

# Node Theory:

An Anarchist Analysis of  
Cybernetic Control Society,  
and Proposals to Resist It

Dunstan Hibernicus

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2023  
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Introduction	i
Node Theory as Worldview	1
Assumptions of Node Theory	7
Node Theory Applied	59
Node Theory as Simulated Relationality	
Historical Origins of Node Theory	
Node Theory as Authoritarian Politics	
Nodes and the Self	
Node Selves as Alienated	
Sociological Roots of Alienation	
Psychodynamics	
Beyond Node Theory: Autonomy	
Glossary	
Works Cited	

Introduction	i
Node Theory as Worldview	1
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## Introduction

This work is an analysis of node theory, a category of my own invention. I have invented the concept of node theory to define a cluster of beliefs, because at present, these beliefs are often invisible and unnamed, or disguised behind other labels. Node theorists might present their ideas as science or common sense, or as anything from analytical liberalism to ecology or feminism or Marxism. The purpose of this work is to reconstruct this discourse and show that it is neither obvious nor empirically proven, but rather, is a set of contentious and often false axioms and resultant social practices with debilitating effects.

This is not just a book about theory. It is a book about the structure of lived experience, to the extent that people are exposed to institutions using node-based logics. It is a book about why today's children can be sent to isolation units for minor infractions in schools designed like prisons, where they are taught "competencies" identified[chosen?] for their economic value. It is a book about the ways screws have undermined prisoner resistance with "earned privileges" and

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draconian control regimes. It is a book about why swathes of the world's population were for months at a time banned from meeting friends, using public spaces, or even leaving their homes, as part of a previously unknown and suddenly "obvious" disease control regimen. It is a book about social credit and social media, about the demonisation of dissent and the exploitation of workers, about the corrosion of civil liberties and the spread of mass surveillance. It is also a book about the ways in which identity politics, conduct codes, and cancel culture have ruined autonomous spaces—and the reasons this has happened. Once the concept of node theory is available, a lot of everyday experiences start to make more sense. The personal, today, is not just political, but enmeshed in the politics of node theory.

Node theory is a worldview with a particular root metaphor (people, animals, and things as computers or computer systems) and a series of axioms which are extra-empirical. The axioms are used to interpret facts, not tested against facts. Node-theoretic assumptions are usually accepted without conscious consideration, and operate in the background of theories, but they can also be articulated explicitly. These assumptions change the way the world looks. Node theory is a new worldview, de-

ii

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ii

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Node theory sees people and other beings as externally oriented nodes with no inner substance or life, and theorises human functioning mainly at the level of the rational ego, of reflexes assumed to be quasi-rational, and of externally-imposed norms backed by sanctions. Nodes are assumed to be primarily passive-receptive, and can be transformed on a deep level through nudges, incentives, deterrents, and opportunity structures. Observed appearances, even when patently manipulated, are taken as “more real” than invisible inner forces. For a node theorist, the point of life is to pass the tests of external reality (History, necessity, God...), to be well adapted. Node theory generates (pre-empirically and non-dialogically) a series of preferred policies, methods, and governance/control regimes across a range of social spheres. These are usually the only options considered, though they are often ineffective and contrast with those used earlier. They cluster around the poles of manipulation and coercion, nudging and deterrence, feedback, network disruption and network facilitation—an extremely authoritarian and often totalitarian package.

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It is necessary to identify node theory as a

specific worldview in order to reject and rebut it (or indeed, to consciously accept or nuance it). In this work, I argue that node theory is wrong both at the level of knowledge, generating misleading views of reality, and ethically wrong, with devastating effects particularly on human psychology, social relations and human relations to the world. It usually fails or has overwhelming side-effects because it is unable to relate to meanings, desire, how humans think or how people live their everyday lives.

Node theory is superficially attractive to some anarchists and radicals, because of its relational ontology and its flattening of hierarchies (which can give an impression of participatory horizontalism). In reality, however, this is a conservative and authoritarian worldview which tends to produce totalitarian technocratic systems. It relies on mechanisms of thought control, suggestion and disavowal on an enormous scale, which require inauthenticity from conformists and destroy the capacity for independent thought. Thought is instead directed towards managing one's emotions and body and adapting to external systems, or solving problems to benefit these systems. People who accept node theory become immersed in a hivemind, and lose whatever humane

vi

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iv



conscience they previously had. They renounce autonomous desires and ethical principles, deferring to the collective machine. In the later sections, I use Laingian existential psychology to explore likely psychological effects of node society, suggesting that relating as nodes produces a debilitating split between inner self and outer performance, along with a denial of the inner self. The usual effect will be the formation of perverse subjects in the Lacanian sense.

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## Node Theory as Worldview

Node theory has become *common sense* for certain social strata. I'm using "common sense" here in the Gramscian sense: a philosophy or worldview that is held without conscious awareness by people who do not consider themselves devotees of a particular philosophy. This is similar to the structuralist idea of ideology as not simply false beliefs, but the ways people conceive and carry out their actual social relations. (In some respects, node theory is very much a false belief, a false consciousness, but in others, it is a way people see themselves and each other, and on the basis of which they actually relate). Also, there may be variation in how widespread and how deep node theory goes. It is the dominant common sense among the global elite, in universities, in the managerial middle class, in mainstream politics, and it is having a strong influence on radical (left, anarchist, identitarian) activism and thought. It is also filtering down to the general population through ideological transmission mechanisms that include pop psychology, higher education, media coverage of so-called experts, the structure of social media, experience of regimes of social control, etc. However, it may not (yet?) be the common sense of the

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popular sectors or of some layers of the middle class. Many people in these strata feel threatened or alienated by node systems, although this reaction is untheorised and inchoate (and sometimes feeds into support for node-based political projects and/or for reactionary responses).

There is a theory that each social formation has its own root metaphor: a basic model of the world from which its perspectives on different topics are derived. This is often connected to the main mode of production or subsistence. In subsistence economies, the main root metaphors are things like farming, nurturing, gathering, herding, and weaving. In traditional hierarchical societies, metaphors of the body (conceived as a system of organs subordinate to the soul) or of the authoritarian family or household are widespread. In the Fordist era, the main root metaphor was mechanistic. People, animals, societies, ecosystems, geopolitical and economic systems, were all imagined as working like machines. This gave us a series of (now largely defunct) theories and models that were accepted by many as absolute truth in the 1950s: behaviourism (the organism as input-output machine), functionalism (society as a machine composed of functional parts working together as a whole), operationalism (identity

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Node theory is particularly prevalent in certain sectors of academia, in political (policy-related) circles, and in corporate management. However, it has also filtered through into popu-lar common sense and into radical movements to some degree. It has done so in a concealed way, through norms regarding the so-called obvious ways to respond to a given type of issue or problem. Node theory is arguably the same thing as network science or network theory, which pro-vide many of the root models. However, network theory also encompasses broader ideas of how networks can operate, in which nodes might have multiple states or complex relations, and impacts happen at different durations. Also, the mani-festations of node theory in different spheres (many of which do not acknowledge any root in cybernetics or network science) often have differ-ent names. Since it is based on a dominant form

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of production, node theory may prove to be as ephemeral as earlier mechanistic approaches. Today, however, people who challenge its axioms are often treated as left-field or old-hat at best, pseudoscience at worst.

It is important to realise that the basic ideas of node theory are axioms it posits, which form a framework through which it interprets and generates evidence. The axioms are not proven facts, nor are they obvious or a priori. Things look different when viewed through node theory than when viewed through other worldviews. Use different axioms and the same facts look different. It might be possible to choose among systems of axioms based on the explanatory or predictive or pragmatic purchase provided by the resultant theory. However, node theory is usually assumed at a level that is prior to any such comparison of theories. Most empirical research that uses node theory does not test node theory, but assumes it, and interprets its findings through it.

One aspect of node theory is that nodes are seen as relating in networks, which form systems with their own apparent autonomy. Systems also relate to larger systems as nodes, so everything is composed of nodes nested within nodes at different scales. This is particularly important on a

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social scale, because node theorists are unduly obsessed with the state (health, efficiency, stability, etc.) of overall social systems. Most of their sociological theories are actually about ways that people seeking to direct an overall system can enforce their imperatives (and thus system health) on individual nodes.

Node theory has not yet been critiqued from an anarchist perspective, although people like Ran Prieur, Paul Kingsnorth, Alex Gorrión, 325, Return Fire, Tiqqun, and the Invisible Committee have written useful pieces on cybernetics and its social effects. Some of the more innovative neo-Marxists, such as Tereza Terranova, Franco Berardi, Mackenzie Wark, and Giorgio Griziotti have also provided useful analyses. So did major French theorists writing in the 1970s-80s, such as Paul Virilio (the theories of logistics, information bomb, communism of affects), Jean Baudrillard (particularly his theories of “the code” and simulation), Felix Guattari (notably the theory of machinic enslavement), and Gilles Deleuze (the concept of control society). I here try to provide a more thorough analysis from a point where node theory is widely developed and disseminated.

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Node theory starts from a root-metaphor where humans, animals, societies, ecosystems, etc., (at limit, everything which exists), function like computers. They receive and process information, which is governed by the problems addressed by cybernetics. Information is distinguishable from communication and meaning: the central questions relate to the problem of “signal” versus “noise”, the transmission of contents, and the issue of what is transmitted is bracketed-out. Information is not communication. What matters is whether the signal is received correctly. Anything which interferes with a signal is considered “noise”. Cybernetics is all about making sure signals get through. However, node theory has also moved towards the idea of disruption. Actors can try to shut down signals they dislike by breaking the transmission or inserting noise. These questions of transmission and disruption are mistakenly taken to determine the impact of the signal, and are substituted for other means of influencing other people, social outcomes, etc.

Node theory thus assumes

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7

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or ignores (as irrelevant) the existence of “inner” aspects of nodes. For example, it is not interested in actors’ conscious or unconscious motives for actions. Instead, it assumes everyone and everything both is and should be a node which is passively receptive to information input from outside, which responds adaptively and retransmits what it “learns”. Just as computers exist primarily to perform operations for programmers or users (even when their means of doing so are opaque), so humans are taken to exist primarily for adaptive purposes. Where resistance to smooth transmission occurs, this is a problem of noise or of maladaptation. Thus for instance, so-called mental illness is a cluster of defective thought patterns to be rectified. This axiom creates problems for node theorists in terms of the reasons to prefer one action to another. Most adherents of node theory act as if the universe is ruled by a Calvinistic God who rewards the fit and punishes the unfit, and whose will is both definitive of moral value and partially unknown or capricious. The point of life is to pass the tests set by this God-figure (which can be expressed as History, social change, modernity, ecological crisis, evolution, etc.); one passes or fails based on observable outcomes. Failures are discarded; there is no room for mercy. As a result, node theorists rarely

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ask whether social systems are suitable for human or other beings, or indeed, whether people desire (or should desire) the world the node-theorists are leading us towards. Utopian thought, ideas of social progress, critiques of alienation, the challenge posed by radical thought in the 1960s-70s, existentialist views of moral autonomy, radical ecology, etc., are ruled out of court in advance. In practice, this usually means that everyone takes the market or PR success of their views as the main criterion for their validity, and thus, orients everything they do to optimising outcomes for global capital and the state. One is never to have the hubris to posit one's own values or judge the system from one's own point of view. However, I would also note that a few node theorists might conclude that the entire dominant social system, or certain aspects of it, are unfit and should be discarded (for example because they are ecologically unsustainable or necessarily entail oppressive hierarchies). This is not argued, however, based on the real impact on human or non-human beings, but based on the aggregate effects of the system, and whether it passes or fails the "test of history". **All node theorists play the game of jumping through hoops to impress the system**, though they may conceive the system and its signals differently.

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Ecology is a good point of comparison. Node theorists can, and often do, care about ecology. A lot of the current degrowth and transition literature uses node theory to some degree. However, their motives for doing so have to do with the functioning of systems. Radical ecologists from the 1960s to the 1990s juxtaposed the mechanistic logic of modern civilisation to ecological living. They typically opposed modern civilisation as inherently biocidal and immiserating: an endless process of meaninglessly destroying nature to sustain pointless work-consume-die lifestyles at ever higher levels of production and consumption. This is not what happens in node-ecology. Node-ecologists often oppose the current type of neoliberal capitalism—because it can be shown in computer models to lead to climate change and thus to various harms and risks. Climate change is a type of feedback showing that humans are failing the test of survival, or History, or sustainability. The favoured responses involve leveraging authoritarian structures to nudge behavioural changes of varying degrees of radicality. This view is now taken seriously even at the elite level.

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The former view basically juxtaposes ecologically meaningful existence and a non-exploitative economy to the whole of the dominant social

system. It often draws on alienation from capitalist and statist ways of living, and a kind of wonder or joy in nature. The latter view basically seeks to preserve node-theoretical social functioning and even to expand it, preserving the system while adapting it to the supposed tests of history. It leads to state- or market-centric, top-down changes which reduce damage by sacrificing the poor, and which continue to destroy wild nature while exploiting it more sustainably. A node theorist will not consider moving away from the capitalist rat race personally or socially. They will not try to change minds through persuasion, and they will not try to directly reorganise anything. They will not, for instance, provide free public transport or build homes closer to workplaces. They certainly will not tear down cities and live low tech. Instead, they are likely to propose changes to the opportunity structure to coerce or bribe or thought-control people into behaviour change—things like congestion charges, fuel taxes, legal obligations on companies, limited pedestrianisation, or greenwashed virtue signalling.

The same can be said regarding the difference between 1970s feminist or black radical theory, with its roots in disalienation, autonomy, politics of desire, and anti-system theorising, and

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present identity politics, which embraces node theory, sees inequalities in terms of states of the social system/network, and seeks change through top-down or crowdsourced behavioural nudging and coercion (usually taking for granted both the neoliberal market—with managers holding despotic powers to hire and fire—and the authoritarian state).

Node theory tends to make the unthinkable-able thinkable, to encourage “radical” methods which would not otherwise be considered because they run up against barriers resulting from misunderstandings of subjective meaning, psychology, social relations, etc. Thus for instance, a method may be validated because it “works”, without consideration as to why and how it works (it is assumed it works on a node basis); that something “works” only because it reduces people to abject terror, takes away their coordinates of meaning, or renders them powerless, is not taken as an objection to using it. Even the milder of node theory’s nudges and de-facilitations have the effect of gradually increasing stress, everyday misery, and unfreedom.

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present identity politics, which embraces node theory, sees inequalities in terms of states of the social system/network, and seeks change through top-down or crowdsourced behavioural nudging and coercion (usually taking for granted both the neoliberal market—with managers holding despotic powers to hire and fire—and the authoritarian state).

Node theory tends to make the unthinkable thinkable, to encourage “radical” methods which would not otherwise be considered because they run up against barriers resulting from understandings of subjective meaning, psychology, social relations, etc. Thus for instance, a method may be validated because it “works”, without consideration as to why and how it works (it is assumed it works on a node basis); that something “works” only because it reduces people to abject terror, takes away their coordinates of meaning, or renders them powerless, is not taken as an objection to using it. Even the milder of node theory’s nudges and de-facilitations have the effect of gradually increasing stress, everyday misery, and unfreedom.

It is considered unobjectionable for instance, to persecute homeless people, stigmatise them, and discourage people from giving mon-



ey, to throw them out of shelters for breaking all kinds of rules, not to mention designing homeless-proof cities (for instance, spiked benches), as this serves the Greater Good of encouraging lifestyle change and “not enabling bad behaviour” (such as drug use). The worst of the social-cohesion ideologues actually maintain that phenomena such as homelessness and begging are serious social harms, because they harm city branding and discourage PR-driven economic activities. In the same way, it is considered unobjectionable by many node theorists to use extreme degradation and inhumane treatment in attempts to deter migration, creating “hostile environments” so as to alter the opportunity structure (or in contrast, trying to eliminate “hostile environment discrimination” that depends on subjective perception, or petty deviance deemed to undermine attractiveness to business), or creating securitised borders which increase various risks and harms. Some of this, to be sure, is simply hatred, but there is an entire rationalistic legitimization of such vicious persecution as serving a greater good, a legitimization which tends to reduce the rift between the outright bigoted and the rationalistic “centrists”. A kind of doublethink in which persecution is love, causing harm is preventing harm, has taken root,

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to such a degree that it is the more compassionate people who get accused of causing harm.

2) *Nodes are outwardly determined and outwardly oriented.*

A node's basic relationship to its environment is passive, submissive, adaptive, and "learning"; Nodes may nonetheless be extremely active, but this activity operates as a means to external gains determined by external causes. Everything, therefore, is about survival (not life) in the Situationist sense. A worthwhile action always has an external goal (power, status, success, avoiding pain or death, etc). Ideas of self-expression, becoming, qualitative meaning, existential authenticity, love, play "for its own sake", are alien to node theory. They are not disproven; as in mechanistic thought, they are posited not to exist. Nodes are primarily **passive-receptive**. This is very different from earlier dominant views, either of agency, free will, and self-determination, or of fixed natural orders in which each thing has a nature or essence. Instead, everything is defined as having the same basic nature, a node-nature.

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the opportunity- or incentive-structure as a kind of force majeure, without having to know much about those they act upon. At most, they will use signals that a policy has failed or succeeded in its effects to assess whether it “works”—without caring very much how it works. Since the nature of nodes is passive-receptive, values of freedom and autonomy are seen as illusory, and node theorists are happy with intense mechanisms of manipulation and control reminiscent of totalitarianism. Social control is taken to make people more easily nudged and force them to act more morally, thus producing a better state of reality overall.

It is an informal rule of node theory to *never engage with questions of subjective meaning or cathexis*, since these entail entry into the inner sphere and unobservable vagueness.

Although nodes are passive-receptive and have an external ethical locus, node theory does not negate agency or responsibility and is not a type of nihilism or of quietism. Node theory generally either believes in, or disavows (ie. both believes and denies), that there is some type of objective value located in the big Other. This Other has the role of fate or cosmic order in the imaginary of node theory. In practice, the big Other of node theory usually consists of things which

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result from aspects of human agency, including real effects of appearances (economic success, political success, public opinion, normative changes, etc.). There is thus a disguised feedback loop between the supposed judgements of the big Other and the agency of powerful actors. The actor produces appearances which, due to their influence, and the agency of powerful actors. The actor produces appearances which are perceived as validating the actor's actions; in fact, at least part of the cycle is tautological. For example, cities try to move up the world city hierarchy towards global status (ie. a place where companies locate global command-and-control hubs). A city's place in the hierarchy is determined by choices of elite-level actors to situate headquarters or prestige events in the city, so the manipulation of perceptions, by marketing/branding or even by dishonest means (bribery, dissimulation, etc.), can have the desired effect. A city planner may believe they are jumping through the big Other's hoops or producing *objective* development, when in fact they are manipulating appearances and meanings to produce *subjective* effects. Agency is disguised as passivity, or primary agency as secondary.

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which aim to produce effects in the big Other: leadership, management, strategic nudging, perception management, etc. These practices are often accorded almost magical power in some sections of the node-theoretic literature. For example, Klaus Schwab's work (for the WEF) often invokes leadership as the magical but unexplained means to avoid undesirable outcomes which more sober analyses might see as inevitable. "Leadership" will somehow balance economy and ecology, avoid mass unemployment from robotisation, provide security without destroying freedom, so long as "leaders" resist any temptation to deviate from or try to change the course of the global economy. Leaders are thus capable of being passive-receptive and proactive at the same time.

### 3) *Nodes learn, adapt, change, evolve, etc., through adaptive feedback systems.*

These operate at the level of information: the node outputs performances, receives feedback which reality-checks whether the performance is working, then modify the performance for better results. Learning is therefore basic to node theory, and is identified with adaptive training or reprogramming. Adaptive feedback systems necessarily operate on a surface level, and relate

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4) *The “inner life”, the world of psychology, does not exist or does not matter (onto-epistemologically and normatively).*

This means that, operationally at least, node theorists act as if **observable patterns, performances, behaviour are “more real than” inner lives and subjective meanings**, including inner suffering, pleasure, and subjective security/insecurity.

Since people are seen as outward-directed nodes, there are no limits on what can be demanded of them. Other theories usually claim that there are conditions for a good life, conditions of right relating among humans as moral actors, or a human nature which limits what can be demanded (and corresponding constructs for other actors and systems). Node theory treats any such limits as both socially constructed and normatively undesirable (they serve as limits to

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improvement, to adaptive change). They seek “radical” change which is always in the same direction: control or manipulation of nodes using feedback mechanisms.

In reality, rapid and clumsy changes have drastic effects at the level of inner life. For example, people can suffer existential collapse of their existing lifeworld when drastic changes occur. People lose their sense that a system is justified when it exceeds certain limits or oversteps its role. The neoliberal rearrangement of workplaces, for example, has led to escalating stress and reduced personal security. Post-9/11 securitisation has fuelled shifts in the social imaginary, which has become increasingly dark. All of this is invisible to node theory. The suffering caused by node-theoretic interventions, often euphemised as mere discomfort, is recognised at all only if it has observable behavioural effects (including mental health problems). These effects are accorded little weight compared to benefits obtained at an aggregate network level, and they are treated with further node-based interventions aiming to restore a normal state. Thus we might hear that lockdowns have mental health costs, which should limit their use but can be outweighed by public-health benefits. We might even occasionally hear that the

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costs are greater than the benefits. But the fact that *lockdowns have driven people mad*, that their existential impact quite reasonably causes mental collapse and changed relations to society, cannot be spoken in node-theoretic terms.

Node theory assumes everyone is basically equivalent, and brackets out their internal traits and needs. This leads systematically to a massive downplaying of psychological and cultural differences, even in theories that are posited as inclusive. The assumption that people are all externally-receptive nodes is a parochial belief arising in globalised/westernised societies at a given place and time. It is today projected world-wide as a global-local, a general truth assumed to apply everywhere. Another consequence is that node theorists have little or no concern about doing things that cause harm mainly on an inner, psychological level.

For example, node theorists are usually blasé about embracing drastic top-down culture change, without any fear of destabilising the social bond or causing loss of meaning. Node theorists typically do not care about the existential impacts of (for example) lockdowns, securitisation, neo-liberal working conditions, surveillance, etc. They assess (for example) police stop-and-search poli-

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cies based on whether they are effective and efficient in reducing recorded crime rates, plus or minus their other observable effects. They might be against stop and search if they think it causes racial inequality or undermines public trust in the police, or because it is ineffective or expensive. These are all external effects, based on how the practice impacts the behaviour of nodes and the overall state of the system. They are not concerned with the unfairness and indignity involved, the idea that inherent rights are violated, the fear caused by the practice, the risk posed to people who become angry or panic when confronted, etc.

Node theory thus has a strong bias towards **valuing the observable over the unobservable**, the seen over the felt, the countable over the uncountable, bodily outcomes over mental outcomes, surface performance over inner wellbeing. It also **values aggregate (or average) effects over personal ones**, and tends to reorder social values in terms of claims/rights to particular outcomes or states of the social system, rather than claims/rights that limit the means adopted to produce such outcomes. Since the aggregate or average reflects statistical frequency, node theory also values the **normal, similar, and selfsame over the different**. Impacts that are statistically infrequent,

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There are exceptions to the denial of the inner life. Some kinds of node theorists, in some spheres, are obsessed with such matters as petty nuisance, “quality of life offences”, “harassment, alarm and distress”, impacts of verbal abuse and trolling, hostile environments for particular groups, bullying, hate, etc. Node theorists often articulate a view of human nature in which, because people are outer-oriented nodes, people are also extremely fragile and constantly at risk from incoming signals. These can include such things as toxic discourse (treated as if it can literally enter and poison), blows to self esteem and validation, hostile speech, aggregate-level risks, disruption of one’s zen state, etc. In general, node theorists ignore potential harms arising from the various forms of control that are compatible with node status, for example being behaviourally nudged, subjected to acceptability standards, expected to comply, or even to enforce, others’ rules, constantly exposed to stressful conditions or negative feedback, being under surveillance, being punished, etc.

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as if it were a direct, external, unmediated impact, akin to physical harm. This otherwise invisible harm is either registered through subjective self-reports that are treated as automatically true, or else is considered mainly in terms of indirect observable effects. This leads to clumsy, sledgehammer approaches just as damaging as those that assume that the inner life does not exist at all. It ignores another set of harms—those arising from inhibition of self expression, anger, sexuality, etc.—and it often ends up treating morality-dependent distress as if it were objective harm.

It is doubtless the case that people constituted as node subjects, constantly dependent on external signals, are more vulnerable to negative feedback than other people. It is also the case that a node-theoretic society constantly leverages this vulnerability for social control, so that its concerns about abuse and toxicity in fact take the form of an attempt to monopolise not only the use of force, but even the use of hostile speech. Much of what was imposed as etiquette or morality or order in the 1950s has returned, now dressed-up as risk and harm. The hysterical moral-panic discourses that in the 1970s-90s were treated with disdain by the professions, have now been rebranded by a new type of expert as if they

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This kind of selective hypersensitivity to psychological impacts should not be taken to indicate a humane streak. Node theorists never have a humanistic conscience; they have an authoritarian conscience oriented to social control and compliance. People and other entities are means, not ends. Since people are assumed to be malleable, and inner lives are taken not to exist, the impact on each person (or even on large numbers of people) of any given intervention is believed not to matter, ethically speaking. It matters only if the inner impact has observable, outer effects. Node theory in practice, therefore, is necessarily either callously indifferent or actively cruel.

Node theory is faced with an artificial binary choice regarding subjective suffering: it can treat it as an observed fact (measurable for example by surveys), thus assuming that all asserted suffering is real suffering and that the severity of suffering is reflected in its narratability and legibility, or it can assume that such suffering is an illusion. The prohibition on causing distress arises on the basis of a passive view of emotion/affect in which (for example) an insulting or hateful comment causes the resultant distress without mediation by the meanings and inner states of the “vic-

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tim”, even though cognitivist psychology uses an active view where people are only affected by others’ actions because they allow themselves to be. Obviously this prohibition is unable to distinguish between distress arising for different reasons, and encompasses morality-dependent distress as a harm. If applied to psychological symptoms, it also includes suffering arising from a symptom as a harm. Crucially, it is also possible to cause emotional distress as a result of pointing to repressed contents, as a result of challenging rationalisations, or, when a person depends on others’ validations to sustain a system of self suggestion or thought control, to interrupting, challenging, or even simply not participating in such circles of validation.

This last point is vitally important, since neoliberal subjects are encouraged and trained to manage their psychological suffering primarily by means of self suggestion and thought control. It thus follows that anything that approximates an *Act* in the Lacanian sense, or breaks through false/happy consciousness, registers as a harm. (John Rawls, founder of the abstract-moral-subject approach to ethical theory, argues for an equal right to “the social bases of self-esteem,” which is to say, a right to validation unconnected to affinity or merit). There are obvious resonances here with

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the East Asian idea of a duty not to disrupt the zen state of others, to contribute to their being in the right kind of social trance.

In practice, the prohibition on distress is generally applied hypocritically or on the basis of aggregate observations or elitism (what distresses the greatest number or Benchmark Man)—because if applied consistently, most of the normal functioning of cybernetic control would be ruled out as excessively distressing.

Node theorists also usually have a strong distaste for habit and comfort, which indicate that people are not being challenged to change, and have settled into patterns which may be maladaptive. This does not prevent them from also relying mainly on incentives and deterrents that operate at the level of pleasure and pain, or reflex emotive politics that work at the level of habit.

Most node theorists also value vulnerability as a positive virtue (for example, in the Orwellian-sounding slogan “vulnerability is strength”). Opposition to being constantly vulnerable, or attempts to shield oneself, are often seen as macho or modern. Vulnerability is valued partly because it is taken as an existential condition, an aspect of human life as such, which people should accept and deal with. This view typically univer-

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salises neoliberal precarity and uses it as a lever for social control; in some cases, it also indexes an attachment to early childhood dependence. In other cases, vulnerability is seen as valuable because it is a supposedly necessary condition for breaking down egos and/or for adaptive learning in which feedback is taken seriously. Contempt for “coasting” and “silos” can also imply a cult of rapid change. The valuing of vulnerability and discomfort sits uncomfortably with the fact that neoliberal performance regimes and “zero tolerance” systems have little leeway for mistakes or human frailty. This position serves mainly to encourage people to maintain a wide threat surface on which sanctions and nudges can operate, for example by foregoing privacy and putting oneself on display. Jules Henry’s idea of the “vulnerability system” is relevant here. The idea of “reflexivity” (when performed in public and in standardised terms) is related to that of vulnerability. In both cases, accountability--or vulnerability to systemic retaliation--is crucial.

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No distinction is drawn between authentic ethical belief and hypocritical public performance. Ethical commitments themselves are taken to have little importance. Individual conscience is taken as a means to produce social conformity and coordination, and thus, of little value in itself. "Moral outsourcing" and "moral idiocy," in which the individual has no independent moral compass and instead relies on social acceptability as their guide to what is right (in the manner of Eichmann), is encouraged. Unwanted conscientious acts and refusals are taken as just another category of maladapted behaviours to be rectified. The root metaphors in this case come not only from attempts to program computers to think morally, but also from corporate social responsibility, which consists mainly in monitoring social impacts and legal sentiments so as to avoid reputational and legal risks and improve the reputation of a brand.

6) All motivations are basically either pragmatic/instrumental or normative.

Motivations based in desire and self expression (the Freudian id), or in any posited existential or spiritual field, are ignored. Ultimately, everything is taken to be motivated by survival and persis-

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tence. Normative and social motives are secondary mechanisms that impact on the pragmatic level (eg. reputational cost) and are beneficial for other systems at a higher level (eg. trust within an organisation). Such claims are clung to, even when surveys and the like show no such conscious motivations at work.

This leads to a certain cynicism in styles of reading and of social interpretation. Consider for example the idea that insurgent movements are motivated by “greed not grievance,” because they can sometimes be manipulated by restricting their access to resources. Alternatively, consider the rationalistic treatment of economics, even in regions where moral economies are known to exist. One regularly finds articles written as if parents in poor countries were managers allocating the labour of their children, in which education is valued or avoided for purely economic reasons. Interventions are then designed to bribe or coerce increased school attendance, which is taken to be justified—not by the inherent value of knowledge or the broadening of horizons—but solely by increased earning power. The cultural meanings of subsistence farming, the importance of families and lineages, risks of deculturation, conflicts between local norms and those of western-style

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school systems, even the children's desires and sufferings are factored out. The fact that education often serves as a sign of modernity and a system of social ranking—so that expanding education simply leads to graduate unemployment—is also ignored. Finally, consider the almost paranoid reading styles of certain identity politicians, in which everything a privileged person does is taken as ultimately (perhaps unconsciously) directed towards perpetuating their privilege. Even sexual desire is taken to be mainly a question of power, a desire to subjugate others.

7) *Humans think like computers. Cognition is computation.*

This is another aspect of the exclusion of inner lives and of emotions. In practice, we are never far from Descartes and Kant: emotions and the body are taken to be irrational supplements of the rational mind, which should be observed, controlled, exploited, but also protected and nurtured by the dominant rational mind or will. The fact that human reason is a secondary process derived from the psychoanalytic primary process, and that meaning and motivation continue to flow from the primary process, is largely ignored.

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Instead, reason is chained in the service of outer masters: its main task is to guess the task posed by history and then impose this task on the emotions and the body.

In practice, node theorists often have to deal with the fact that humans do not think in node-like ways. In these cases, they generally rely either on ideas of malfunction or of conservatism: mechanisms that formerly met some goal or function, but are now counterproductive and need to be overcome. All the good activities (from a node theorist's point of view) going on inside human beings, whether they are rational or irrational by older standards, are taken to be computer-like cognition. This is true even if the mechanism in question operates through reflex, emotional reactions, etc. On the other hand, anything dysfunctional for the system and a person's adaptation to it is taken to deviate from node cognition. For instance, humans are said to have a maladaptive lizard brain as a kind of evolutionary legacy, which was useful in the Stone Age or for proto-hominids, but which responds maladaptively to modern life—causing people for instance to lose their tempers online, or to feel threatened by others' attempts to nudge and control them. This claim is advanced instead of asking whether modern life is suitable for humans

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as they already are, and instead of looking into the reasons why modern society might quite understandably cause defence reactions in living beings. For node theorists, it is necessarily the organism and not the environment that is at fault. Earlier capitalist and pre-capitalist systems are used in similar ways. For example, certain supposedly masculine traits implicated in refusal of passive conformity are taken to be socially functional norms inculcated in earlier stages of capitalism, either to enforce patriarchy or to meet demand for soldiers and suchlike. The possibility that there is actually a problem with women's patriarchally-conditioned submissiveness and resultant exploitability, rather than with men's relative resistance to exploitation, is not acceptable to consider, because adaptability is always the goal. Whenever personal traits, desires, needs, incapacities, beliefs, meanings, ethics, etc., conflict with the dominant system, node theory automatically assumes the system is right and fair, and the individual trait is dysfunctional. It also follows from this model that psychological problems are maladaptive cognitive-behavioural functioning which should be fixed in the same manner as debugging a computer program or repairing a car. The underlying function of a symptom for a per-

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son's psychological equilibrium is not recognised. The extent to which the different (the mad, for example) are different is grossly underestimated.

The idea of lifelong learning is in practice combined with a competency-based view of learning and a valuation of adaptation and constantly-shifting social systems to mean a passive-receptive stance in which one constantly receives and responds to feedback (much of it negative) to further hone one's performance, or alter it entirely, to fit external imperatives. Such learning entails suppressing, or not experiencing, common human responses to criticism such as anger and despair. It also requires sufficient similarity in functioning that miscommunications do not occur.

The body occupies an anomalous place in node theory. The word "body" in critical theory today often stands for "node", and is considered almost as if it were an element in language. However, node theory also encourages intensive management of the body by the mind (for example, in the quantified-self movement, health and fitness ideology, etc.).

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exchange information and signals at very high speeds. They are unconcerned about the content of the information. Connections can also be cut, which cuts off the flow of signals and thus the information. Human communication is much more complicated. The primary process elements affect whether and how people communicate, and the content is absolutely crucial as to whether communication seems meaningful. Humans do not communicate efficiently, so node theory either has to pretend they do, or attempt to reprogram human language to bring it closer to computer code. We have all seen the attempts at language reform: attempts to purge everyday language of anger, fear, hate, negative thoughts, criminal “neutralisations,” acting out, ideas and words deemed to contribute to social inequalities, etc., and the compulsive pursuit of clarity and foreknowledge in place of dialogue. One node signals, in a commanding manner, what is acceptable; a less-powerful node is meant to receive, accept, and comply, in the same manner as a computer executing a script. This is an extremely authoritarian way for humans to communicate, and several major functions of language are lost through its reform; we are never far from Orwell’s Newspeak, which is modelled on earlier mechanistic

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reforms. More often, however, the whole problem of language in social life is simply factored out by node theorists as another aspect of the unseen and unimportant.

9) *Nodes are basically plastic and malleable.*

Node theory neither recognises nor explains the “stickiness” of personality traits, behavioural patterns, cultures, etc. It assumes that everything internal to the self can be remade, using relatively simple techniques. In reality, hardly anyone is as flexible as node theorists believe. Important aspects of personality are formed early in life, and changed if at all only through long, depth processes. Node theorists may well accept a few limits in terms of traits which are malleable, but only on a higher level (genetically, socially, etc). However, they are unusually reluctant to do so. What is more, since they have no theory of internal desire or meaning, node theorists see no reason not to constantly try to force or induce people to change, in ways favourable to the state of the system.

Node theory entails a strong, and often naive, belief that incentives and deterrents work in a simplistic way. There is strong counter evidence for the claim that punishment deters, such as that provided by studies of psychological reactance

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and deviance amplification. However, the axiomatic beliefs of node theory are insulated from empirical testing. People are nodes and therefore they are deterrable. Also, node theory does not seem able to distinguish between someone's motivation to act and their capacity to act. Incapacitation of a dissatisfied actor is taken to be the same as someone refraining from acting because they are satisfied. Observationally, the two are equivalent. If something doesn't work, node theorists will typically escalate with more of the same. Node theorists also fail to distinguish between superficial compliance and inner commitment. They think that habituation, even when coerced, eventually produces passionate authentic commitment. Usually it does not.

10) *The only, or most effective, means of pursuing any given social or political goal is through culture change, ie. wide-scale signalling and pressure on nodes.*

This means that every goal is pursued through incentives, sanctions/deterrence, or modifications to the opportunity structure, accompanied by signalling. Humans-as-nodes are passive recipients with little input. Node theorists seek to change behaviour, not minds. They do not attempt to rationalise, not minds. They do not attempt to rationalise.

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Anyone who remembers the tail end of Fordism, or who studies history, will see how novel and utterly unprecedented this axiom is. Before neoliberalism, it was almost unknown for states to pursue this kind of culture change. Either states would seek to directly plan and carry out projects in a mechanistic way, or they would seek to change culture slowly, through education and information. Interventions for a given goal would often be broad brush, not manipulative. This meant that, although some issues were treated repressively and others clumsily, there was no automatic default to social control. Authorities worried about (for example) low-level gang fighting among youths might try to intervene in any number of ways: knife amnesties, persuasion campaigns in schools, financing youth clubs or youth workers, providing psychological services, providing jobs in an affected area, initiatives like Street Beefs, etc. Today, node theory restricts the

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available options to a dozen different varieties of authoritarian policing—including such previously unthinkable measures as mass surveillance of entire areas, COMPSTAT-style policing, mass stop-and-search, aggressive enforcement of petty laws to disrupt gangs, crap arrests, and even lockdowns of entire areas, as well as increasingly draconian uses of punishment. There is rarely much evidence that the new, node-theoretic interventions are more effective than the older ones (in this case, social democracies often had very low crime rates). Rather, the older methods have simply become unthinkable, and the newer ones have become the common sense of the policy establishment. Not only that, but most people in affected communities replicate the copthink they have picked up from the news and from police fiction. Even the left, which historically focused on social causes of crime, now struggles to think further than kneejerk crackdowns. Retributive shaming and cancel culture are simply crowdsourced neoliberal punishment.

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certainly. Since nodes are passive-receptive and entirely outwardly determined, it is questionable whether they exist at all. Their existence is conceded in practice mainly for pragmatic reasons: one has to pretend something exists to reward or punish it. On the other hand, higher-level systems involve observable effects which observably vary, and which can be recounted or simulated in currently-fashionable varieties of scientific research. Hence for example, more weight is attached to speculative computer models of disease transmission and lockdown impact than to resultant effects on individual lives. Identity politicians no longer care whether someone has any demonstrable prejudice (whether the relation is discriminatory), but only whether a given action aids or undermines the overall goal of reducing inequalities (whether there is an overall observable outcome of inequality).

As a result, individual rights, welfare, fairness/concrete justice, equality in actual relations, and every other individual-level good is systematically trumped by social-policy goals related to overall outcomes across the entire system. There is still rights talk, welfare talk, equality talk and so on, but more and more, these focus on outcomes experienced passively by individuals: a right to

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a non-hostile environment, rather than to free speech or expression; a right to equality in the workplace, enforced by despotic managers and disciplinary panels at the cost of heightening boss-worker inequality; a “right to life” which is taken to be violated by not using torturous suicide-watch protocols or not using lockdowns, but is not violated by police murders or by the social conditions that make people suicidal; projects of market-led sustainable poverty reduction, rather than aid to the poor. Such passive goods transfer all actual social power to top-down authoritarian actors. In principle, they should improve social outcomes. In practice, they are often counterproductive, because the concrete, individual-level effects are far more directly observable than the purported system-level effects, many of which involve invisible vectors of causality. It is easy to know when someone is driven to suicide by a lockdown, and much harder to test whether lockdowns have any overall effect on deaths; it is easy to know whether poor people are starving, and much harder to know whether market-driven policies are reducing poverty. Indirect effects provide good excuses for bad policies—and in practice, node-theoretic states and corporations rig their policies towards meeting the tests of history,

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which in practice, means towards strengthening capitalism whatever its impact.

*12) Meaningful knowledge is about observable facts, not meanings.*

This registers an old social sciences debate between quantitative and qualitative approaches. For researchers who recognise the role of meanings in social life, investigations of social life are necessarily concerned with uncovering the meanings involved. Other researchers believe they can discern objective processes in the social sciences which cut out the level of meaning, and function observationally, in the same way as the natural sciences. Node theorists are usually of the second type, and exercise a strong force towards validating only quantitative studies as scientific and policy-relevant. In practice, the facts often show very little, and are dependent on the researcher's interpretive activity to choose among multiple possible explanations. The question of meaning is therefore decided arbitrarily.

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signalling, towards goals of fitness for an external environment, etc. Nobody has ever proven that quantitative, observational, node-based, or factual approaches actually provide more accurate or useful evidence, or that this evidence leads to better, or even more scientific policy or social practice. The preference for certain methods is generally made axiomatically, and admissible evidence is restricted so as to prevent the axioms being proven wrong. Rational-choice economics is a classic example. World Bank economists do not prove or show that subsistence farmers, sweatshop workers, street traders, insurgents, or dictators are motivated by rational economic motives; they assume this as an axiom, which they use to interpret statistics obtained on an aggregate level. When interviewers ask farmers, workers, etc. about their motives and experiences, they do not confirm the rational-choice hypothesis. Also, rational-choice economics has been used to justify a great many policies that have been outright catastrophic or at least unsuccessful—structural adjustment policies in most of the global South, for example. There are many triumphalist pieces written in the 1990s-2000s, prior to the 2008 crash, which treat rational-choice economics as scientific truth, as proven beyond reasonable

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The current fad for “risk factors” and network analysis also frequently leads to the confusion of correlation with causality, with all kinds of aggregate correlates tainted by association with some supposed social harm.

### 13) *Egos are bad.*

This is one of the big differences from mechanistic thinking, which generally valued egos. Today, it is common for egos to be seen as barriers to passive-receptive adaptability. This is particularly true of leftfield node theory (such as identity politics, posthumanism, and ecology) in which the ego is taken to be a socially-caused product of “modern reason” and the overvaluation of abstract individuals. In practice, it is hard to unpack those aspects of the critique that challenge egos based on the multiplicity of the self, and those that seek a new subordination by asserting the reality of the collective and the inexistence of the individual. However, it is clear that the inexistence of the ego, or its character as a secondary effect

doubt, etc. Today, rational-choice economics is in crisis, and is being partially replaced by behavioural economics (which is just as firmly node-theoretic, but somewhat broader in the evidence it considers and the hypotheses it permits). The current fad for “risk factors” and network analysis also frequently leads to the confusion of correlation with causality, with all kinds of aggregate correlates tainted by association with some supposed social harm.

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This is one of the big differences from mechanistic thinking, which generally valued egos. Today, it is common for egos to be seen as barriers to passive-receptive adaptability. This is particularly true of leftfield node theory (such as identity politics, posthumanism, and ecology) in which the ego is taken to be a socially-caused product of “modern reason” and the overvaluation of abstract individuals. In practice, it is hard to unpack those aspects of the critique that challenge egos based on the multiplicity of the self, and those that seek a new subordination by asserting the reality of the collective and the inexistence of the individual. However, it is clear that the inexistence of the ego, or its character as a secondary effect

of social relations, is entailed by the premises of node theory. Since the ego is created in this way (and is not a substance that society works on), it is taken to be desirable and possible to weaken it or break it down.

The core of node theory's rejection of the ego is the propensity of ego towards a rejection of an utterly other-driven, internally-meaningless life. In node theory, social and other systems have authority over individual nodes, and are primary in constituting them. The kind of ego node theory hates is the kind that entrenches individual fixity and resultant resistance to change or compliance. It encompasses not only the rational ego (particularly in its intellectual aspect, as something that asks too many questions), but also desire or the id, to the extent that it is unconditional and unsubmitting, and the superego, if it functions in the form of an individual conscience.

This is not a thoroughgoing critique of ego. In fact, node theory also relies on a strong but passive ego that observes, calculates, and controls all behaviour in pursuit of instrumental goals. It absolutely depends on the very modern reason condemned by its more radical adherents. For example, the same node-theoretic feminists who view the male ego as the barrier to women's

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liberation, also demand from men perfect social performances in which they consciously check any actions or words (gazes, turns of phrase, ways of standing or sitting...) that these feminists deem objectionable. Obviously these performances require a strengthening of male ego, not a weakening.

People often believe they are at the height of radicalism when they attack modern reason, not realising that today's dominant ideology is not the rationalism of the 1890s or 1950s, but node theory. Modern reason had its faults, but there is little point flogging a dead horse. And to the extent that modern reason is still alive in a mutated form, it is precisely the instrumentalism and self-management involved in node theory which express it.

Disruption or transgression, aimed at egos and desires, is often made a virtue in poststructuralism, identity politics, and appropriations of eastern spiritualities. It is also absolutely central to current regimes of social control: network disruption, withdrawal of privileges, disruption of gangs, time outs. It reaches its apogee in lockdowns, which disrupt the whole of social life. One also increasingly finds authoritarian actors using personalised management, commands, injunc-

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tions, and suchlike to prohibit the very things that bring meaning, pleasure, or psychological stability, on a person-by-person level.

There is sometimes a contradiction here, as ego-based functioning is consistently preferred in node theory to id- or superego-based functioning. Currently fashionable therapies typically engage in ego-integration and ego-strengthening similar to that of 1950s therapies.

*14) Desire has no autonomy, and mostly consists of ego-desires.*

By autonomy, I here mean the idea that desires arise ultimately from a force internal to each living being, such as Freud's pleasure principle or Deleuze and Guattari's desiring production. If desire is (even partially) autonomous, then it provides both a potential criterion for social formations and a limit to how far people can be remoulded. Node theory generally has no place for desire in this sense. It recognises desire in the sense of preferences, but it attributes these mainly to habit or to external pressures. It tends to reduce desires to imperatives that provide ego-satisfactions—for example, the social status obtained through owning consumer goods. Because it does not recognise autonomous desire, node theory contributes

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to the sapping of joy and meaning from life, as intense activities are replaced by pared-back, modified simulations. These impacts are rarely seen. For instance, the fact that coercive culture change might destroy the pleasures associated with a given fandom or sphere of activity—that node-theorists are killjoys—is unrecognisable.

15) *Systems tend to entropy unless proactively managed and steered by leaders or by the social hive-mind so as to remain functional and adaptive.*

This axiom is a bizarre mixture of radicalism and conservatism: it authorises endless top-down change, while detaching this change from human justifications. It serves to justify enormous concentrations of unrestrained power in the hands of managers and leaders in various sectors (corporate CEOs, heads of state, etc). This power differs from the power of historical dictators mainly in that it is not meant to be used to command and plan. Even when power is highly concentrated, subordinates are assumed to be nodes, and are to be nudged based on observations of the effectiveness of different measures. So-called transformative leaders who impose changes in the direction of greater responsiveness to the state of the overall system are celebrated and glorified. On the other

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hand, social actors who oppose social responsiveness are treated as bad actors. In the more radical versions of node theory, the special role of leaders is sometimes replaced by faith in the social hive-mind. It is believed that people operating collectively can take over the power of leaders and managers and use the same normative mechanisms to enforce progress on each individual.

The role of the leader is almost precisely that of the steerer (*kubernetos*) of cybernetic theory. The leader is in a bizarre position of at once being despotically powerful, and yet utterly dependent on external forces (for example, an entrepreneur succeeds only by predicting and adapting to the market). The leader is not a sovereign who organises the collective body in the manner of a machine operator or the classic idea of the brain in the body. Rather, the leader is accorded an almost magical power to produce outcomes with seemingly insufficient means, by intuitively or scientifically deducing where to exert pressure. The leader's means are those of node theory: signals and nudges. The theory is non-falsifiable. If they succeed (or seem to), this shows their aptitude; if they fail, it simply indicates their insufficiency. Crucially, this is a very authoritarian model in two ways. Firstly, node theory tends to be

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Crucially, this is a very authoritarian model in two ways. Firstly, node theory tends to be

contemptuous of limits on leaders' actions, since these inhibit adaptation. Secondly, node theory does not recognise any right of individual nodes to freedom from control, in any way or in any sphere. Instead, it posits that they are always outer-directed, and that they should be constantly controlled since this is the only way to overcome maladaptive patterns. Combined with the low importance attached to inner suffering and meaning, this is a recipe for social barbarism. Companies are run as despotic personal fiefs of entrepreneurial leaders. Entire societies are reconstructed on the model of such companies, with heads of state conceiving themselves as managers not just of the state but of all society.

Node theory is usually (though not always) pro-market, on the basis that markets are effective signalling machines. However, they do not believe in markets in the manner of anarcho-capitalists, as a route to freedom. Rather, they seek nudging and regulation of markets by states, and also the internal self regulation of markets through corporate social responsibility (driven by reputational and regulatory risks). The conservatism of companies in complying with state regulations, or in avoiding reputational outcries, means that the state can use them to implement its own

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policies, often for free. In this way, we end up with the worst of capitalism—companies with untrammelled power—at the same time as the worst of state socialism—the *gleichschaltung* of all major actors as arms of a single control agenda.

16) *Truth is pragmatic, or pragmatism trumps truth.* The status of truth, reality or objectivity—whether they even exist, and if so, how they are reached—is highly controversial in philosophy. Node theory effectively sidesteps the question. It is supposedly not interested in ultimate truths at all. Instead, it focuses on pragmatism—“what works.” It formulates means to meet ends that it cannot justify or else takes for granted. Node theorists disagree in their positions towards truth, but the approach is compatible with very strong scepticism about truth. In these cases, scepticism serves not to introduce doubt, but to cauterise any concern with truth whatsoever. In practice, whether node theorists believe in truth or not, they treat pragmatic effectiveness as functionally equivalent to truth. In other words, pragmatic effectiveness performs the same motivational, argumentative, persuasive, etc. functions that truth performs for someone who believes in truth.

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ply is pragmatic: one should believe claims that are useful. Statements are social signals the value of which is determined by its usefulness in some sense (eg. for the adaptiveness of the overall system). Others argue that truth does not exist or is positionality-relative, but that discourses vary with how strategic they are for particular objectives, defined normatively. In either case, there is a tendency to devalue all kinds of traditional epistemological criteria, except sometimes the favouring of observational research. Instead, choices of perspective and statement are made “normatively” or “strategically.” Thus for example, media outlets that formerly sought (albeit unsuccessfully) for an objective voice are now increasingly prepared to use highly moralistic language and strategic framings deemed useful for their overall normative objectives (consider for example the coverage of lockdown scepticism and anti-vax sentiment in the centre-left media, or the increasing preparedness to label adversaries as terrorists). In academia, performance metrics measure the popularity of viewpoints within the academic community, an outcome often nudged by political and economic funding priorities, and manipulated by cultish citation clubs, powerful editors, and heads of school. There is no check on outright falsehood becoming

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Node theory also does not distinguish between something meeting a need or redressing a grievance, and it being effective at PR and marketing. In some of today's fashionable economic sectors (such as advertising, global city branding, obtaining finance, the stock market, etc.), PR effectiveness translates into real effectiveness. In the same way, no distinction is made as to whether identitarian control or equal representations have eliminated discrimination or only its appearance, whether network disruption eliminates social unrest or simply incapacitates its current expressions, or whether cognitive psychology overcomes someone's problems or simply suppresses them beneath suggestion and thought control.

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## Node Theory Applied

Node theory has applications in virtually every area of the social sciences.

Rational choice economics and behavioural economics are both node-theoretic. From the 1980s onwards, major economic bodies such as the World Bank, WEF, IMF, and most university economics departments have oriented exclusively to rational-choice economics (also known as neoclassical or neoliberal economics). This approach assumes (without proof) certain basic axioms by which markets are justified. It recognises only quantitative macro-scale data, and interprets this data exclusively in terms of rational-choice axioms. It systematically excludes history, psychology, and sociology from economics.

Competence-Based Education and Training (CBET) is explicitly node-based. It sees learned skills, knowledge, and personality traits (often misrecorded as skills/competencies) as learned adaptive capabilities that can be instilled easily using feedback. It overlaps with educational psychology, which has become heavily quantitative and outcome-focused, and excludes knowledge drawn from qualitative sociology of education. CBET is often criticised for neglecting deep learning.

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Cognitive-behavioural psychology (CBT) and its spinoffs, such as Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT), are strongly node-theoretic. CBT assumes that psychological problems are faulty behaviour, and cognition is a particular type of internal behaviour. Its practitioners seek to correct the faults by replacing the faulty mechanisms with other, supposedly more reality-oriented or useful mechanisms. The approach is eclectic in the techniques employed, and often serves as a brand label for whatever there is quantitative evidence works in given circumstances (towards the goal of readjusting behaviour). Critics see it as short-termist and ineffective over time, and as treating surface symptoms rather than causes. It often seems to have a social brainwashing function, encouraging beliefs that are useful because they render distressing realities more palatable. For example, CBT often encourages wishful thinking and distraction from distressing realities, and encourages an internal locus of control—blaming oneself rather than the system for one's failure. While CBT is the gold standard in node-theoretic psychiatry, virtually all the currently popular mainstream and alternative therapies incorporate node theory to some degree. For example, the 12 step model relies heavily on group pressure and thought control, the Duluth

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model on ego bashing, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) on imitating pragmatically effective models regardless of truth, etc.

Situational Crime Prevention, which focuses on redesigning environments to remove the possibility of deviance, and COMPSTAT-style policing, which uses computers and surveillance to efficiently and rapidly deploy police, are blatantly node-theoretic. Node-theoretic approaches often de-emphasise investigation of individual crimes, instead focusing on profiling (and resultant preemptive harassment) or the targeting of risks, risk groups, and risky areas, and thus a kind of collective punishment and surveillance. The zero tolerance approach, based on the idea that there is a conveyor belt from minor to major crimes and that suppressing minor deviance heads off larger problems, is also node-based. So, too, is “smart on crime,” the main alternative to zero tolerance that relies on proven effectiveness of particular measures (usually ignoring whether they are fair, cause suffering, or cause wider social problems). The idea of laws as tools to be used selectively to manage particular individuals or situations is also node-theoretic, and is a strong break with earlier ideas of law. Arbitrary preventive injunctions of the ASBO type are a good example, as are schemes

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like PubWatch and ShopWatch in which companies coordinate discrimination against deviants; there is also increasing reliance on punishment-by-process, legal innovation, summary powers, and sanctioning by private actors, sometimes under legal coercion (eg. social media companies and search engines). One can also include here the use of extreme policing methods such as active-shooter lockdowns, kettling of protesters, sieges/shutdowns affecting entire areas, house-to-house searches, police-state zones around summits and major events, etc., which are focused on securing a target by shutting down all life--all uncontrolled activity--within a given zone, and/or poring over the entire zone. Such so-called security comes at the price of destroying basic freedoms or making them precarious, of extreme risk to anyone who cannot or will not comply, and increasing the anxiety, terror, and panic of affected civilians.

Network disruption, and thus most post-9/11 counterinsurgency, is node-theoretic. The idea is that terrorism (or other targeted actions, such as riots, organised crime, hacking, or NVDA) arise, not from individual conscience, rational belief, or madness, but from the existence of supporting networks of beliefs, resources, and allies. There is taken to be a "conveyor belt" in

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which people start out mildly dissident and pass through stages to finally take militant action. Counterinsurgency (COIN) focuses on isolating and disrupting these networks, seeking to prevent any contamination of the wider network and to break down their capacity to act by whatever means are available. In practice, this means persecuting entire political movements, censoring dissident views, persecuting people deemed too far along the conveyor-belt (usually before they do anything particularly bad), and identifying and brainwashing people deemed to be further back on the belt.

So-called authoritative parenting, which is typically taught in parenting classes and promoted by states, is node-theoretic. Parents are encouraged to set strict but clear rules and refuse to reason or negotiate. The rules are to be backed by sanctions, often timeouts or “loss of privileges”. The rigidity of the regime is meant to make the child believe that defiance is pointless and counterproductive, and allow further power to be exercised seamlessly. While time outs and isolation teach that defiance causes social death, loss of privileges teaches that the self is bare without social recognition, that poverty is proof of one’s failure and badness, and that parents unable to

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provide consumer goods are either abusing or punishing the child. Other behaviour management systems also work on the same model. For example, workplace disciplinary systems often use the same kind of top-down non-negotiable rule setting, in contrast to the older industrial relations approach. This underpins the capacity of bosses to seek widespread workplace culture change and conduct codes across a growing sphere, well beyond the work process itself. Prisoners make heavy use of “earned privileges” and graded sanctions to discourage and disrupt resistance: prisoners who stand up to guards are likely to suffer intense persecution, while others receive increasingly generous bribes for conformity. A crucial part of this system is the “breaking-in” of prisoners by placing them in a zero-privileges regime to begin with, and subjecting them to degradations before they are assigned to somewhat improved conditions.

Social credit, an emerging system of social control, is inherently node-theoretic. This system has its origins in China, but is being introduced for social housing tenants in Italy, and is likely to spread. People begin with so many virtue points, and gain or lose points depending on micro-scale behaviours. Acts deemed antisocial lead to points

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deductions, and those deemed prosocial lead to points additions. People are also rewarded and punished for the actions of others in their circle of friends, encouraging peer enforcement and cancel culture. People falling below a certain level lose social rights, such as the right to social housing in Italy, or the right to use high-speed rail or leave the country in China; those falling above a certain level receive perks. This system has the potential for aggressive micro-regulation across different spheres, and might even replace money in the distribution of social wealth. It is the latest stage in a process of similar regulations, ranging from the systems used by online games and social media, to government databases such as no-fly lists and problem complainant registers, “earned privileges” in prisons, and the Shopwatch and Pubwatch systems. It covers similar territory to the ASBO regime in Britain, which effectively abolished rule of law, allowing individual judges to issue open-ended prohibitions differing from person to person, so as to combat low-level nuisance and distress. Vaccine passports involve a similar logic, as does proof of identity to access services (commonly used as an anti-immigrant measure).

Biometric ID systems like India’s *aadhaar* and the (so-far-defeated) Blairite ID card scheme

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overlap with systems of this type. One can easily imagine ID cards recording or being indexed to social credit databases, no-fly or Shopwatch lists, vaccine registers and so on, or the databases being indexed to biometrics or even to implanted RFID chips, so that micro-scale actors can discriminate on a person-by-person scale in determining access to services. In France, ID cards were used during COVID-19 lockdowns to measure distance from home and check whether a person has pre-registered essential activity. In China, people could find themselves suddenly unable to enter their own home or other buildings if their phone tracking flagged them as potentially infected. Both types of systems are loosely based on the wider regimes of risk management and credit rating, which are both used in the private sector to discriminate (often morally) among people seeking loans or bank accounts, and in the public sector to profile people as potential deviants and to determine such things as sentencing by courts and early release from prison. Such profiling is inherently discriminatory, predicting what a person will do based on data regarding people like them.

Even in international relations, spoiler management and the approach to “rogue states”

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Even in international relations, spoiler management and the approach to “rogue states”

are node-theoretic. Spoiler management is the idea that certain actors with interests in continued conflict will disrupt peace processes. This can supposedly be prevented by sufficiently isolating or deterring these actors. In practice, this leads to the demonisation of particular protagonists who reject arbitrary peace conditions imposed by intervening powers. The cultural meanings of conflict, grievances of social groups, and the entire anthropological context for interventions are simply bracketed-out. The idea of governance, promoted by intergovernmental organisations like the UN and IMF, is similarly node-theoretic. Good governance is all about states or other entities efficiently providing particular supposed public goods. The main target of the concept is the widespread primacy of informal over formal allegiances in the global South. Democracy consolidation is a similar concept. Its advocates effectively want to gut democracy by cutting off any possibility of ruling parties relying on social movement mobilisation. Instead, party elites are to have a common commitment to the overall system and the “rules of the game,” while important parts of the political process are handed over to the financial system and the judiciary. Part of this commitment is that all party elites condemn

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any extraparlimentary actions of their supporters, and take part in massive condemnations and crackdowns on riots, blockades, etc. Democracy consolidation might better be described as oligarchic dictatorship by a cross-party political class. There is a general, implied imperative to make everything work with, and as part of, the dominant system, and to correct what does not.

Current public health discourse, with the move away from healthcare focused on individuals, is node-theoretic. The response to COVID-19 was based on computer modelling, the management of optics, and the usual focus on nudging behaviour to produce aggregate-level outcomes. Other aspects of health policy, such as the use of indirect immiserating tactics to deter “unhealthy choices” (smoking, fast food...) and the growing importance of batteries of just-in-case tests, also largely fit into a node-theoretic framework. Such approaches differ greatly from the earlier focus on the treatment of individual patients.

Third Way technocracy, which is today euphemistically termed “centrism”, is thoroughly node-theoretic. While neoliberals and neoconservatives innovated node theory in the 1980s as part of an attempt to resubordinate populations, it was the Third Way and the post-Washington Consen-

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sus economists who expanded the model to cover the entirety of social life and to encompass aspects other than rationalistic economics. Leaders like Blair, Ardern, Macron, etc., are thoroughly node-theoretic in their approach to policy. So-called evidence-based policy and policy-relevant research are nearly always node-theoretic. Node theory provides an outer restriction on the types of evidence and policy that are considered, and the means by which they are tested. Performance metrics in academia both express node theory and encourage its application. In Third Way discourse, as in neo-Confucianism, the test of History or of conforming to cosmic law is effectively displaced onto the whims of transnational capital. Governments compete to manage appearances in such a way as to attract capital, treating the resultant success (in fact a reward by capital) as if it were proof of merit, strategic acumen, and virtue. All too often, the appearances sought by capital erase all other subjectivities, suppress protests and unsightly signs of poverty, and create pliant, robot-like workers.

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Also in politics, participatory governance based on mass-line approaches is largely node-theoretic. The mass line is a Maoist model that entails political leaders studying existing popular

beliefs, rhetoric, and concerns, and feeding these back to the people concerned in the form of political slogans and policies (“from the people, to the people”). This disguises the role of the leadership and makes controversial policies seem to stem from the people themselves. Mass-line politics is crypto-authoritarian but difficult to distinguish from anarchism and from democracy. One of the forms taken by anarchy/anarchism is the emergence of self-determining crowds, affinity groups, and direct action. “Democracy” is a contested signifier with many interpretations and variants on the theme of rule “by the people”; either directly or through accountable representatives. Some mass movements can be considered as engaging in popular democracy, participatory democracy, and/or direct democracy. Mass-line politics, whether in authoritarian or representative systems, can look like anarchy or democracy but is a crypto-authoritarian structure in which direct power may well be exercised (anarchically or democratically) by the crowd, the majority, or small groups, but covert control over these forces is exercised by a dictatorial political elite, usually operating with cult-like thought-policing mechanisms to enforce groupthink while also disguising its existence or role. The confusion arises because

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the controlling group conceals its existence, and feeds back to the populace a rhetoric and action agenda rhetorically close to their own, but structured dictatorially. With no visible vanguard or command structure, the movement seems from afar to be anarchic or democratic. In practice, there is firm control (no anarchy) and no accountability of leaders to followers (no democracy).

The Chinese Cultural Revolution for example looked anarchic and/or democratic from afar. Most of the mass campaigns were directed upwards in the social hierarchy (Blecher and White, 1979:47), even if this served the goals of others within the elite. Common tactics included flyposting, mass criticism sessions with verbal haranguing, occupation or ransacking of elite homes, strikes, shutdowns, and occupations. The criticism method (see Perry and Li, 1997:113-14) is similar to the now-familiar call outs of identity politics. While there were grassroots groups that took their own directions, much of the Revolution was a conflict between two student groups as to whether the main criterion for university places should be someone's official social class designation (which favoured the children of party and army officials) or levels of virtue signalling in mass campaigns (favouring the children of the

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middle class) (see Chan et al., 1980). Thus, students who seemed to be engaged in a spontaneous student rebellion on the model of France 1968, in fact were “not ‘rebelling’ per se” but engaged in “activist competition with classmates” to accrue political brownie points (1980:421). The students were in mass campaigns orchestrated by sections of the state leadership, but often doing so spontaneously, without command from above. The level of polarisation was intense, with “tit-for-tat retribution” between student factions (Perry and Li, 1997:66) even going so far as to stockpile weapons (Blecher and White, 1979:48). This happened because the simple competition for power or resources between rival factions was turned into “pseudo-politics” (1979:64), each side viewing itself as defenders of Maoism against demonic enemies (Chan et al., 1980:442). In other cases, workers and peasants had little knowledge of central slogans or the stakes in intra-party feuds, but reinterpreted campaigns in light of local issues, such as wage levels or bureaucratic injustices (Blecher and White, 1979:101-2; Perry and Li, 1997:56). Maoist campaigns thus functioned as effective channels, structuring rather than stifling mass movements (Perry and Li, 1997:5), and making these movements less threatening to the

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state. They also allowed Mao and his supporters to attack rivals in the state and party bureaucracies, using charismatic leadership to mobilise “the masses” against opponents and sometimes using established party networks and patronage systems to do so (Zuo, 1991:106). If conflicts got out of hand, however, it was relatively easy for Mao or local authority figures to call them off (Perry and Li, 1997:142, 195). In still other situations, students mobilised as Red Guards were effectively deployed by the regime as culture police, engaging in attacks on cultural deviants and traditional peasants (Friedman et al., 2007:90). The Cultural Revolution was a complex feedback loop; while the main driver in conflicts between politicians was a power struggle between factions with differing strategic visions, the slogans and campaigns used were drawn from previous research into grassroots grievances. Hence, the leaders of the Maoist faction could leverage genuine discontent as part of a struggle with their rivals within the party, even though the discontented people did not understand what was happening at the centres of political power.

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When working in formally democratic systems, mass line leaderships tend to sidestep or capture institutions and turn politics into PR and

empty rhetoric. They rely on participatory but non-democratic feedback loops to echo back to their followers the latter's own concerns, repackaged in such a way that they serve continuing dominance by the ruling group. Thus for example, local councils in parts of the UK will periodically send out surveys asking which of a checklist of forms of minor deviance are the biggest problem locally. They will then launch poster campaigns and other initiatives targeting whatever is chosen. After the 2011 riots, an astroturf "riot cleanup" campaign gained massive proportions on social media and on the streets. It was initiated by people close to the far right, and then amplified by the mainstream media. When the Third Way faction in the Labour Party feels threatened, it uses backdoor channels to media insiders to create or amplify heavily-spindoctored media events. Thus for instance, when the more left-wing Jeremy Corbyn was party leader, the Third Way staged a media event around supposed anti-Semitism in the party. The witch-hunt only uncovered a few dozen incidents, but the media panic was enough to create a widespread impression of bigotry, which—again—was amplified on social media. In the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown, police departments aggressively stigmatised supposed

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lockdown-breakers (including some who didn't even break the law) on social media. Media scare-mongering rapidly created a hate lobby against so-called "Covidiot", which also led to dispersed actions ranging from snitching to vigilante attacks to flyposting. The grassroots mobilisation was genuine, and not coordinated from above, but it only took place because of targeted signalling and nudging by politicians, medical officials, police chiefs, and media. It thus looked like lockdowns were imposed and toughened by popular demand, but the popular demand was heavily manufactured. Official documents talked of a need to create a climate of fear for the lockdown to work; enforcement alone was not enough, spontaneous-appearing compliance needed to be stimulated.

Another example involves the strategy reportedly used to combat "Islamic extremist" speakers in the early 2000s. State agencies involved in counterinsurgency apparently leaked intelligence on forthcoming events, along with accusations of bigotry, to campaigning groups, leading to cancellation campaigns by gay, feminist, and Jewish groups, who were effectively exploited as a wing of state policy.

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social media groups. Because entire groups are at risk of being banned if (for example) someone advocates violence, owners and moderators take on the role of policing their own members. The situation rapidly becomes contradictory, because people in a social world with intense pressure to conform will disguise or hide their feelings and beliefs to avoid being the targets of moral panics or cancel culture. Leaders find themselves echoing popular sentiments which are themselves echoes of leaders' exhortations—except for charismatic leaders who are able to tap into unexpressed feelings. Politics increasingly becomes a competition between several different moral panics, a conflict between left and right versions of node theory, which differ little in their basic assumptions and methods. Or worse, the left gets fused into node theory along with the supposed centre, while intuitive rejection of node society is channelled by the far right. Furthermore, politics of the mass-line type is infiltrating anarchist and anarchic spaces, often leveraging informal hierarchies and guilt-trips to create systematic authoritarian cryptohierarchies. An informal leadership manipulates anarchist spaces for system-level effects, undermining respect for autonomy and difference and destroying the carefree and open

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quality of such spaces, turning them instead into spaces of moralised control and strategic status play. This differs fundamentally from other kinds of informal hierarchy in anarchist spaces, which retain autonomy for participants.

Corporate social responsibility is node-theoretic. The basic idea is that, rather than pursuing profits openly, corporations need to appear moral—otherwise they suffer longer-term profit losses due to reputational and legal/regulatory risks. The overall motivation is still about optimising profits, and the morality in question is not the company’s own, but that of the populations it seeks to appease. Nonetheless, companies have become very self-righteous about their perceived moral status, their “shared values” and virtue-signalling. This has not stopped widespread corporate plunder, but it has made companies increasingly controlling in relation to their workers and trade partners, and increasingly unwilling to stand up to moral panics.

Culture industry metrics are node-theoretic. Studies of the culture industry today are mostly at a loss as to how to incorporate a sphere so laden with qualitative values into rationalistic economics. They persist nonetheless in treating culture as an industry producing goods and services that

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Culture industry metrics are node-theoretic. Studies of the culture industry today are mostly at a loss as to how to incorporate a sphere so laden with qualitative values into rationalistic economics. They persist nonetheless in treating culture as an industry producing goods and services that

can be measured in their value, with the result that an inordinate focus is placed on measurable things (such as footfall and ratings), over those that are unmeasurable. Governments spend huge sums of money trying to create culture industry hubs by attracting companies, which does little to aid actual creativity. There has been a corresponding competencisation of cultural products themselves, with a focus on technical excellence in teachable and duplicable aspects, to the exclusion of creativity. Thus for example, art education focuses on imitation of styles, creative writing on word choice, pop music on vocal range or brand identity, sports on technical skills and consistency. Finally, the interventions of identity politics into culture further reinforce these trends.

Node theory also has various impacts on the content of culture. It encourages algorithmic approaches to the development of cultural products, and often an overreliance on franchise, star power, special effects and tickbox virtue signalling at the expense of plots, characters, and audience emotions. Whereas earlier stages of the culture industry marketised distribution, in the current era production itself is often confused with marketing. Node theory often involves an emphasis on technical proficiency at the expense of content (for

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example, vocal acrobatics in music or avoidance of redundancy in writing), or else an emphasis on fashionable or politically-correct thematic content regardless of the quality of its treatment. Node theory is typically contemptuous both of traditional aesthetic standards and of the standards maintained within specific fandoms. And although there are exceptions, the culture of node societies shows a general tendency to prefer grimness, darkness, and grittiness (often with some degree of sadism and/or paranoia) to idealised, romanticised and utopian representations. Other changes include the growing interactivity and resultant management of fandoms, the harsh judgement of stars by real-world statements and actions and their quasi-mandatory presence in social media, the emergence of *prosumer* culture (at once consuming and producing value, as on social media), the design of products to fit into break periods in hectic and irregular lives (rather than to be consumed serially or reflectively over time), reductions in complexity of many cultural products to satisfy a critically-undereducated and global audience, and the emergence of cultural products (such as the revival of simple app-style games) that serve mainly to manage anxiety. In some areas, identity-political criteria have made significant leeway

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as a means to obtain guaranteed critical acclaim and a captive audience, and/or as means of virtue signalling for producers. This generally operates superficially (for example, in terms of numerical representation of historically marginalised groups) and tends to replace quality criteria. Other notable shifts include the move from military-themed and historical/colonial dramas and novels towards those focused on police, and the new genre of reality television, which typically combines being on display with harsh normative ranking and sadistic treatment of participants.

Behaviourist approaches to disasters (including pandemics) are node-theoretic. Leading theorists perceive all disasters, whatever their cause, as equivalent, and see the main problem for disaster management agencies as managing public responses. This involves coordinating/censoring coverage, establishing lines of command among the various state and non-state responders, and nudging affected populations into desired behaviours (such as evacuation or shelter in place). The computer modelling used during the COVID-19 crisis, and the resultant tactics (such as lockdowns), are heavily rooted in node theory. To a node theorist, it makes perfect sense to try to control a disease by restricting popula-

as a means to obtain guaranteed critical acclaim and a captive audience, and/or as means of virtue signalling for producers. This generally operates superficially (for example, in terms of numerical representation of historically marginalised groups) and tends to replace quality criteria. Other notable shifts include the move from military-themed and historical/colonial dramas and novels towards those focused on police, and the new genre of reality television, which typically combines being on display with harsh normative ranking and sadistic treatment of participants.

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tion movement, rather than attempting to treat it with medicines. Having once embarked on this course, subsequent tactics are tried out as ways to enhance compliance; for example, the flow of information is controlled, media are mobilised to signal threats in a pragmatically useful way, etc.

Most approaches using the buzzword “management” in the contemporary context are node-theoretic. Management studies is overridden with imprecise general models that break down into lists of factors or buzzwords.

Identity politics in its present form is thoroughly node-theoretic. It is very different from its forerunners as late as the 1990s, even though there is some common vocabulary and a common thematic concern with race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability. Today’s identity politics mainly focuses on aggregate outcomes, and posits any inequality in outcomes as structural oppression. Every such instance is automatically assumed to be continuous with whatever historical atrocities have affected the group in question, and to be systemic. However, identity politics today is not systemic in the way its forerunners were. It is not trying to realise an entirely different system of relating, but to make the node-based social model nondiscriminatory. It is also not

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dealing with structures as its socialist-inspired forerunners did—as an alternative to blaming individuals, because problems can only be solved on a macro scale. Instead, it is aggressively committed to blaming, shaming, calling out, excluding, and punishing, with each individual treated as responsible not only for deliberate actions but for inadvertent oversights, supposed unconscious microaggressions, unintended aggregate effects, morality-dependent emotional distress experienced by identity politicians or others, etc. Identity-political ideology is now constructed in such a way that the existence of social inequalities is taken to automatically entail a kind of complicity of privileged individuals, taken as nodes, in macroscale inequalities. For example, the idea of “hostile environment discrimination,” the idea that a space is discriminatory if members of a given group feel unwelcome or unsafe, was invented by American judges, not activists. It is today embedded throughout identity politics, to the point where a space used (for example) by few black people is automatically considered racist, whatever the reasons for this. The failure of the environment to exert the correct pull factors at a node level is itself taken as a type of racism. This is taken to be a problem with the local subsystem and

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all of its nodes, who need to be reprogrammed to provide an environment with the correct pull factors. This is the grounds for frequent claims that entire movements or ideologies have “a racism problem” (or whatever), which when unpacked, might mean that it contains only a single racist, or that too many of its adherents are white, or simply that it violates some identity-political dogma. Ideas of toxic discourses, safe and unsafe spaces, call outs, duties of social groups to police their members, cancel culture and the general sense that everyone is disposable, are all aspects of the impact of node theory. In identity politics and other political spheres (such as contemporary ecology), there is often an overt agenda that is similar to that of forerunners holding the same concerns, but also a hidden curriculum of node theory. People have to accept node theory to understand and take part in many movements today. These movements try to set up different node relations with different nudges and structures, not to challenge the node model.

It is very noticeable that, with a few exceptions among feminist legal scholars, and a few similarities to Maoist self criticism, nobody in earlier identity-political movements took anything like a node-theoretic approach. Works

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written from the 1960s to the 1990s most often sought reforms of a socialist or social-democratic type (at the progressive pole of modernist policy), or sought to undermine centralised top-down institutions and replace them with grassroots, small-group structures. The same shift has happened in ecological theory and in neo-Marxism. It is also noticeable that standard node-theoretic assumptions can be rebranded as specific to any given identity-based theory, generally on the basis that they subvert the modernist orthodoxies associated with the historical oppression of the identity group. In fact, none of the basic assumptions of node theory have anything to do with any particular positionality. The core beliefs are surprisingly homogeneous, and involve denying any fundamental difference between nodes of different positionalities (other than that arising from their network position). Indeed, node theory seems to have spread out from a mainly white male elite, and has least leverage among the global poor. This style of radical politics has deviance amplification effects that contribute to the rise of the alt right, since bigoted statements gain a kind of transgressive frisson and come to feel like defiance against moralistic straitjackets. This type of radicalism is also useless to those among the op-

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pressed who do not see themselves as nodes and cannot pass as nodes—which is to say, the most radically excluded, the people for whom critique of alienation is needed.

In academia, the influence of node theory (which I repeat, was almost unknown in these spheres as late as the 1990s) is not at all limited to identity politics. Firstly, node-theoretic assumptions are now the main gloss given to poststructuralism. Secondly, the various spin offs from poststructuralism, such as posthumanism, Actor-Network Theory, Object-Oriented Ontology, and New Materialism, are thoroughly awash with node theory. The idea that people are not egos, but relational nodes is frequently the endpoint of so-called radical theories. Alternatively, people are imputed to have responsibility for the realities they produce through the differentiating language they use, leading to theories in which the validity of claims is determined by its political usefulness. In so-called radical theory, there is a seemingly endless trend of small groups of academics rebranding slightly modified node-theoretic ideologies with new names, passing them off as “radical” and distinct from all the previous variations, and thus producing an endlessly novel literature that always say roughly the same as their forerun-

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ners. This proliferation of labels is facilitated by the now-widespread idea that the same statement articulated from a different standpoint is a different statement, because statements are believed to be primarily relational, not truth claims. Today, node theory is so backgrounded as *common sense* in so much of academia that people are even able to read earlier texts and imagine that these texts share their own, node-theoretic assumptions.

It should be noted here that the authors deemed the founders of poststructuralism/post-modernism and most of the 1960s-70s radicals, are not node theorists. The closest forerunners in the historical left are the Maoist offshoots involved in radical feminism and anti-racism. They began the process of replacing macro-structural concerns with cultural-revolution-like behaviour-change approaches, in which people's identities, subjectivities, desires, and behaviours are to be remoulded through moral exhortation, political commitment, or thought reform so as to produce changes in macrorelations. Most radicals in this period were broadly aligned either with socialism or the New Left, and committed primarily either to economic, political, or policy changes, to self empowerment through autonomous agency, and/or to redistribution of power from the elite and

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the state to oppressed populations. The founders of poststructuralism—Foucault, Lacan, Baudrillard, Derrida, Deleuze/Guattari, and Lyotard—are mostly children of the 1968 revolution and/or are critical of the cybernetic, normative, and technocratic trends of the 1950s-60s.

Lacanian-influenced psychoanalysis is arguably closer to cybernetics than other psychoanalytic strands, and there are similar tendencies in Foucauldian discourse analysis and Althusserian Marxism. These are the aspects that have been picked up and integrated into radical variants of node theory. It should be noted, however, that Lacan was a depth psychologist who *rejected* behaviourism and the reduction of people to outer influences; Deleuze/Guattari were trying to formulate a theory of desire and small-group formation directed against hierarchical power; Baudrillard was a radical critic of tendencies towards cybernetic control society, and fundamentally objected to cybernetic belief systems because they elide or eliminate meaningful, symbolic, and affective aspects of life; and Foucault was primarily a (sexual, gay, mad, anti-prison) liberationist seeking to analyse and fight dominant power regimes.

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node theory applied

theory variant in Britain and America, following its adoption and schematisation by proto-Third Way theorists in a period of reaction, who accepted the core axioms of Thatcher and Reagan as indicators of a historic shift, and who sought an alternative to Marxism that could preserve their radical credentials without entailing conflict with the system. Many of them are former Eurocommunists and Maoists who switch out Althusser and Gramsci and substitute Foucault and Lacan. This variant of poststructuralism echoes the core assumptions of node theory. In particular—and in line with the more inhuman, Stalinist and Maoist variants of Marxism—Anglophone poststructuralists place a big emphasis on the supposed nonexistence of “the subject” (i.e. the individual or person), the reduction of all or most identities and desires to social constructions and associated “conditioning” (often reduced to language), the supposedly dispersed nature of power in postmodernity, and a resultant political agenda of morally- and/or politically-exhorted self change or coerced individual-level change towards radical goals. This approach was further deradicalised under the influence of state patronage systems connected to inclusion/diversity and the neoliberal culture industry, before being re-

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exported into radical politics. Since everything is a social construct, functions like a differential language, desire is a secondary effect, and the inner life does not exist, radical politics on this model means making clever strategic interventions (often either rhetorical or punitive) to nudge society in the desired, radical directions. The rejection of truth, objectivity, and the idea of reality in such approaches (always ambivalent given their necessary reliance on structural theories of inequality as Sacred Science) devolves in practice into a belief in the overwhelming pragmatic/normative importance of promoting one frame rather than another, with no reality checks on the resultant claims: the claims are justified not by their truth but by their usefulness for the liberation of a given oppressed group (a contradictory position, since one has to also believe that the group is truly oppressed for it to make sense). The resultant political style is inimical to autonomy, to the valuation of Unique Ones and the liberation of desires, and also to humane concern for others.

The Anglophone poststructuralist approach has been spun off in various areas and cross fertilised with concerns such as gender and race, as well as with academic disciplines. This results in a proliferation of subtly differentiated *theories*: post-

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## Node Theory as Simulated Relationality

I believe node theory is a new worldview, which evolved gradually from cybernetics. The old mechanistic worldview went into crisis in the 1960s-70s, and node theory is what re-emerged when the system managed to pull itself together. Node theory is the new *common sense* of mainstream academia and technocracy, and has pushed aside the older mechanical models almost entirely.

It follows from this that modernity is dead, assuming one defines “modernity” in the sense meant by its node-theoretic critics. The type of modernity usually criticised today was prevalent in the period of roughly 1930-1970, and relied on completely different core axioms from those of node theory: fixed knowable identities and essences, objective knowledge, big general theories dealing with invisible causes, teleological and progressive models of history, conceptual hierarchies of (for example) historical stages or races, state planning or command, developmentalism, an emphasis on the standard of living, etc. This leads to completely different approaches in nearly every area. In education for instance, modernist approaches either sought to instill facts/knowledge/culture

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deemed necessary for culture or for their own sake, or to develop national citizens of a certain type. Modernist approaches to crime oscillated between authoritarian and social-democratic poles. The former sought to identify and punish individual criminals, the latter to prevent crime through social reform and to rehabilitate criminals. Much of contemporary radical theory is therefore flogging a dead horse, attacking modernity over and over as if it was still the dominant system, while in fact parroting what is today the dominant system. (Of course, modernity is clearly not dead if it is instead defined, for example, in terms of capitalism, industrial society, Mumford's technics, etc.). In this endless attack on the corpse of modernity, today's "radicals" often seem to defend and extend present regimes of power that in many ways are even worse. For example, the identity-political script for creating Safer Spaces by using draconian enforcement of broad and vague conduct codes is lifted almost exactly from the statist node-theoretic model of handling deviance by using zero tolerance, draconian catch-all laws, and summary banning orders. Only the behaviours that are to be managed are different. Node theory has become a backgrounded *common sense* in swathes of academia, man-

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agement, professions, and radical politics, such that dissent from it is ruled out of court. Node-theoretic assumptions stand out to me because I have little resonance with this approach and find it personally very threatening. But it is no surprise that others take it for granted. It is in the air we breathe, so to speak, as mechanicism was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I think readers will look back on the theories of today as irredeemably tainted by these node-ideas, the same way people can now look back on early twentieth-century socialists and anarchists and pinpoint the ways they reproduce mechanicism and “modern reason”. So far, nobody on the left or post-left has articulated a thorough critique of this ideology, and it has a tendency not to name itself, to hide behind generalities or particularities (appearing variously as “centrism”, “policy relevance”, “materialism”, “feminism”, etc.). There is some criticism on the right, from people who prefer Fordism or other earlier systems, but this is unhelpful except in specifying how the two regimes differ.

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interrelate, partly in the ways it tries to leverage relationality. Node theory is relational, and as such, is often conflated with other relational approaches such as indigenous cosmologies, ecology, Daoism, feminist epistemologies, etc. A layer of node-theoretical scholars do a great deal of work passing off node theory as various other ideologies. Thus for instance, there is a tradition of “ecological education” which is mainly about encouraging node-theoretic systems thinking. In reality, there are wide gaps between node theory and other relational approaches. This is particularly noticeable in the case of indigenous thought, which is relational but in a very different sense. One can thus compare, for example, Wolff’s description of being initiated as a shaman by Malaysian hunter-gatherers, whose practices include daily sharing of dreams and recounting of experiences in trance-states. Most accounts of indigenous worldviews indicate that these worldviews are intensely relational, situated, and co-constituted.

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One of the differences is that the process of networking and social fusion arises in a context of lived immediacy and intimacy. It is because they have real non-instrumental multiplex relations on an intimate level that uncolonised indigenous people can think relationally. This is linked to the existence of the Clastrean war-machine, subsistence and gift economics, and shamanism. Such

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One of the differences is that the process of networking and social fusion arises in a context of lived immediacy and intimacy. It is because they have real non-instrumental multiplex relations on an intimate level that uncolonised indigenous people can think relationally. This is linked to the existence of the Clastrean war-machine, subsistence and gift economics, and shamanism. Such

material enfoldings of relationality make it viable, whereas in other contexts it is an abstract ideal or willful denial of the actual situation.

Another is that the fusion occurs at the level of the Imaginary: by relating and co-interpreting their dreams and experiences, people come to inhabit a mythical/magical world into which the desiring-production is plugged, which is not imposed as a false-self system but which rather enriches their own imaginal production. Thus in Wolff's account of indigenous hunter-gatherers, he describes sharing of dreams, the use of dreams to establish the character of worldly experiences, and the sharing of experiences in trance-states.

Another important difference is that node-subjects immerse themselves in situations in order to exploit them; if they use the imaginal or intuitive level, they use it to aid their performance in the simulated world. This is true whether the person is an entrepreneurial self seeking economic advantage, a politician seeking power and prestige while passing the test of History, or a radical activist seeking to make strategically effective interventions. Most often, of course, they immerse themselves in Spectacle more than in reality or imaginal realm. Node society has very little access to the Imaginary because the Imaginary relates to

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the id and spirit, and does not operate on a node level. (Hence, movies, novels, art, even theory, produced in a node-society become increasingly banal, repetitive, contentless, and soulless).

Western writers on indigenous knowledge use terms like “natural resource extraction” or “harvesting of resources” in a manner that subtly misrepresents the process. A western node-theorist may well manage resources, with both words (“resource” and “manage”) indicating the ego register and willpower they use (see eg. Conklin and Graham, 1995; Ellen 1986; Li, 2005; Lynch, 2005; Trosper, 1995). Indigenous people, however, tend to intuit and construct at the level of the imaginal realm and of cosmic order the particular practices they retain. They relate in a direct, immanent, immediate way to a particular environment, so that their relationship to it is a pattern of smooth relating rather than a dominant conduct code imposed by force of will, bribery, or threats. Uncolonised indigenous people do not relate as nodes, in the same way they do not “harvest natural resources”. Their relations derive from a lived intimacy that is not grounded on a split between inner and false self, and in which the dynamics of the Imaginary (such as introjection and projection) play a role (see eg. Wolff, 2001).

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Take for instance the Nayaka prohibition on refusing a request for an object or a piece of food (Bird-David, 1994). This probably involves a strong cathexis of generosity, and is also a basis for a kind of implicit welfare right which does not operate through domination. Instead, it entails high regard for a lifeworld in which abundance exists, a view of such a world as (so to speak) a good cosmic order, and a desire to reproduce it. It also suggests respect for the spirited part, which would feel slighted or threatened by a refusal. To a node-theorist, it would be read principally as a form of social signalling and sanctioning designed to produce social cohesion, to create mutual dependence and/or to meet some practical need such as food security. A computer modeller could doubtless create a community of NPCs with minimal node traits who “behave like” Nayaka in this regard; they might even be able to show that such a community has survival advantages over other nodes in certain conditions... but Nayaka are not nodes and they don’t think they’re nodes. However, it is difficult to demonstrate that autonomous and indigenous worldviews differ from node-theoretic worldviews, because they differ in precisely those aspects of life which node theory denies.

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The effect of the two approaches, of imma-

nent relationality and node-like relationality, may sometimes be similar. However, there are important differences at a psychological level. Relying on ego and willpower means that node-theorists activate various negative reactions to ego-based performance, including the reactance effect. It also means they can only rely on conscious knowledge, not intuition. Node-theoretic actors relate only as nodes, primarily at the level of ego, through performances and norms.

Indeed, it is not just hunter-gatherers who do not relate as nodes. Nomads, subsistence farmers, even peasants and workers do not think in node-like ways. There are always dense webs of meaning, including cathexes and a “moral economy”, which preclude node-thinking (even when oppressive hierarchies exist). Autonomous social movements also do not function in node-like ways, at least prior to the mid-2010s. Flow-states and immediacy have always been vital to such movements. More recently, the trend towards node-like relating through social media activism and related virtue-signalling has been corrosive of conviviality and sustainability in radical spaces.

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Node theory partly derives from cybernetics, which emerged as a branch of the old technocracy (and one particularly highlighted by critics such as Mumford, Ellul and Vaneigem). Cybernetics applies ideas similar to node theory to technical problems in areas related to information systems. It is also influenced by network theory/science, by complexity theory and by systems theory, all of which are more limited perspectives which establish scientific credibility based on their ability to model particular phenomena. Viewing something as a network or a complex system is a choice of lens, and scholars of this type would historically have been careful to nuance these approaches by recognising their partiality and their basis in schematic modelling. Once popularised, node theory has increasingly mistaken the models for underlying realities which are “more real than” observable realities. Node theorists also typically include the ethical and desiring registers

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In some respects, node theory is simply an updating of older technocratic theories, including such classics as behaviourism, operationalism and functionalism. For example, behaviourism in psychology was all the rage in 1950s America and was often combined with cybernetics. Undetermined by the cultural turn and early evidence from neurology, it has revived by fusing with cognitivism and neuroscience into a new approach in which thoughts are taken to be a type of behaviour subject to behavioural interventions. This new behaviourism has had a huge influence via pop psychology, and increasingly forms the subtext of everything from forums focused on “mental health” to “workplace wellness” interventions. In the same way, certain 1950s sociological theories (including both functionalists and interactionists) assumed that people are reducible to roles, and that selfhood is nothing more than a constructed role. Goffman (1956) and Merton (1949) are examples. For instance, in Goffman one already finds the claim that “[t]he self... is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from

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a scene that is presented.” (Goffman, 1956:252) Such ideas were undermined by movements against alienation, as well as the growing influence of conflict theories of society and meaning-based approaches to sociology. While functionalism has revived only marginally, structuration approaches and node-based constructivisms apply a similar approach, focused on roles and opportunity-structures. Contemporary management is in some respects neo-Taylorism.

In the social sciences and humanities, node theory has partly evolved from poststructuralism and post-Marxism. Structuralism was originally a binary theory of language with similarities to classic cybernetics, but formulated independently and earlier. The founders of poststructuralism were 1960s-era radicals. However, their work was

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In some areas, node theory began as rational choice theory (RCT), which uses abstract models based on the assumption of rational actors with perfect information. RCT forms the core of World Bank/WEF economics and the Washington Consensus. As it became increasingly clear that neoliberal policies were not working as well as RCT predicted, it was supplemented with other behaviourist and node-theoretic elements in the post-Washington Consensus.

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imported to the English-speaking world mainly from the 1980s onwards, by ex-Marxist and centre-left intellectuals seeking to replace Marxism in academia with a less threatening alternative. Poststructuralism replaced Marxist-like analysis in identity politics during the 2000s, and became definitive of most radicalism in this era. Over time, the already simplified ideas of poststructuralism have been further influenced by pop-psychology, academic funding and ranking systems and the wider “common sense”, moving closer and closer to cybernetic forms of relational theory. For example, the work of Katherine Hayles (eg. 2002) and Rosi Braidotti (eg. 2002) is scattered with poststructuralist jargon and references to its seminal thinkers, and with nods to identity politics and radical concerns, but, at the level of content, is indistinguishable from cybernetics.

One particular substrand of these scholars are/were structuralist Marxists, who in the 1970s would generally have been Eurocommunists and influenced by Althusser and Poulantzas (who merged structuralism with Marxism). Some members of this tendency viewed neoliberalism in the 1980s as a new stage of history that rendered past theories obsolete (see eg. Hall and Jacques, eds., 1989; contributors include the later

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Blairite intellectuals Charles Leadbeater, David Held, and David Marquand; Manuel Castells is another example). Many kept up the same theoretical models they had used in the 1970s, but switched out Althusser, Marx, and Gramsci and replaced them with Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida. They also replaced class with identity politics, and further tamed their residual anti-capitalism. This group are particularly attached to the “test of History” discourse and technocratic elements in Fordist-era Stalinism; some also had Maoist sympathies. They are not some kind of crypto-communist conspiracy as portrayed on the right; most of them have long abandoned any socialist pretensions and embraced neoliberal globalisation. They do, however, promote forms of governance resembling those of the Soviet bloc countries and of contemporary China, and bring from their earlier perspectives an ethical orientation to History and aggregate outcomes, and a contempt for “humanism”:

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tense social control was combined with politicised venting of mass grievances and the imitation of mass “common sense” by leaders, while officials were given autonomy but rewarded in terms of performance according to central targets. The resultant system operated with local-level control and high-speed feedback loops allowing the state to carry out wide-reaching, drastic change. This had a number of effects ranging from economic and social “development” (for example, improvements in rural healthcare due to low-level participatory models later adopted worldwide) to charismatic political appeal abroad. Relatively flattened (but nonetheless strict) hierarchies using participatory governance techniques have become popular in everything from radical politics to management of businesses to Third Way devolution agendas. Maoism influences node theory via several conduits: firstly, the adoption of aspects of Maoism by identity politicians; secondly, the imitation of Maoism by Eurocommunist and post-Marxist tendencies which later influenced the Third Way; thirdly, the adoption of participatory models by global governance bodies and transnational companies; and fourthly, the growing influence and imitation of post-Maoist China, which retains neoliberalised versions of some of

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the Maoist techniques. More broadly, East Asian philosophical and cultural systems have been targeted for imitation and appropriation owing to the iconic status of East Asian developmental states (Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and later China) for global capitalism from the 1970s onwards. Capitalists tend to copy successful models, and these countries all had high GDP growth rates in recent times. This was attributed to social control and trust, and to participatory management practices, which in turn were sometimes taken to depend on cultural traits such as loyalty to superiors, socialised (rather than individual) moralities, relational ontologies and rigid etiquette. Social scientists like Fukuyama, Putnam and the developmental state theorists tried to reverse-engineer these traits on a node-theoretic basis so as to reproduce them in the west and elsewhere. The idea that the west is flawed because of excessive individualism, Cartesian reason and/or narcissism, and that this needs to be rectified by paring back and “socially situating” the ego, largely reflects this agenda. Although the Chinese government has encouraged the process, it does not on the whole reflect East Asian influence. Rather, it is similar to the appeal of Fordism outside America in the

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1930s: capitalists copying the rising hegemon. For example, Japanese techniques such as kaizen and just-in-time production have been generalised in capitalist companies. It should also be added that the reception of East Asian ideas is often selective and poor-quality. It is a western manager's version of how an East Asian manager thinks, not a nuanced appreciation of cultures (in the Geertzian sense) or of philosophical traditions.

Virilio believes modern development is usually driven by the expansion of military technologies and ways of seeing. Today, counterinsurgency has been a major influence. Network disruption, surveillance and micro-governance methods have evolved from COINTELPRO and similar initiatives, with the specific purpose of defeating armed insurgencies and social movements. These methods have been expanded to other forms of deviance (for example, KYC/AML/CTE) and even to unrelated spheres such as health tracking and employee performance monitoring. Advertisers now target likely purchasers in a manner similar to how counterinsurgency agents single out rebels.

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Changes in social life and production have also likely had effects. The generalisation of computer technologies, including smartphones, gami-



fication and social media, has exposed people to, and increasingly naturalised, various mechanisms of node-theoretic thinking and regulation. As Galloway shows, the protocols of particular software and platforms has effects on the ways discourse takes place and the technology can be used. Social media with a one-to-many structure and extensive audience participation encourages normative performance for the audience and the use of discourse to signal rather than communicate. It also tends to polarise discourse, because people respond more to controversial posts. And it is far easier to block or report someone than it is to engage with their arguments. Other social changes have similar effects. For example, the role of moral panics reflects successful strategies of media producers to attract audiences by channelling their anxieties. Its evolution into “cancel culture” is mediated by counterinsurgency methods in the 2000s, which leveraged moral panics to destroy civil liberties, and by the transfer of moral-panic mechanisms from the traditional media to social media. Moral panics can now be “crowdsourced” and politics often functions as a competition among different moral panics. The weakening of trade unions and labour laws has also encouraged a type of managerial despotism which both en-

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courages an overemphasis on top-down influence and allows bosses to operate as moral autocrats in response to moral panics (“corporate social responsibility”). This type of highly concentrated power provides a model for others’ attempts at social control, as well as the quasi-dictatorial “states-as-firms” metaphor popular today. The influence of financial rather than productive capital as the leading capitalist sector has influences through the spread of risk-management and creditworthiness ideas as models for other types of normativity. Sectors like finance, advertising and marketing also generate vicious circles in which perceptions of success become self-fulfilling. Social precarity and disposability also provide a necessary infrastructure on which social control can be built, underpinning fear of exclusion.

It is hard to track in any given case how node theory was influenced by these different sources. For example, a contemporary identity politician may adopt political models rooted in Maoism while also accepting Third Way assumptions about capitalism and the state. They might also be a heavy social media user, and view enemies such as the alt-right or TERFs in a manner similar to how counterinsurgency theory views armed insurgents. They might have read and been

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influenced by poststructuralist-inflected identitarian theorists. They may be a heavy consumer of pop-psychology or behaviourist-rooted therapy, and they might have studied currently fashionable theories at university, and/or worked in sectors such as management, advertising or media. And if (like most of their cohort) they grew up in the 2000s or later, they were likely exposed to node-based management/governance systems at school and work, and possibly also in the family; they could well have normalised these, and furthermore, have developed complex emotional investments (such as a desire to capture and imitate parents' power, or to invert it and use it back "upwards" against them). It is easy to see how pressures in the same direction from different sources could produce a node-theoretic orientation without it being easy to specify its sources.

It is thus easier to say that node theory reflects the mechanisms of the current stage of capitalism, and/or the cumulative worsening of industrial civilisation over time, than it is to specify exactly how the two are linked. At the same time, it is frustratingly difficult to argue with someone who takes this bundle of ideas for granted, when they can draw on so many mutually reinforcing sources. Arguably, the central features of the cur-

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rent regime which encourage node theory are the triumph of appearance over production in the functioning of capitalism (there is nine times as much financial as productive capital—meaning 8/9 loans will not be repaid), the structural weakness of labour and of social movements and the poor, the consolidation of oligarchic power by transnational elites in a managerial manner, and the reactionary, control-freak response of these elites to the events of the 1960s-70s and to later social movements. As capital is able to become arbitrarily selective as to who it hires or supports, it develops risk-based, moralised selection mechanisms which make inclusion conditional on conformity and on loyalty to the system, rather than ability or exploitability.

### Node Theory as Authoritarian Politics

The node-theoretic worldview is wrong both epistemologically and ethically. It misunderstands human motivations because it is unable to engage seriously with psychodynamics (as opposed to external signals or ascribed “interests”). It cannot explain the failure of many of the initiatives it promotes. It has deleterious consequences across a range of liberation struggles such as mad liberation, prison liberation, sexual liberation, rewild-

rent regime which encourage node theory are the triumph of appearance over production in the functioning of capitalism (there is nine times as much financial as productive capital—meaning 8/9 loans will not be repaid), the structural weakness of labour and of social movements and the poor, the consolidation of oligarchic power by transnational elites in a managerial manner, and the reactionary, control-freak response of these elites to the events of the 1960s-70s and to later social movements. As capital is able to become arbitrarily selective as to who it hires or supports, it develops risk-based, moralised selection mechanisms which make inclusion conditional on conformity and on loyalty to the system, rather than ability or exploitability.

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ing, disalienation, children's and youth liberation, deschooling, and anti-capitalism. It is closely enmeshed with current social-control regimes, and serves to protect and extend these regimes. It is no coincidence that many of the node-theoretic "radicals" support punitive methods, the unrestrained power of bosses and service providers to fire and ban, COVID-19 lockdowns, etc. Its ethics are all about manipulating "societies" as a whole, and generally militate against individual and small-group freedoms so as to maximise control (and thus optimise whatever goal is pursued). It discourages moral autonomy and encourages moral idiocy, the outsourcing of the moral function to the herd. Its ethics is so focused on aggregates that it gives no place to issues of human needs, desires, and capabilities, to personal welfare or humane conscience.

Node theory is unable to account for the range of differences among humans, or among the variety of other entities (from animals and plants to computers) which it treats as nodes. It cannot explain the stickiness of personality-traits. It is insufficiently complex to understand living beings. Worse, it explicitly refuses engagement with subjective meanings and cathexes. Instead, it relies on "models" and "profiles" which

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are simplified make-believe simulations, always far simpler than (and dangerously mistaken for) complex actual people and phenomena. It denies (or treats as rational) the unconscious, and is thus unable to explain symptoms, dreams, parapraxes, etc. It renders important aspects of human motivation invisible. It cannot explain why incentives and deterrents (not to mention neoliberal global markets) often fail. A simulated you is not you, no matter how accurately you're "modelled" (and the accuracy today is not great); assuming everyone and everything (from subatomic particles to entire societies) is dominated by a passive-dependent survival-oriented ego can be viably modelled with a bit of forcing/stretching, but this doesn't make it true.

In its liberationist forms, it offers false hope to oppressed groups by striking at "causes" which are at most surface effects or common manifestations. Thus for instance, the average identity-political activist is constantly outraged at their own dehumanisation, erasure, or silencing; they demand recognition. Yet they never seem to achieve recognition, and also constantly rail against their own movement and especially the "allies" for failing to deliver true recognition. The reason for this is clear: the recognition they receive only

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occurs at the level of nodes and false selves, and an authentic commitment is indistinguishable from a dissimulated one. Even in the rare cases where they obtain visibility and validation, this usually fails to change underlying problems because it succeeds only in the field of normativity or appearances (think of Black Lives Matter or #MeToo). Identity politics also involves an inchoate resistance to cybernetic control; consider for example the desperation with which its adherents seek to exempt themselves and their group from prohibitions on expressing or validating inner-driven anger, yet also how they mystify this anger by conceiving it in pop-psychological terms (“triggering”) and as a structural effect.

The endless struggles at the levels of appearance and norm-setting leave unaddressed a whole string of elephants in the room: capitalism, statism, and the power of elites; the alienation of people and other beings in systems of abstract power; the irrelevance of need, desire, and capability to the dominant ethical systems; the unavailability of flow-states and peak experiences in a world of pervasive anxiety, micro-regulation, and stress; the stupidity of the work-system; the psychodynamic roots of personal-level problems; the concentration of power, and resultant loss of

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autonomy and counter-power. It is noticeable for example that identity-political campaigns might focus on representations of the global South, but not on the economic dynamics of the capitalist world-system or corporate abuses in poor countries. Because their campaigns rely so heavily on moral exhortation and coercion, they also produce a backlash due to reactance and labelling effects, and because “privileged” people are also affected by the voicelessness and fear of erasure which goes with a node-society. They thus tend to produce a polarised politics in which two sides both seek recognition and disalienation primarily by attacking one another.

Node theory, compared to the earlier dynamic and mechanistic theories, is particularly cruel and punitive. Node theory defaults very rapidly to prohibitions and punishments, and usually prefers the punishments to be relatively severe, targeted, and effective. It is not long ago that much of the left, and virtually all anarchists, saw punishment as a reactionary substitute for actually solving social problems. Now, coercive measures have proliferated. There has been a *gleichschaltung* of different state agencies, mainstream nongovernmental organisations, and other mainstream actors in each policy area. There is

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also joined-up government: police, social workers, youth workers, doctors, teachers, council officials, probation officers, etc., all meant to be working from the same playbook and cooperating (including sharing information) with one another. In practice, this means the mixture of police-state and marketised practices valued by neoliberals has begun to be taught systematically to, and imposed by, the various actors in the welfare agencies and even in adjacent non-state agencies. There was always a criticism that many of these actors played a role as “soft cops,” but in the past they had relative autonomy. Many agencies were influenced by social-democratic, social-liberal, or radical ideas, and practitioners would not see themselves as being on the same side as police or prison guards. Today, the system is *joined up*. To take an example, I mentioned above the case of homelessness. Node theorists tend to see homelessness as a failure of individuals, arising from irresponsible lifestyles or irrational resistance to accessing available (conditional, coercive) support, and they wish to use destitution as a stick to compel conformity. They also see the presence of homeless people as a threat to city branding and attracting elites to an area. Resultant policy options include criminalisation of

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homelessness or related activities (panhandling, camping, rough sleeping, street drinking); police sweeps; use of tools such as ASBOs; “designing out” (eg. placing spikes on benches or in doorways); poster campaigns to discourage people from giving money to beggars; and enforcement in homeless shelters of strict lifestyle rules that in particular deny services to people who are drunk, drugged, or agitated. Those deemed mentally ill will also be pressured to use mainstream services and keep up medication regimes. The situation is so bad today that Food Not Bombs, Calais Migrant Support, and similar groups are periodically harassed or criminalised. In the older social policy toolkit, homelessness was still stigmatised, but was considered as a social problem with complex causes. The favoured responses were such things as duties on local councils to provide housing, shelter places with conditions determined by NGOs or welfare agencies, engagement by outreach teams, and schemes easing the passage into work. Teams from mainstream NGOs or council agencies would be found in major cities, making sure homeless people had blankets, clean needles, and some minimal social services. In many countries, squatting was also legal, and people might be able to sleep in indoor public spaces such as

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train stations, multi-storey car parks, or churches. Today these kinds of practices are discouraged or criminalised, at just the time the number of street homeless has increased.

Another example is the cluster of social problems, minor crimes, and nuisances classified as “juvenile delinquency.” In many countries, there had been a move away from jailing children and youths in the 1960s-70s. The first-line state responses included such things as engagement by youth workers, provision of youth clubs and other activities, mentoring systems, child psychology, special education, and job training. In the same way, the probation service (at least in the UK) was largely focused on job training and finding work. These approaches were phased out over time, with the growing use of criminalisation, imprisonment, and restrictive/repressive measures, including such measures as ASBOs in the UK and gang injunctions in the US, and the increasingly restrictive and persecutory use of bail and probation regimes. Whereas the older welfare state would try to find legal work for criminals in sectors close to their chosen line of activity (such as retraining car thieves as mechanics, or hackers as cybersecurity specialists), the later police state does the polar opposite, seeking to ban people from entire lines

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of activity once these become tainted by deviance.

The same applies to the issues targeted by identity politics. While there was always some pressure for greater state repression in these fields, it was more usual before the 2000s to find self help and social policy initiatives. Thus, the main responses to domestic violence were providing shelters for survivors and training women in self defence (both of which could be carried out by state welfare agencies, feminist collectives, or nongovernmental organisations). Today shelters and women's self defence are less often used, and hardly ever by state agencies. Instead there is an emphasis on aggressive criminalisation, often in ineffectual ways such as waves of dawn raids on presumed abusers (doubtless terrifying to their cohabiting victims/survivors) and court orders that in many cases are ignored. In the field of anti-racism (or "race relations" as it was known), the usual responses in the UK in the 1980s were to promote state multiculturalism, provide services targeted at marginalised groups, seek to build bridges and raise awareness, organise events celebrating different cultures, and establish units such as Racial Equality Councils (which would engage in pressure and campaigning, provide advice, and coordinate different activities). The issue of neo-

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Nazism among youths fell under the remit of the youth system. It was also common to find state or state-adjacent agencies involved in campaigns against police racism and against aspects of the immigration system. Local councils were required to provide sites for Travellers. In the later, node-theoretic period, the state has ceased claiming to be multicultural and instead calls for social cohesion and integration. Anti-discrimination laws are broad but often unenforceable, and police repression (sometimes under counterterrorist auspices) is periodically directed at far-right groups. With “joined-up government,” the social agencies have not just been cut back but have also been brought into line with the agendas of the police and the economic-growth system. There has thus been an increase in the types of racism that are illegal, an increase in the number of conduct codes forbidding racism, and an increase in arrests and prosecutions for street-level or online racism—but also (for example) a big increase in structural racism, a decline in the social position of the poorer subgroups within racialised minorities, increasing persecution connected to the War on Terror, vicious anti-immigration systems, big increases in racialised practices such as stop-and-search, and increases in racial murders by police. In practice,

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node theory always “responsibilises” individuals. If someone does not fit into a rigid system or receive signals as intended, the problem is assumed to be with the individual, not the system. Consider for example the conversion of “industrial relations” to “human resource management,” and of social and communication problems to social and communication “skills,” which are lacking only on one side of a failed interaction. If people are not producing measurable results on demand, the problem is assumed to be with the person, not with the system or the demand. The possibilities that the system might make unrealistic demands, or that it does not have mechanisms to produce the expected results with actually-existing people, are framed out. The system is barely recognised as existing and (if recognised at all) is viewed as virtuous. It is generally impossible within node theory to blame the system for anything; blame always falls on individuals or micro-level groups. Node theory tends to disguise and downplay the social role of elites in the functioning of authoritarianism, which is often disguised as democratic, libertarian, or anarchic. People are increasingly unable, or unwilling, to call it what it is: an authoritarian system.

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ready have towards authoritarianism, sadism, self blame, masochism (and depression), and other tendencies by channelling, rewarding, and providing expression (relative to other personality tendencies) for these aspects of self. Alternatively, it produces a disconnection between actual personalities and outer social functioning. Or it might even do both at once. Online for example, platform affordances and protocols make it difficult for moderators and site owners not to act tyrannically. If they refuse to do so, they may well be breaking the law by “facilitating” illegal content (a weird kind of doublethink in which the failure to network disrupt or censor is a kind of proactive guilt, as if the population is entirely composed of conscript cops). The ideologies attached to node theory also offer huge opportunities for satisfying contradictory desires at once—for instance, allowing people to act in an authoritarian way while identifying as anti-authoritarians and rebels, and to attach node-based logics to grievances against node society.

People who implement node theory as a totalitarian ideology generally conceal it, even from themselves. They seem to be simply technocrats, professionals, leaders, pragmatists, realists, people oriented to effectiveness and efficiency. Dis-

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senders are accused either of paranoia and hate, of idealism and reality-denying optimism, of undermining the common effort and failing the test of History, or of being a node actor themselves, with ascribed malicious intent (identity politicians, for example, typically assume that any opponent is motivated by unconscious or conscious racism, sexism, etc., and not by objections to node theory). Like their technocratic and Stalinist forerunners, they come across as sterile, heartless, almost robotic. Systems of subtle and faceless coercion through manipulation and peer pressure make it difficult to identify authoritarian actors. The entire system is disguised to make it seem inevitable, impersonal, and capillary. The forces and people involved are hidden behind the system's mechanisms and protocols. This creates either dull acceptance or floating paranoia that attaches to any available target.

Node theory does not worry much about capacity to obey, and not at all about fairness or proportionality. It often has recourse to strict-liability rules, preferring clarity and ease of enforcement to fairness. There is a normalisation and widespread proliferation of arrests, searches, jailings, raids, property seizures, banning orders, summary fines, intrusive security measures, and

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disciplinary processes outside the state (social media bans, shop bans, sports match bans, workplace discipline, and firings...), which cause immense harm (both objective and subjective) to those on the receiving end, but are morally sterilised from critique by their supposed overall benefits.

For any given social problem, one can weigh the node approach against other possible responses: it is very common for punitive and incapacitative approaches to be used today for problems that would previously have been either tolerated, targeted for funding, or handled under the modalities of psychology, social work, youth work, education/propaganda campaigns, negotiation (for example with unions), etc.

Node theory tends to have authoritarian effects. The reason is that it is focused on the overall impacts of given actions on the state of the entire network, not the impacts on each person or other being (impacts which are occluded by treating each as nodes and assuming malleability). The social principle, in which cooperation itself arises from the desires and needs of each, is utterly alien to node theory; people are treated as always and rightly inside society, which is considered as the big Other, as parent substitute. More fundamentally, node theorists are playing the perverse game

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of impressing the big Other or passing the test of History. They judge themselves and their projects by outcomes that they take as indicating the big Other's will, and not by any unfortunate impact on affected populations. They happily run states and professions on the model of businesses--in which the CEO has absolute power, yet is accountable for performance in terms of profit margins. The only limits to their despotism arise in the form of "optics," or the avoidance of appearances producing unwanted effects (such as unrest). Since everyone and everything is to be manipulated as a "means" to policy goals or to corporate profit, understanding is surplus to requirements. For a node theorist, Unique Ones cannot be ends-in-themselves.

Node theorists imagine that they can re-program individuals and societies, in the same way a programmer can debug a computer program through code. They believe they are engaging at the root level operative behind subjectivities, when in fact they are operating in a field of Barthesian myths and shadow-play, a world of simulations. This supposed level analogous to source code is various theorised as the incentive structure, the opportunity structure, or language. The attempt to work on the source code avoids any need for node theorists to engage with, un-

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derstand, or be reasonable towards actual people or other entities (which they take to be secondary effects). What's more, the root metaphors themselves are largely unprovable and unproven; they are taken on faith, as axioms.

Node-theoretic interventions generally either fail, or succeed only partially and at great cost. This is because they operate at a secondary level, that of ego motivations. They fail when they come up against deeper motivations and when they decompose the very ego they rely on. When they succeed, they do so by coercing or inducing false-self performances. These are unstable and liable to collapse, since the inner self is alienated and becomes increasingly hostile. I doubt that node theory works only on the node level itself. For its adherents, it is also cathected—for example, as an ethos of seeking to pass the test of History or please the parent, and as a source of masochistic and sadistic pleasures. Just as there are people whose character armour reproduces traditional masculinity and femininity, so there are people whose character armour makes their surface self node-like. Certain node-theoretic dynamics come to operate in reality through the belief that they operate, sustained by processes of suggestion and thought-reform. This is particu-

derstand, or be reasonable towards actual people or other entities (which they take to be secondary effects). What's more, the root metaphors themselves are largely unprovable and unproven; they are taken on faith, as axioms.

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larly true in elite-level economics: brands have value if they are perceived to have value; manipulating the appearance manipulates also the (socially constructed) reality. Such circularity only works in a limited range, however.

Actual social changes come from changes either in how people live their lives, or at the level of psychodynamics. The first type of changes include those from replacing capitalism with subsistence or vice versa, those arising from widespread technologies and historical changes, and those arising from greater or lesser autonomy—for example, from relying on state services or providing them autonomously. The latter typically require dialogue and understanding of the primary process. They operate at the level of libidinal cathexes, needs, desires, capabilities, the multiple registers of the psyche. They also use rational discourse, since this is the only common language between different selves.

Psychoanalysis and Geertzian anthropology are two approaches that operate on this level. I attach a lot of importance to something like the Geertzian ethnographic approach because I think it's only possible to have dialogue if there's an attempt to understand the other's point of view while also avoiding reducing it to one's own; this often

node theory as authoritarian politics  
121

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involves reconstructing the psychodynamic, historical, and embedded-meaning elements that are not apparent to actors themselves, without which a given actor is incomprehensible to someone who does not also hold their background assumptions. Node theorists generally reject such attempts at understanding because they often fail, producing ethnocentric misunderstandings. But they substitute general models that are even more ethnocentric, such as the idea that indigenous groups are always-already cybernetic node-societies with such practices as “ecological management,” “escalating sanctions,” and economic rationality. Identitarian critics of anthropology tend to throw the baby out with the bathwater, substituting an open-ended but meaningless guilt, accountability, or responsibility for understanding across difference. This approach embeds also an assumption that the responsibility can never actually be exercised because of absolute incommensurability, rendering it useless in practice. It is more about ego bashing or navel gazing among westerners than about benefiting indigenous or subaltern people. When articulated by people of indigenous origin, it typically expresses a middle-class academic point of view or a “strategic” simplification of their cultural background in line

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with the “pragmatism=truth” axiom. In practice, the kinds of “culture change” stemming from node theory are brutal, inhuman, and often culturally genocidal. Attempts are made to override given cultural traits or practices through brute sanctioning or norm-setting, without understanding their social or personal functions and without reasoning or affective appeal within the local cultural framework.

The world of nodes is the world of appearances, of simulation and illusion. Observing social life at the node level, one sees only surface behaviours, many of which are themselves inauthentic and manipulative. One tends, furthermore, only to see those behaviours that are not concealed. One then interprets these (even if they are measured numerically or modelled on computers) through one’s own projections and preconceptions.

In the medium term, node theory will likely go the way of its Fordist-technocratic forerunners, losing its shine and fading away as it proves unable to handle some crisis or other. The earlier technocratic theories seem to have been undermined for three main reasons: further discoveries within their logics that falsify their axioms, failure to meet the needs and desires they claim to have

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solved, and powerlessness against the wave of social movements of the 1960s-70s. Today, hardly anyone supports these theories; everyone from neoliberals to identity politicians denounces the old modernist technocracy as oppressive. Nobody would have expected this in the 1950s when Fordist technocracy was at its height, Stalinism and social democracy had hegemonised radical thought, and industrial countries were converging towards a Fordist social model. It is similar with node theory today. I predict that node theory will look ridiculous in a few decades and will vanish as quickly as it rose.

Schizoanalysis implicitly indicts node theory, as is shown in the concepts of machinic enslavement and control society. People are not nodes. People can act as nodes only at the level of the false self or persona. Acting as a good node in an increasingly hostile and demanding environment typically involves immense repression of all one's affects and capacities: anger, fear, principles, compassion, sexuality, play, despair. One has to react as an ego, non-relationally and non-expressively: for example, to take humiliations as nudges and to not react to the interpersonal affront involved. Social production of node society is only one possible way of articulating desiring-production. Like

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all such ways, it is socially constructed.

My own view of psychology is very different from that of node theorists. People are not primarily nodes because people have a psychological structure that is formed early in life, and changes only rarely and with difficulty. People relate to the world in multiple registers, and in many respects are not integrated selves, but bundles of different psychological dynamics. People respond aversively to things that seem persecutory, frightening, dominating, polluting, etc.; they react differently depending on their ethos or ethical worldview; they form desiring machines that integrate in social machines in particular ways, which vary a lot among people. People are not passive receptive, but rather, make selections as to whether something they might relate to is desirable for them. The conscious self exists at an intersection between the outer, *real world* and a second field, the *inner life*, the virtual, Bergsonian time, the system of psychodynamics or of multiple parts within the self. Node theory pays attention only to the single dimension of contact with the outer world, and black-boxes the multiplicities inside each so-called node.

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by the ego and its Sisyphean attempts to optimise power, wealth, prestige, status, security, etc.—to the approach Deleuze terms “philosophical expressionism.” Expressionism has taken terrible blows in the social sciences from the influence of “strategic” orientations. It has its basis in the id and the spirit, and, while sometimes flexible and connected in its own ways, it also foregoes instrumentalism.

Unfortunately, anything can be classified and modelled in node-theoretic terms, regardless of whether the actors concerned regard themselves as nodes. Thus for example, anarchic social structures can also be modelled as node systems in which certain kinds of authoritarian moves are negatively sanctioned. Indigenous systems can be modelled as normative systems and ecological management systems, with cultural phenomena that are deemed functional by anthropologists. Animal behaviour can be modelled as node-like, for example in theories of swarming. This does not validate node theory. The elements of affect, desire, play, and sometimes meaning and ethics are motivational, even if this is invisible to observers. Even if it turns out that the node level (or ego-based calculation) is ineliminable, it would not be the entirety of social life. Node-like inter-

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action is intensified and systematised when people conceive themselves as nodes and treat each other consciously as such. It is only under such conditions that it crowds out other motivations.

There are many important similarities between node theory and Deleuzian theory, including the emphasis on networks and “rhizomes,” the critique of the modern self, and the goal of realisation in a field of becoming. Most Deleuzians misread Deleuze and Guattari as node theorists, but actually their approach is distinct. The crucial difference is that in the Deleuzian model, people and other beings make selections on the basis of desire, and this is not considered a type of linguistically-based epistemic violence that people should feel guilty about. Rather, one protects one’s freedom and finds the ability to survive and flourish through these selective combinations. Hence, Deleuze and Guattari situate humans at the intersection of the virtual and actual, the imaginal realm of models, ideas, structures, and the physical realm. The process of passing through time entails the mixture of the two, the actualisation and reinflection of the imaginal in the physical, and selections and ways of relating to the existing world stemming from the imaginal.

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receptivity that is unselective or selective only as an effect. Its adherents seek a type of presubjective fusion into a unity with the mother-symbol, without recognising that there are necessary material conditions for such a fusion. These conditions are not met in today's social worlds. Node theorists nonetheless seek to immerse themselves totally in these worlds, to fuse with them without differentiation. This is effectively a form of disavowal or denial, a submission to the powerful actors able to define the dominant fields. This difference largely registers the difference between a Deleuzian schizoid and a perverse personality.

Like Deleuze and Guattari, Stirner, Nietzsche, Vaneigem, and post-left anarchy, I value active force and empowered action, see vulnerability as something to be minimised, and desire the optimisation of dispersed (rather than concentrated) power. Cybernetics relies on machinic enslavement; people are not naturally nodes, but become nodes at a surface level if they alienate inner traits and submit ("comply") docilely to incoming/top-down forces. In order to be passive-receptive, people have to be broken in or broken down; the whole approach is reminiscent of brainwashing/thought reform on Lifton's model.

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tion of mind from body is built into the process of immersion-to-exploit. One finds here the standard perverse contradiction: absolute submission to and submersion in the big Other, and corresponding renunciation, performed using will power and ego, but with the goal of strategically achieving the gratification one implicitly denies by submitting and renouncing. Paradoxically, one cannot immerse oneself relationally in node society without also adopting an utterly non-relational stance, as demanded by this society. One can only regain relationality to living things, including those denied by node society, by refusing immersion and separating from the general field of alienation. To engage in systems thinking regarding living beings and ecosystems, one needs to engage with the field of play, desiring-production, meaning, not only of observable behaviours or language.

Living creatures do not operate as nodes, but through the field of affect and desire. Political prisoner Giannis Michailidis, explaining his own hunger strike, uses the analogy of scorpions who kill themselves when surrounded by fire. This makes perfect sense in terms of their feelings and awareness, but makes no evolutionary sense. They do this, he argues, because they are

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not robots. David Graeber makes a similar argument about scientists' denials of the obvious fact that animals play. Indeed, he argues that play rather than work is the driving force in the lives of animals. Evolutionary adaptation might seem to happen in the historical *longue duree*, but for individual animals, intention is mainly affective. Animals do not think they are nodes. Outer appearances are less real than the actual flows of desiring-production and meaning-production that provide the substance of social life, on which control systems operate. Early childhood development is extremely sticky; it cannot be changed by anything short of long-term intensive therapy, and even then not always successfully. Node-theoretic approaches at best produce surface changes and displacements. Humans are not all of one kind; we are divided into a number of different psychological types, each of which relates differently to other humans and to society. This means that one-size-fits-all methods are always discriminatory and inappropriate: they work for some types and not others (when they work at all). The effects of interventions—particularly brutal, ignorant, and inconsiderate interventions, such as lockdowns and “culture change”—on individuals of different types are unpredictable and

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are often not what node theory predicts. People are not adaptive robots; they are quite capable of holding intuitions hostile to the existent and of desiring states of affairs that do not exist.

People do not operate as conscious nodes, and the unconscious is not structured around rational interests and reflexive adaptation. Rather, people process their environments in subtle manners, often operate intuitively, and react in ways they do not understand or misunderstand, which are often maladaptive when viewed from outside. The production of social systems does not operate on humans as blank slates or nodes. It operates through the articulation of humans with particular characteristics, humans in whom the “primary process” (unconscious reactions) are already operative, who have desires, aversions, a sense of meaning, etc. Hence, people react involuntarily to hidden control mechanisms and authoritarian systems. Node theory works exclusively at the levels of the ego and the externally-oriented component of the superego, relying either on rational interest or moral exhortation/peer pressure. This is clumsy and leads mostly to political failures. One cannot gain effective political change through superego-level conformity; one has to work with a person’s psychological forces to achieve any last-

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In practice, node society is stressful, alienating, and offers nothing of meaning. It leaves people paralysed by anxiety, depression, and burnout. This is partly because the approach is so imperative and exhortatory, and partly because it is based on external rules ("passing the test of History"), not needs, desires, or capabilities. People have needs, drives, and (in)capacities that are not captured in the node model. Node society thus constantly makes inhuman, impossible demands. Many do not like node theory or the interventions it generates, although they would not articulate their objections in those terms. It makes people

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feel insulted, degraded, dehumanised, powerless, devalued, persecuted, insecure. Node theorists can only dismiss this dislike as an egoist delusion, a nostalgia for modernity, or a kind of privilege.

Information theory does not quite apply to humans, except in limited situations involving the use of ego to master a particular “game.” Humans process incoming signals in complex ways, many of them unconscious, and varying by individual and culture. The signal sent is rarely the signal received. Furthermore, each individual is actually a bundle of different forces. The same signal is received by a range of receptors that interpret it differently. What the ego experiences as a nudge or a change in the opportunity structure, the superego may register as an evil or a duty, the spirit as an unwarranted aggression by a hostile actor, the id as a frustration or a pleasure. The balance of these different registers varies between individuals (and today’s therapies generally strengthen the passive-receptive aspect of the ego register, or serve mainly to “manage” or calm the other registers). Because of these multiple registers, interventions at the ego level that make perfect sense to node theorists on paper, might have all kinds of unexpected effects in practice. Rather than compelling behaviour change, the various nudge regimes (such as

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the prohibition on expressions of anger, hatred, and sexuality) may intensify what they prohibit. Or they may drive people who cannot or will not change out of the spaces controlled by the system. They may push people to desperation, to various extreme actions, or to psychosis or suicide. Surveillance may attract exhibitionism, or inhibit free thought. The threat of isolation might create a self-fulfilling prophecy, or a compulsive need for company, or a desperate conformity always lined with resentment. Regimes designed to produce a sense of powerlessness, and resultant acceptance of the system as unquestionable and as the locus of meaning, might instead increase the desperation of rebellion or the despair of depression.

Treating communication as a series of cybernetic signals also has corrosive effects on the very possibility of dialogue and coexistence. Node theory polarises, because, in any failed communication, one of the parties must be malfunctioning. Node theory has not eliminated relational communication, because this has observable benefits; it has, however, made it a duty, and thus cast a suspicion of inauthenticity over it. It has damaged creative expression by reducing expression to a kind of technical competence, in which the crafting of rhetoric is more important than a work's in-

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spiration. It has also heavily undermined the possibility of two people agreeing on points of fact or knowledge, which depend on two people making propositional claims. This type of claim-making has been widely undermined by the style of communication that treats a proposition as a signal, and judges it in terms of checklists based on its effects (not its truth). The damage done by this destruction of the possibility of knowledge and truth does not depend on any particular ontology (such as realism or empiricism). Even if truth is only a “truth effect,” even if subjects do not exist or are multiple, the elimination of knowledge-based communication is damaging. It disrupts the co-production of meaning. The node-theoretic model subordinates statements to normative imperatives and establishes a primacy of the inner over the outer in determining which claims are permissible (or, functionally speaking, true). This necessarily leads both to a general false-self system with high levels of inauthentic performance and hypocrisy, and to relations of domination. The subordination of inner to outer, and the imposition of certain claims as obligatory on a non-empirical basis (Sacred Science), are both key elements of thought reform as theorised by Lifton—aspects of brainwashing, not of knowledge.

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This is particularly the case since node theory generally dispenses with or pares back any sense of individual rights (not just liberal rights, but customary rights and traditions, and welfare rights), and instead encourages people to throw up swingeing “boundaries” and demand “behaviour change” from others based on one or another political or pop-psychological criterion. One is meant, for example, to have zero tolerance for abuse, harassment, and bullying—none of which are clearly defined and all of which tend towards circularity in their definition (with the subjective reaction being a key component of the concept). At the same time, the exercise of resultant intolerance will be felt by the recipient as itself being a type of abuse, harassment, or bullying. Since everyone (except a few masochists) tends to exempt themselves from the implied referent of such concepts, conversation degenerates into attempts at mutual policing, in which participants use moral hustling and coercive sanctioning (as well as validation) to move others’ statements into their own (often rather narrow) field of acceptability.

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As we shall see later, the discursive structure is modelled on that of an authoritative parent and an obedient child, or more accurately, that of an authority figure speaking for the will of real-



ity or History, and a subordinate seeking to pass the test by adapting. This is often metaphorised in various ways (expert and layperson; therapist and person seeking to heal; educator and student; spiritual guide and disciple; oppressed-group spokesperson and “ally”), and the absence of such a relation often triggers coercive or exclusionary mechanisms even on the micro level. But this relationship—between a person who defines the field of permissible claims and may make unlimited demands for behaviour change, and a passive-receptive person who adapts to these definitions—cannot be egalitarian or libertarian. There cannot be respect for autonomy, because this undermines the ethical core of the relationship; and there cannot be equality, since both cannot occupy the parent position. Where one person does not spontaneously submit, communication misfires, turning into a competition to occupy the parent position and “control the narrative.” There cannot be dialogue or affinity, only a relationship between a dominant speaker-for-the-parent and a subordinate who is to be remoulded by them, transformed in the depths of their “subjectivity.”

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It is clear to me that the ability to demand behaviour change, or throw up boundaries that result in the exclusion of others, or to limit dis-

course in line with one's own sense of safety, has to be restricted for anything approaching equal relations to be possible. The right to demand change is limited both by others' freedom and by the unknown determinisms behind their current personality. Unless one both has the proven power to achieve change in others and the capacity to persuade others to pursue it voluntarily, one has no right to demand it, regardless of what is posed as harm one can attach to whatever one is trying to change, or how patterns of personality-types or behaviour are distributed today. In my view, it is unethical to demand the impossible of others, and to treat people or other beings without regard for their needs, desires, ethos, meanings, capabilities, and incapacities, psychological type, etc. It usually makes more sense to think of others as delusional rather than bad: they act in a way that would be justified were their beliefs true, just as one does oneself. Or rather, they are either delusional or justified: one can never be sure it is the self and not the other (or the other and not the self) who is justified.

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The treatment of harm and freedom in node theory is dangerously crude. Harms are typically situated at aggregate levels, with a focus on those harms that are legible in node-theoretic

terms. Subjective and psychological harms are included on this basis, as a prohibition on disrupting the supposed zen state of a passive-receptive good subject, with every exercise of controversial speech, every expression of anger, every disruptive protest, every misfired communication, every “rudeness,” every “horizontal workplace violence,” or “microaggression,” every unwanted display of sexuality or pride or pleasure or courage or creativity or misery, assessed as an indefensible harm. This ignores other psychological aspects that involve risks of more severe harm. People have distinct needs for expressive freedom and autonomy. Meanings and cathexes (investments of libido) are hard-won and easily disrupted. Node society does very little to provide meanings and cathexes, and frequently leaves people besieged, frustrated, and disrupted. It leaves the task of finding meaning to each individual, but then aggressively selects among the paths they choose, smashing any cathexis it finds harmful on an aggregate level. This is often framed as protection from harm, but it tends to cause more harm than it prevents.

For example, the “digital harms” for which companies will be held liable by the British government’s proposed Digital Safety Bill are all at the level of nodes and their relations, predomi-

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nantly subjective or indirect harms: “facilitating” harmful or illegal activities, which is a perverse formation meaning in fact a failure to censor or to incapacitate; causing subjective distress, for example by bullying; or contributing to aggregate-level harms, such as structural oppressions or “radicalisation,” or the spreading of rumours, “fake news,” “propaganda,” which is to say, the dilution of a unified message by “noise.”

Since the criteria are vague, the algorithms poorly designed, no consensus on criteria exists, and also because political actors and aggrieved individuals will seek to gloss whatever is banned to the advantage of their own position (for example, to classify all disagreement as hate speech or harassment)—and also since the work of censorship in a context of billions of data items is done summarily (by clumsy algorithms or unqualified hirelings with their own biases) there will be immense numbers of those wrongly accused and wrongly punished.

One could extend this assessment of imbalance across a range of spheres. Do we really know who suffers more harm: a person distressed at being called names online, or a person angered at being punished by a social media site? Which really causes more distress: being a victim of a mi-

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nor crime, or being manhandled by police? Is the aggregate harm caused by workers' misbehaviour (for example, sexual harassment or expressions of prejudice) really more or less than the harm caused by the powerlessness and disposability of workers, by the lack of job security and the feeling of constantly walking a tightrope lest one be fired? Alongside the microregulation of workers, is there also an increase in prejudice, discrimination, and sexual abuse, due to the same despotic power of bosses?

Censorship and network disruption themselves cause a range of harms. People subject to terms and conditions may feel themselves unfree, and interact only as false selves; or they may inhibit expression, turning it inwards. Aggression turned inwards becomes depression; displaced sideways, it becomes unjustified hatred towards those who do not deserve it. Once one thing is censored or persecuted, it seems like the controlling agent is endorsing whatever it tolerates, in a way that does not happen in freer environments. Algorithms and police often operate clumsily and unfairly, generating a sense of unfairness and arbitrariness; this in turn corrodes trust. Growing numbers of people feel singled out or persecuted, or believe double standards have been applied, or

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their own point of view silenced while someone else's is amplified. Being banned, censored, black-listed, arrested, and so on, can cause intense distress and trauma. Risks of sudden penalisation cause constant anxiety, which eats into enjoyment and flow. Inhibiting or suppressing the expression of particular affects or emotions causes inner harms, ranging from temporary distress to the quasi-permanent growth of life-inhibiting character armour. Constant self-watching, the maintenance of a false-self state, drains energy and deflects from creative and useful uses of one's attention and energy. People who are excluded, or who self-exclude to avoid these harms, often suffer isolation, leading to depression in some cases, psychosis in others. Alienation is itself a harm. Living as a false self, a node, is harmful in many ways, from the loss of pleasure and authenticity involved, to the dangers arising from the desperate inner self. Then there are the social-level harms: the ways control regimes and arbitrary power reinforce the despotism of corporations and states, discourage critical thought and creativity, encourage moral idiocy and imitated opinions, etc. As conversation becomes a game of provocation and "gotcha," both rationality (reasoning) and compassion suffer. Epistemic criteria

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for belief are replaced by normative criteria, statements that indicate belonging to a given “club.” All of this tends to cause paranoia, since everyone expects everyone else to be sending strategic nudges rather than authentic expression or true propositions.

Network disruption and the pervasive control-through-incapacitation characterising a society of nodes operate almost as if designed to block and frustrate forever the third task, the reconnection of desiring machines into social machines. The system now makes it as hard as possible for people both to live their own way (authentically, with fidelity) and to flourish; what cannot be recuperated is attacked with a type of inherently-traumatising violence, which quickly leaves psychiatric casualties, by means not only of physical brutality but also of the corrosion of meaning and connection and the instilling of anxiety and fear.

Meaning and cathexis are hard-won and easily lost. There is tremendous harm when people are stripped of sources of meaning and joy (from raves to autonomous movements, from work to the autonomous values of cultural spheres) and left, in effect, with a world without meaning. Yet this is what the node approach does, callously and systematically—from network disruption as

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counterinsurgency, to the use of bail and court orders to disrupt lifestyles, to the impact of lockdowns, to the endless attempts at culture change and rearrangements of social spheres for purposes of control and nudging. The approach tends to produce a reality where nothing is cathected, where there is no stable substance for cathexes to stick to, where only ego investments are possible. No wonder, then, that life seems pointless, empty, futile to so many people. Whether excluded or self excluding (like hikikomori), or withdrawing behind a veil of false-self performances, the self withers away, loses its capacity to live, and eventually suffers a psychological collapse of some variety. (Nearly everyone held in supermax goes mad). There are also social-scale effects. Trapped within a hivemind, people lose their capacities for moral and rational autonomy, and autonomous desires; this removes many of their other capabilities as well, and leaves the collective without reality checks. In contrast to psychotics, neurotics cathect the social world. In neurosis, regular practices often act as channels for sublimated desires, stabilising the neurotic personality. In psychosis, similar formations can operate as what Lacan calls a *sinthome*, again stabilising the personality. The sudden and systematic removal of

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such outlets (due for example to a lockdown, a clumsy rule, or a personalised banning order) has the effect of destabilising the personality, throwing it into internal chaos. Node society keeps people constantly on the edge of a depressive or psychotic collapse, and this is why people are so polarised and desperate.

We are dealing with a situation in which trivial harms that are legible to node theory are exaggerated and hyper-responsibilised, whereas more severe harms arising from factors invisible to node theory are ignored and/or committed with the utmost callousness.

The same can be said for the discourse on harm to children, which is focused in an almost paranoid manner on closing down any possible vector for sexual abuse by strangers, on subjecting children to constant control and punishment so as to supposedly prevent bullying amongst them, and on preventing accidents and health risks, to the exclusion of any concern for the pervasive psychological harm caused by constant subordination, arbitrary and severe punishments, excessive stress, moulding into particular roles, the absence of emotional contact, the blocking of opportunities for self-directed activity: basically the entire structure of treating children as nodes.

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As a result of this system, children learn from an early age that their own desires and needs don't matter, that the locus of value and morality is the other; and they learn to crybully, to play passive-aggressively on rules and norms so as to exercise power by proxy, to redress grievances through vicarious revenge carried out by a cycle of reporting, narrating victimhood, and relying on the other to act.

Node theory can use liberal frameworks because it turns liberalism into fascism: one can see for instance how fascistic J.S. Mill's "harm principle" becomes, when the concept of harm is both extended and limited into node theory, harm through impact on networks. The distinction between harm and paternalism, harm and dissent, harm and offence disappear completely once failing to incapacitate others, "radicalisation," or the wrong normative nudges are judged as harms.

The risk of terrorism is notoriously exaggerated, and taken to weigh far more heavily than numbers of deaths, injuries, and traumas could justify. This is partly a matter of emotional reaction (the repulsion of an ingroup for such actions by an outgroup), partly of strategic politics (attempts by counterinsurgency agencies to monopolise by counterinsurgency agencies to monopolise by an outgroup), partly of strategic politics (attempts by counterinsurgency agencies to monopolise by an outgroup for such actions by an outgroup). This is partly a matter of emotional reaction (the repulsion of an ingroup for such actions by an outgroup), partly of strategic politics (attempts by counterinsurgency agencies to monopolise by an outgroup for such actions by an outgroup).

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olise and nudge public discourse to obtain funding and power and to hit directly at opponents' views), and partly a matter of node effects (the state cares more about its own loss of power than it does about lives lost). Counterterrorism causes drastic harms, ranging from the chilling of protest and free speech, to the mass terrorisation of people wrongfully suspected or accused, to harms arising from harsh punishment and from security protocols, to side effects of increased state power. The currently fashionable counterterrorism doctrines are based on node theory, and largely ignore the main causes of acts of armed opposition to states (disempowerment, inequality and poverty, alienation, nihilistic affects, grievance, a wider social condition of warlike threat, etc). These doctrines are probably counterproductive: whether measured by the number of politically-motivated attacks, the range of insurgents, or the frequency of apparently apolitical mass killings, which have got worse since these doctrines became the mainstream. Yet, criticising them is de facto prohibited as undermining the counterterrorist effort itself.

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speed of spread (it is well-known it is unlikely to reduce infections over time) and thus prevents health services from being overwhelmed. (This is likely a rationalisation for a policy designed initially for containment, but maintained when containment failed). Lockdowns cause immeasurable harms—psychological damage, disruption of social life, damage to civil rights, etc. But these belong to the fields of meaningful social relations and of inner psychology, and thus are invisible or undervalued in node theory. Furthermore, questioning lockdowns undermines their supposed effectiveness, so opposing views can be framed-out without being rebutted.

If one sees oneself, not as a node, but as an inner self distinct from false-self performances, one feels constantly attacked and besieged by attempts to impose alienation, to require false-self performances, to split life into politically qualified and bare life; one reacts in anger or fear to the constant attempts to remove or restrict one's spaces and networks as "risks." This is observable in the various kinds of resistance that emerge. It will be clear to anarchists that this reaction is present in insurrectionary anarchism, but it is also present in the various other "small-world networks," from Islamists to sovereign citizens, from identity

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politicians to the alt right. One finds in such cases a bizarre, contradictory fusion of the rebellion of the inner self with the axioms of node theory.

Ultimately, node theory tends to produce a war of all against all. Everyone is trying to amplify or clarify their own signal, and other peoples' attempts to do the same get in the way. My signal is your noise. And one responds to such unwanted signal noise by disrupting it. What's more, discussions no longer focus on the (potentially falsifiable) content of claims. Today it is rare that two sides in a disagreement seek to rationally convince each other; it is rare even that each side has its own shot at emotive persuasion or appeal. Rather, each side seeks to prohibit its adversary, not on the basis that its beliefs are false, but on the basis that these beliefs have harmful effects.

It seems obvious to me that there is a difference between truth and beneficial effect; there are circumstances where (for example) revelation of a true fact will demoralise the better side in a conflict, produce disorder, etc. (Those using such approaches are sometimes agnostic about truth or might outright deny that it is possible, or they use a theory that relates truth to effects—for example, a pragmatic theory in which truth is utility, or a performative theory in which truth is an effect of

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actions). In social and political affairs, it is almost impossible to hold a false or wrong view without risks of indirect harm: expressing the view may encourage others to think more falsely, to act in line with the belief, etc.

Very often, the harmful effects of the opposing belief are perceived as harmful, or as the greater harm, only because the premises of one's own belief are accepted; the opponent who rejects one's beliefs will also reject the posited harm. Argument from harm is therefore tendentially circular: one holds a particular viewpoint and not its opposite because one believes this viewpoint will have ethically-beneficial consequences, and one can automatically classify opposition to it as sabotaging these consequences, or producing corresponding harms. For example, criticism of COVID-19 lockdowns and encouraging defiance are harmful only if the premises that lockdowns are effective and justified are also true; otherwise, pro-lockdown statements are the harmful ones.

Instead of arguing rationally, appealing to the other person's emotions, or even performing for the audience, a person engaged in political discussion today is likely to start by judging the opponent's views according to tickboxes, classifying them as belonging to some category of harm-

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Instead of arguing rationally, appealing to the other person's emotions, or even performing for the audience, a person engaged in political discussion today is likely to start by judging the opponent's views according to tickboxes, classifying them as belonging to some category of harm-



ful speech, and then demanding that the opponent's speech be silenced and one's own speech be amplified. Needless to say, resultant discussions are rarely fruitful, often polarising, and generate exactly the kinds of viciousness that fuel further calls for censorship. Discussion has, in effect, become a constant battle to monopolise the power to signal, to argue irrationally and dogmatically, by eliminating the adversary. It is easy for sets of false claims—such as the Lysenkoist pseudoscience prevalent in the USSR—to take root and hold based on such circular arguments-from-effects. Since there are no agencies aiming for objectivity, and rational dialogue is so uncommon, it is just as easy for true and valid claims to be misperceived as for varieties of thought control.

### Nodes and the Self

What happens psychologically when someone is treated as if they are a node, with all the brutality, doublethink, and stress this involves? I think we can find a clue in the work of the existentialist anti-psychiatrist R.D. Laing. Mainstream psychology and psychiatry define *mental health* as social conformity and social functioning, or at least as compatible with conformity and functioning. Radical theories deny this, seeing healthy people

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as those who have authenticity, desire, or autonomy, which are incompatible with conformity. Treating someone as a *person* or *human* has a central importance for existentialists. It is not always clear what this entails, particularly if one rejects simplistic views of human nature, rational agency, and human superiority. I believe it means something like treating the other as a Unique One in the Stirnerian sense. This might be an ethical imperative, but it is also descriptively true: people are in fact Unique Ones once character armour and false-self system are peeled away. Each person is a meaning-producing entity (or system), pursuing certain needs or desires; the relationship to them should go by way of their meanings and their relationship to their environment, which cannot be assumed to be the same as one's own. Treating somebody as a node, a bundle of thoughts or behaviours, a diagnosis, a biochemical system, a risk profile, etc., is not treating them as a person or a human. I would thus expect Laing to be utterly opposed to node theory, though not on quite the same basis I am. Laing emphasises the overwhelming importance of being able to understand and reconstruct others' systems of meaning, their self-world relationship, what they believe and why. To do this,

151

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one needs to suspend moral and epistemic judgement for long enough for this reconstruction, and one has to tone down one's tendency to reduce the other to their place in one's own system of meaning. One explains others' actions based on the way *they* understand their world, what *they* think is happening, not based on one's own understanding.

This concern is common to existentialism, psychoanalysis, interpretive anthropology, and the older constructivist sociologies, but was denied by the psychiatrists of Laing's day—and is denied today by all the various traditions influenced by node theory. If a person is a node, their self-world relationship is irrelevant; it can be read-off statistically and inferred using a few axioms (such as economic rationality, behavioural conditioning, feedback from other nodes, culture in the cybernetic sense) and can just as easily be produced or overcome. Resultant interventions and policies are both inhuman and often ineffective. They are effective only when they act on people whose false self is dominant, and who themselves identify these axioms as what the other wants. (I would add here that most of the instances of "real unconscious motives" inferred by identity-political scholars and activists also belong to this class). Node theorists are often

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oblivious to the enormous damage they do to the integrity of people's lives, to their self-world relation, their cathexes (emotional investments) in the world, the assemblages they are part of, the props for their ego integration, etc. In some cases, indeed, the ability to disrupt others' connections and assemblages is proactively valued: as negative nudges, as reality checks, as COIN network disruption, as creation of a "hostile environment" rather than one which enables deviance, etc. Notice that Laing's approach requires that one reconstruct others' meanings, however abhorrent one finds them. This does not preclude disagreeing with their claims, but it does preclude the use of thought-blocking clichés or outright coercion to prevent their expression. One engages and disagrees, if at all, only with the full view understood in its own context, not with one's own projection of what it "really means."

Laing arguably endorses the modernist view of autonomous selves. Yet his research tends to show that certain social conditions prevent such a self from forming. Laing gets into problems because he sees all humans as capable of autonomous agency, but the schizoids and schizophrenics he talks to do not see themselves as capable of this. Many see themselves as robots, animals, ma-

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chines, or automata. They see their actions as controlled from outside, by another actor or force. He notes that mechanistic views (and today, node-theoretic views) also see people in these terms. People are still seen as mentally ill if they believe their actions are controlled from outside, or that they passively reproduce programmed patterns. Why is it crazy to assert this about oneself, but not crazy to assert it about everyone?

Laing explains that an autonomous self may not form if children come to feel utterly possessed by someone else—initially the parent. The sense of autonomy is weak because the body is felt to belong to the other, and thus, not to be separable from others' bodies. To protect their self from this outer control, they withdraw from the surface of the body. Schizoid people feel vulnerable, porous to the influences of others. They pick up alien fragments of others that seem to get embedded in their false-self system.

Laing sees this phenomenon as specific to the modern west. It arises from family dynamics that undervalue autonomy and place a great emphasis on being good: docile, compliant, conformist, quiet, etc. In fact, the lack of autonomy involved in such a childhood produces schizoid personalities. A child can be “existentially dead”

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(in Laing's terms) and nobody notices, because they don't know the difference between existential life and death. Indeed, being existentially dead is valued and rewarded. The child receives little instinctual gratification at first (though later they may receive ego validation and material goods, and the parents may be extremely self-sacrificing); the parent usually does not notice this, and only notices when the inner self starts breaking through. The child may develop precociously, but through actions perceived as originating from others, not themselves. The parent(s) cannot accept any validity or sense in the child's autonomous point of view; they can only accept the false-self performance.

These patterns have no doubt expanded and intensified, given the presently fashionable parenting and educational models (time outs, parental management, classroom management, zero tolerance, CBET, etc). According to Laing, schizoid personalities form when external control seems meaningless. The child experiences a radical break between the world as it seems to them, and the world posited by the parent(s). The latter does not act as a way of taming the chaos of the former, because it is too incommensurable. Laing believes that what happens in such

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Laing believes that what happens in such



cases is a fundamental split. The body, and external performance, are ceded to the powerful other. To protect from this surrender, one separates off various aspects of the inner life, and avoids investing them in the social performance. The mind is disembodied and the body treated as an object separate from the self. This is expressed in terms of a split between a false self and an inner self. The false self is a surface self of which the body is felt to be the core. The inner self is an onlooker that feels, sees, judges, but does not act. The inner self is felt to be totally divorced from anything observable by others. It is more or less unembodied and bodily actions do not express it. The inner self feels outside of all activity and experience, which belong to, or pass through, the false-self system. The inner self might try to recreate an imaginary world for itself, through relations among inner objects. This is not an essential self. Rather, the split between inner and outer is itself an expression of an alienated world, an impossibility of the unified relation of inner and outer that Laing believes otherwise exists.

This makes it easy to conform, since doing what others want is an attribute of roles one plays, not of the self. Laing suggests that, when a person is unable to defend all aspects of their self, they

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withdraw to the inner self as if to a citadel, and cede the surface of their life to others; everyone dissociates under extreme stress. Schizoid people seem to be permanently dissociative. The surface, false self is experienced as a thing, alien to the inner self and reducible to one's objectification by others. Relationships at the false-self level simulate relations among objects. The inner self, meanwhile, experiences a lot of fear and hatred: fear because this is the only reason it concedes the bodily surface to the other, and hatred because it resents this inwards retreat. There is often fear that others will steal one's soul or selfhood. When the inner self is speaking, it describes existential experiences with a literality normally reserved for consensus facts. Jung had previously argued that psychotic delusions are true statements about a person's inner life or existential condition, made using unmarked metaphors that are wrongly taken as literally true. Laing goes further, arguing that delusions are sometimes literally true.

The false-self performances might be so realistic that the false self is indistinguishable from a true self. There might be one false self, or several—a false-self system--composed of different roles and personas a person adopts in different circumstances. The false selves might be perfor-

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mances, as of an actor, in which one is completely in control, and designed to produce given effects. Some believe everyone is structured the same way. The lack of ontological autonomy—the feeling of depending on others to exist—is the central existential question. People generally take each other to be who and what they claim to be. People are called psychotic, schizophrenic, or insane when this type of relation is not possible.

On the surface level, constant self consciousness is used to ward off fears of merging into the environment, but this also kills spontaneity and joy. The inner self generally hates and fears the false self, which is identified with the parent or other authority for whom it was created. The part exercising self consciousness is often identified by the inner self with an external, persecutory observer. This is not surprising, since it is constructed in passive conformity to a dominant other's demands. Active psychosis arises when someone lets down the false-self front and the inner self speaks or acts directly. Apparently eccentric responses do not reflect a loss of contact with reality. Rather, elements of reality take on a personal significance, in terms of whether they sustain or threaten one's being. Laing suggests this inner/false self split does not happen for

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normal or neurotic people; they have a firm sense of their own existence and basic goodness, and of the security of their lifeworld. Instead, relatively limited parts of the inner life are repressed from consciousness and operate as an unconscious. Embodied and relational activities can then be cathected with the energy of the inner self (sublimation, self-expression, etc.).

The world, and contact with other humans in particular, is felt as continually threatening. Experience of the world is felt to be both threatening and inescapable. This threat often involves loss of selfhood. It can involve feelings such as a fear of being engulfed, a sense of being torn between engulfment or isolation, and a fear that others can see the inner self. There might be a fear of being turned to stone, which seems to involve being frozen in fear. The act of treating someone as an object carries risks of petrifying them. Experiencing oneself as an object of others' agency feels like a drain on one's own agency. However, it is common to feel dependent on the other, or others, for one's very being. Many feel empty, and at risk of obliteration by their world falling in on them at any moment. Full-scale schizophrenics are often in a state of despair, loneliness, desperation, hopelessness. Their inner self cannot find con-

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nection via their surface. They might feel they are dead, unreal, uncertain about their own integrity as a single being, or the predictability of the world. In Lacanian theory, the equivalent concept is the “foreclosure of the master signifier:” psychotics do not internalise a meaning-fixing element that secures signifiers in particular ways.

So that the surface can perform perfectly as a node or role, and to prevent this outer compliance from destroying the inner self, the surface is cut off from the inner self and divested of meaning and energy. Direct relatedness to others is made impossible. The inner self relates only to itself, or to other parts of the system of selves. Its main functions are fantasy and observation. The false self relates to the world and to others, but with little sense of realness. The inner self comes to feel increasingly deadened, empty, incoherent, unreal, and charged with negative affects such as hatred and fear. Everything outside the self comes to seem unreal and mechanical. People feel a futility of their lives and a lack of spontaneity. They might also cultivate these, by maintaining the strong inner/false-self split.

The different fragments might turn on one another. The false self often becomes increasingly like the parent or other person for whom the per-

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formance was designed, and then attracts the fear and hatred initially directed by the inner self at this person. Sometimes the false selves threaten to overwhelm and engulf the true self. They might begin to appear compulsively or impulsively. And without connections to actual pleasure or bodily experience, the inner self and its imaginary world become increasingly impoverished. Fear of a threatening world may be increased by decathexis of the bodily surface. Since dread is not mitigated by love, one never lets oneself go, and fears each possible infringement of the bodily surface as potentially engulfing, penetrating, fragmenting, implosive, or draining.

The self is kept safe by being concealed from others, or isolated, yet remains overexposed. The defences that sustain the isolation of the inner self also tend to devastate the inner life over time. Fantasy and reality have to be strongly separated to maintain autonomy, freedom, and even imagined omnipotence in fantasy. People can thus become averse to starting any real project, which would be contaminated by the false surface or by external necessity. Losing the sense of freedom sustained by the inner/false-self split is terrifying. The constant use of willpower to substitute for inherent motivation is exhausting.

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The inner self both wishes to embed itself in the body and feel again, and fears to do so since it faces dangers there. It faces a dilemma of survival (taking in vital energy) versus taking in alien, invasive substances. People can become afraid to do anything that produces real effects from their own desire or will. Some people come to feel they have no right to exist, or feel guilty for existing. Intense, immersive experiences may be feared as potentially engulfing (though there are often exceptions for certain spheres). Connectedness, such as love, can be feared, since it carries the risk of one's facade being penetrated, of being objectified or petrified. Given the suffering involved, fantasy often becomes destructive and extreme: the world and the self are totally destroyed, reduced to ashes. Some of these effects are not delusions or false beliefs; the person may in fact be prone to collapse under stress, at risk of active psychosis if their surface performance breaks down, they may lack conscious control of areas blocked by muscle tensions, etc. What's more, the entire situation may arise because the world is (or was in childhood) a threatening place.

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pinned to an identity activates the false-self complex. Some people are able to feel more authentic in moments of peak experience, when alone in nature, or with particular others. Eccentric ideas and practices—which can, at least, be communicated to others—can also ward off full psychotic collapse. In Lacanian theory, this kind of binding of inner selves to the world through localised knots is referred to as a *sinthome*. A person who has a *sinthome* retains a psychotic character structure, but avoids a psychotic break because the different aspects of their experience, Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real, are integrated. *Nimas* in the book *bolo'bolo* seem to be a series of such *sinthomes*. On the other hand, the node system is organised against such reconstructions of meaning. Practices like lockdowns, mass imprisonment, network disruption, suppression of countercultures, workfare, etc., seem designed to produce psychotic breaks by ripping away *sinthomes* or removing the conditions for their formation.

A full psychotic break happens when the different parts of the self become irreconcilably separate, when the inner self takes over the surface performance, or when different selves attempt to annihilate each other. The inner self operates without reality checks and without so-

pinned to an identity activates the false-self complex. Some people are able to feel more authentic in moments of peak experience, when alone in nature, or with particular others. Eccentric ideas and practices—which can, at least, be communicated to others—can also ward off full psychotic collapse. In Lacanian theory, this kind of binding of inner selves to the world through localised knots is referred to as a *sinthome*. A person who has a *sinthome* retains a psychotic character structure, but avoids a psychotic break because the different aspects of their experience, Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real, are integrated. *Nimas* in the book *bolo'bolo* seem to be a series of such *sinthomes*. On the other hand, the node system is organised against such reconstructions of meaning. Practices like lockdowns, mass imprisonment, network disruption, suppression of countercultures, workfare, etc., seem designed to produce psychotic breaks by ripping away *sinthomes* or removing the conditions for their formation.

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cial norms, since these are handled by the false self. It reacts mainly to figures in the internal life. Realness and life can no longer be experienced. This often fuels resentment (of the life observed elsewhere) and thrill seeking. The inner self starts to lose its integration. It splinters into parts, and it loses access to feelings of realness. Its place of safety becomes instead either a prison or a torture chamber in which it is persecuted by other phantoms. The false-self system becomes more extensive and autonomous, feels increasingly unreal, and is harassed by fragments experienced as alien. It becomes the source of paranoia for the inner self. When everything around someone feels dead and meaningless, people usually either seek to still “be themselves” in spite of anything, or to murder their self. Both of these responses lead to psychosis. The person then functions as several distinct selves—personality systems with distinct memories, concerns, drives, etc. These are often confused with external people or forces. According to Laing, therapy for this is difficult: first the person has to feel understood, and second, the therapist must be able to handle the hate that initially emerges.

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society. Schizoid people generally recount not being allowed any autonomy in childhood. While this is not always absolutely accurate, it usually reflects a predominance of performance pressure, a constant demand to be a good child (in whatever sense the parent wants) to the point where autonomous impulses are inhibited. Subjected to childhoods in which they feel reduced to an object, a doll, an emblem, a robot, or some such by their parents or other adults, they respond in two ways: with an outward compliance from which they withdrew themselves, their passions and meanings, and an inner self that turns a hostile gaze back on the other, objectifying them and thus taking away their power. One of Laing's patients related to him as a robotic interpreting device, to which he fed input to produce output. In this way, he kept up a passable appearance of being an autonomous agent.

Schizoid false selves are similar to the masks most people put up and those found in neurotics. In non-schizoid personalities, however, masks are ways of meeting the desires of the inner self. A schizoid false self is instead compliant with others' wishes, and is felt to be alien and partly autonomous by the inner self. Some schizoid people attain very high levels of social performance

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and conformity. This is achieved by sharpening the split between inner and false selves. Often, psychotic processes are going on invisibly, but the person uses false performances that contain them. We know from Klein that schizoid and paranoid mechanisms arise in early childhood, and are somewhat similar to those found in psychosis. These can be reactivated even in neurotic and other non-schizoid personalities.

Laing also argues that modern culture is debilitatingly oriented to the development of desires mainly for validation from others. This leads to misfires in interpersonal relationships because both people are putting up false fronts. People fail to develop as selves because of their desire for validation, and fail to develop responsiveness to others because of their own alienation and the general norm of false self performances. Vulnerability is optimised in modern culture to induce this kind of excessive fixation on validation from others.

To the extent that thought-control techniques are successful, people come to conceive themselves as nodes, and thus, to identify with their false-self performances. Node theory in practice generates pervasive situations similar to Laing's schizoids (though more often, I suspect, reflected in perverse personalities in the Lacanian

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sense): an early decathexis of one's relations to the world and retreat behind a false self, a resultant alienated inner self unable to form connections except superficially, a series of false-self roles or performances in which one invests on the ego level but not via cathexis or meaning, a cumulative experience of both the outer performances and the desocialised inner self as meaningless, a joyless life, and in many cases an eventual breakdown. This in turn generates many of the social symptoms that node theory attempts to eliminate through incapacitation--depression and suicide, the use of drugs, thrill seeking, or violence as desperate means to feel something, random or hair-trigger violence (including spree killings), insoluble and escalating grievances, scattershot hatred and fear, rejection of the political centre (experienced as a bad parent), a paranoid style of relating to or reading others, nihilistic world-views conducive to "radicalisation", a desperate struggle to survive accompanied by callousness towards others, etc.

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kind is becoming less common. I think, however, that the inner/false self split (which, I would add, is not a question of an essential self, but an effect of a particular kind of alienation) is widely operative. I am struck here by the similarities of Laing's theory to Vaneigem's critique of roles—all of which Vaneigem considers to be false-self performances, rooted in images passively received from the Spectacle—and Goffman's theory of self presentation, which takes for granted that all social action has this role-driven form. There are also similarities to Stirner's account of spooks, which are similar to false-self elements that "possess" the Unique One as if from outside. One should bear in mind, however, that Money-Kyrle (1951) argues that totalitarian systems generate generalised psychosis (mostly in the form of paranoia). Neurosis has its origins in experiences of the world as predictable and safe, parents as supportive, etc. In totalitarian systems, people cannot become neurotic or "normal" because the social environment is not safe. Persecutory beliefs are constantly reinforced by actual experiences. In such a system, it is almost rational to be paranoid. Autonomy offsets this. A Laingian schizoid experience is one in which the authenticity/survival contradiction is heightened to zero-sum heights.

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Bruce Levine's theory of psychology is based on this contradiction, and the use of everyday autonomy and recomposition as means to mitigate it. Another similarity is with Theweleit's (1987, 1989) psychoanalytic theory of fascism. The soldier-males whose writings he studies have both a dependence on false-self systems (totality-machines in Theweleit's terms) and a negative inner force which seeks expression. They hate or fear life-flows and engage in devivification (rendering lifeless) to produce a sense of security. They operate with a rock-flood complex. Social movements, flows of desire, and anything which produces an emotional reaction, is experienced as flood-like. To protect from the flood, one becomes a rock, tensing or freezing up. Soldier-males turn rigid to protect themselves from inner and outer dangers. In this way, devivification is a protective mechanism. On the other hand, people are systematically devivified (sapped of life) by being perceived in rigidly stereotypical terms, in terms of internal images which substitute for the actual person. Killing the other has the significance of turning them visually into the bloody, amorphous mass they are already imagined to be, of a cathartic death-and-rebirth, and as a removal of life-energy perceived as threatening. Sterile, emp-

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In practice, cybernetic approaches have undesirable and unrecognised medium-term effects, ranging from social polarisation and backlash, to widespread psychological breakdown. Of course this doesn't preclude passive-receptive stances being part of a well-lived life for some people, depending on their psychological makeup, but in general power-dispersal is not served by rendering people passive-receptive. I'd gloss autonomy as having three or four distinct elements—moral autonomy, following one's own conscience or ethos rather than laws and herd commandments; ego-autonomy, or making up one's own mind what is true and real (and not complying with orders not to think, thought-blocking clichés, etc); desiring-autonomy, or the pursuit of desires based on one's own passions and not on pursuit of status/what is taken as desirable socially. There might also be a "spirited" part as Plato calls it (the maternal superego in psychoanalytic jargon) and thus a form of spirited autonomy, and I feel most cybernetic and identitarian discourse is especially hostile to this type of autonomy; there is a desire for spirit to be collectivised in ecstatic media events/moral panics, but also a desire that spirit not exist at all,

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since it is the part most opposed to passive-receptivity (it leads to pride, stands on principle, "death before dishonour," reactance, etc). Someone who has none of the four types of autonomy is in Guat-tarian terms "machinically enslaved" to a social assemblage or "totality-machine;" Eichmann is a notorious example of such a position.

Node theory works almost exclusively with ego-level motives, or with pre-individual reflexes that are wrongly taken to function in an ego-like manner. This is why it often fails in practice. A given intervention might well correctly manipulate the situation so that the most effective way to meet ego goals is to conform. Yet it continues to run up against powerful obstacles in the id, spirit, and superego. To the extent that people are trained to operate on the ego level or the reflex level, node theory might work. The moment this myopia breaks down, it stops working and has unexpected effects.

The authors of the introduction to Theweleit (Benjamin and Rabinbach, 1989) suggest that soldier males are perverse personalities, rather than schizoids. "Perversion, a primitive, sexualized defense against psychosis, comes much closer to what Theweleit describes than does psychosis" (1989:xxi). Most of the conformists of earlier

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Lacan theorises a third type, "perverts", whose central mechanism is disavowal (simultaneous denial and affirmation of a traumatic belief) and who typically see themselves as pawns of The Other (God, society, history, the parent, etc). Reading Laing, the idea occurred to me that perverts in Lacan's sense might be similar to psychotics, but with a strong false-self identification that is strong enough to mostly prevent schizoid experiences. They cannot obtain much pleasure through cathexes, but they can maintain artificial belief in the importance of false-self goals using techniques of suggestion and self suggestion. Such a person would more easily be convinced of node theory than either a neurotic or a schizoid. I suspect perverse types are not the norm or the normative model. Both Leo

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This is similar to node subjectivity. Believing people are passive-receptive nodes is a variety of devivification. Whether they are a cybernetic modeller or an identity politician, the average node theorist relates to other people in this way. They are uninterested in the other's meanings, their self-world relation, and do not relate on a person-to-person level. Rather, they sap the other of dangerous power by thinking of them as an object and reducing them to an image. They rapidly classify the unknown and threatening into familiar patterns, and when faced with novelty, they crack down. They differ from Theweleit's soldier-males, in that they also value flow, flexibility, mobility, etc. But they value these—in the manner of Hannerz's cosmopolitans—as attributes of the false self.

In today's node selves, one finds a total identification with the false self, to the point of denying the existence of an unconscious, an inner life, or any kind of autonomy. Their surface performance is much more artificial and strategic than that of neurotics, but at the same time, it is intensely cathected: blows to one's self esteem or validation can have enormous emotional impacts which they would not have for a neurotic. At the same time, the inner self keeps finding its way out of the condition of disavowal. One constantly sees

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### **Sociological Roots of Alienation**

Laing argues that there are also macrosocial causes of alienation. Modern civilisation (from Fordism onwards) represses transcendence (meaning, or peak experience) as well as sexuality. People are now one dimensional, operating through roles and performances. Anyone with access to other dimensions is at risk of self betray-

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al or destruction. Psychiatry is used to instill or strengthen false selves, and to classify behaviours into arbitrary boxes, rather than to understand or change existential situations. The central issue is actually the relationship between each Unique One and their world. A patient in therapy brings this world with them—for example, in how they perceive and relate to the therapist.

We know from psychoanalysis that this world is often perceived or produced on the model of early childhood perceptions. Initially, there is no self/other separation, but assemblages and individual objects experienced as good (pleasurable) or bad (painful or frustrating). When an other is first theorised, no distinction is drawn between the parent(s) and the world. People do not simply pick up conditioning or feedback. From early in life, they ask if the world is friendly or hostile, if others around them are good or bad—and, soon after, if they themselves are good or bad. People often come to identify with their parents, or with whatever they imagine the object of the parent's desire to be.

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All the pre-Oedipal types live in a world where security cannot be taken for granted, where the good/bad world question from infancy is still open, or else where a bad outer world is generally assumed. Perverse personalities disavow the sense of insecurity, simultaneously being terrified of conflict and failure, yet believing by force of will that the big Other, the parent or system, will provide security if they conform perfectly. Security issues are thus central to the personalities of pre-Oedipals, including schizoids, and also pervers. Increasingly, this reflects the general condition.

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Neurosis is not as common as it used to be. The world is pervasively insecure, and previous props (such as stable jobs) have been removed. Current parenting and pedagogical norms require strict false-self performances and node-like adaptability, and use social death as the main punishment.

The main strategy of authoritative parenting is conditional love: the child is valued only when they comply and behave as demanded. Otherwise, they are exiled from the social relation, treated as inexistent: put in time outs, in school isolation units, or cut off from their social activities or relations to objects. People are faced, at least symbolically, with a choice between a false-self performance or subjective destitution. It is often emphasised that this punished behaviour is not the self, but something alien. On the other hand, a “good” child is often indulged, materially rewarded, ego-validated, etc. Consumer goods serve as the mark of the difference between good and bad selves; the identity constructed publicly, using consumerist and mediated means, is identified with the good pole. This means children never develop a sense of themselves as mattering no matter what, or as able to autonomously define their own values. They feel they matter only if they act as false selves, and that their inner self is worthless

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and evil. According to Laing, even acting autonomously comes to seem shameful or guilty, a hubris against the other. In today's world, it is often the case that everything outside the false-self system is denied or suppressed so virulently, that nothing but the false-self system seems to exist. This both expresses and reinforces trends towards masochism in society. Classic neoliberalism and neoconservatism in the 1980s involved a masochistic turn and abandonment of social dialogue by character-armoured people, to suppress the upsurge in freer desires in the 1960s-70s. Third Way ideology and later neoliberal thought have strong perverse features, and seem to provide the drive for social expansion of node theory. These approaches almost completely deny the existence of the inner self in people who operate as nodes, and deny that people have to be produced as nodes; instead seeing people as always-already nodes without remainder. The holders of this ideology have constructed a quasi-totalitarian system that embeds their own power in various national and international opportunity structures and systems of nested power. They are facing challenges from a number of directions. The current far or alt right is a quasi-paranoiac formation that like its forerunners combines contradictory beliefs in

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Identity politics also has structures comprehensible in Laingian terms. Most identity politicians fully endorse node theory and perceive themselves only as false selves, as effects of an outer structure that “writes them.” They experience explosions resulting from the inner self, that are usually angry and quasi-paranoid in character (experiencing the other as persecutor on flimsy grounds), but rationalise these as part of their stigmatised identity or as acts of standing up to authority. The disavowal involved here is clear: the explosions coexist with, and are used in the service of, a dominant false self. The obsession with being seen and heard, the fear of losing one’s being if one is silenced, the fear that others can intrude into oneself via interpellations or appropriations, the response of objectifying or petrifying the other in rigid categories to protect oneself from similar objectification, the belief that others’ consciousnesses and words act like death rays that penetrate and petrify (thus that a person can really be harmed by hostile feelings or words), are typical of Laing’s schizoids, though the move-

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ment also has perverse and hysterical features. The neocommunist or alt-left current has many traits of masochism, and few of the desire-affirmative traits of the New Left. Survivors of earlier anarchist and radical currents, who are not part of these larger clusters, are generally demoralised and burnt out. Most have accepted the primacy of false-self performances as an unfortunate historical necessity. A situation is thus emerging where the younger generations accept node theory almost entirely, see themselves as externally-caused and outward-oriented nodes, and are not able to perceive their reduction to false-self performances as a type of alienation. Radicalism will re-emerge when this public secret is ruptured. Nodes affect each other at the level of ego, which is to say, at the level of impacts on each node's pursuit of its self interest. This level of node functioning does not, without perverse loops, generate any real sense of meaning or desire. Meaning, which encompasses subjective and intersubjective understandings, conceptions of the world, culture in the Geertzian sense, operates on another level. Cathexis, the investment of desire, libidinal investment, works on yet another level. People can come to form meanings and cathexes around node-functioning only if they confuse

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purely instrumental gains—status, wealth, etc.—with actual pleasures or expressive freedoms, and/or with meaning. Node functioning acquires meaning when people adopt a conception of the world that affirms a duty to function like a node, or come to understand the world in terms of node theory. Node functioning is cathected when people believe that functioning like a node is a means to gratification. However, disavowal is necessarily involved. Neither meaning nor cathexis is conceivable in node theory, unless it is either black boxed or reconceived in ego terms. Node society operates on a basis that it must disavow—the contingent process of obtaining cathexes and meaning for the node model itself.

This overemphasis on ego and observable effects explains why, for example, during the COVID-19 crisis, life as flow and force was utterly ignored in favour of a governed life measurable in death rates. The node view of risk entails a (false) theory of human nature and makes no sense without it. Also, one has to adhere to the entire node-theoretic worldview for such judgments to make sense. As well, an entire theory of the purpose of life is involved: life as ego driven, lived solely for survival, or for the accumulation of power, wealth, or success, in which preserving

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### Psychodynamics

The backlash against the politics of desire from the 1980s onwards encouraged the entrenchment of false-self systems. Reich and his follower Lowen argue that the source of subjective meaning is the flow of energy through the body. For Reich, the main driver of life is libido or bioenergy, which manifests both in sexual pleasure and in meaningful work and projectuality. For Lowen, there is a kind of existential choice between living for pleasure and meaning on the one hand, and living for status, power, success, or wealth on the other. The second group of alienated goals require that a person subordinate their energetic flows to external performances in which the ego, the calculative part of the self, dominates. This requires the development of character-armour which prevents the enjoyment of the resultant gains. Vaniergem argues similarly, with the two paths named

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as “life” or “survival.”

Reich and Lowen both portray schizoid people as operating with a strong separation between their ego and their bioenergy, with the latter often perceived as external and persecuting. This is why the sense of self is separated from the body. However, this type of split, or a similar one, also happens in other psychological types. Masochistic people, for instance, and high-performing ego-driven “phallic-narcissists”, are also highly split from their bioenergy and do not identify their self with their body. They identify their self with an external image, with their reputation or an ideal version of themselves.

I believe there is a sadomasochistic root metaphor at work in node theory. (This follows the arguments of Leo Abse, Samo Tomsic, Erich Fromm, and Mary Daly, who have all characterised capitalism as masochistic or sadomasochistic). Since the stakes in the cybneretic worldview are principally control, and phenomena of desire and inner life are denied, the root assumption is “sadistic theory of coitus,” or the idea that power play is basically what produces life, reality, and everything else. (According to Freud, this is a common infantile sexual theory, perhaps based on misinterpretation of observations of sex). In

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Lacanian terms, node theory is probably best characterised as a perverse formation. Life is lived in service to the big Other, and the self tries to be the perfect object for the Other (initially the parent, later society, history, God, etc). In a strange twist, the self also gains power through its ability to pass the tests set by the Other, so its masochistic submission to history is also an act of cybernetic steering and heroic leadership.

Talking psychodynamically, node theory is a model of machinic enslavement to social systems. It is entirely ego- and superego-focused, in the sense that the ego (for Freud and Reich) is the part of the psyche oriented to self preservation and external threats and demands, and the superego is derived from it, as an internalisation of parental commandments. The Freudian ego both represents reality to the id and represents the id (and superego) to the world. The node-theoretic ego instead only represents the outer world, and dominates the other parts of the psyche. Node theory is idless; the id in the Freudian sense is radically denied. Node theorists presumably still have an id, but it is either frustrated or channelled into social performance. The superego plays a role, but is subordinated to the ego and loses much of its independence in relation to social demands.

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The earlier formation known as the maternal superego, in Plato as the “spirited” and in Avicenna the “aversive” soul, is also radically denied. This is the part that seeks to preserve itself from unwanted stimuli. The ego itself is stripped of those aspects pertaining to independence, bodily integrity, and knowledge, reduced basically to a pragmatic survival-oriented responsiveness combined with an implied resource-optimising drive.

Psychodynamically the ego is a secondary formation constructed from components of the id related to self preservation. In current social regimes, particularly those using behaviour management, a fear of abandonment (or of social death or inexistence) is cultivated as a powerful means of social control. Time outs, isolation units in schools, solitary confinement in prisons, cancel culture, lockdowns, even loss of privileges when it relates to social spaces or symbolically maternal flows, are all symbolic of parental abandonment of the child—one of the most primordial fears. The threat of abandonment is used to make non-compliance seem terrifying or even unthinkable. Since these methods are used from early childhood, entire generations have grown up without developing a sense of autonomy. The parent or school, and later society, becomes the exclusive

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determiner of what is good and bad, true and false, and is taken as good or true even when it conflicts with one's own experience or knowledge. Needless to say, people raised this way are far more manipulable and malleable than those who came before.

The node-theoretic view of risk is similar to the view discussed by Theweleit in the case of fascists. In both cases, what is living and free registers as threatening. A node subject must constantly ward off and contain their inner lifeforce to keep functioning solely as a false self. Anything that reminds them of flows of desire or their inner self, reminds them also of the internal threat and thus seems threatening. They respond by deadening, devivifying, disrupting—thus rendering it predictable, and by extension, less lively, more deathlike. One achieves this by violent suppression, or by recuperation, by regulating things to death, by subjecting them to surveillance and profiling, by turning them into mere marketing activities, etc.

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There are loose similarities to Lifton's theory of thought reform (used to describe practices of brainwashing in Maoist China; these methods are probably still in use in Chinese re-education camps). According to Lifton, thought control uses a variety of techniques, some designed to break down the ego, to guilt-trip, or to induce self betrayal, others to instill the primacy of the environment's demands over one's own beliefs or perceptions, still others to encourage stereotyped patterns of thought and "thought-terminating cliches," which function to block further thought. Group-mandated doctrines are taken as sacred science, beyond all critique or doubt, while the group is taken to have authority to choose who and what is allowed to exist. Psychodynamically, this is an intensified form of the dynamics of suggestion. The group is placed in the role of a ty-

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Vaneigem and Deleuze/Guattari offer ways out. For Vaneigem, the active or passive nihilism of schizoids can be overcome by realising that everyone is in the same position, and trying to reconstruct life based on the autonomous desires of the inner self, in free association with others. Microsocieties that allow free expression come to replace false-self systems. Deleuze and Guattari argue that there are three tasks when analysing schizoids. The first is to break down their charac-

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ter armour and defence mechanisms, the second is to activate their own desiring machines, and the third is to connect their desiring machines into social assemblages. Both of these approaches point towards anarchist or autonomous approaches as a kind of refuge through which inner selves can reconnect more authentically with others. One might also compare here Scott's (1990) theory of hidden and public transcripts. If oppressed groups such as peasants don't usually go mad, it might be because their inner selves find expression in the concealed social life of the hidden transcript. The false self performances are therefore experienced and recognised as false, instrumental, in service of goals beyond themselves. This weakens the potential for people to identify with their false-self performances.

Deleuze and Guattari theorise a method of "schizoanalysis," to build something similar to a sinthome or nima for each schizoid or alienated person. There are three basic tasks: to clear out the false-self system and its spooks, to reactivate the desiring machines of the inner self, and to connect the inner self into new, affinal, desire-based social or ecological assemblages. In this way, the inner/false self dichotomy is overcome, the inner self regains connection to the world and

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a reality check of sorts, and the self takes back possession of its body (not as an object, but as a site of desiring-production and peak experience, a “body without organs”). We now need the type of process described in the tasks of schizoanalysis, on a social scale.

As stated, Deleuze and Guattari postulate three tasks of schizoanalysis: the untying of knots of character armour and entrenched complexes, the activation of the desiring machines within each subject, and a process of reconnecting these desiring machines into social assemblages. It should be emphasised that the desiring machines are prepersonal, and thus, invisible to node theory. The way one solves the inner self/false self split is through autonomy--direct expression of agency unmediated by roles. Disrupting autonomy thus causes serious psychological harm. On the other hand, re-establishing autonomy, even in partial, isolated, or concealed forms, has the effect of combatting the illusion that people are in fact nodes and that node society is natural and inevitable.

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and flows, and splitting (“schizzing”) from others. The disruption of the process of desiring and social production is a type of alienation and social oppression, which generates misery through the proliferation of reactive force (e.g. guilt, sadism), feelings of powerlessness, and inauthentic lives lived entirely through personas, for status and power (or survival) rather than pleasure or meaning. When people are forced into non-resonant systems, this either produces false-self performance or psychological collapse.

It now becomes possible to specify why node theory’s views of relationality are wrong. Node theory sees only false selves. It disavows or denies the problem of the split between false and inner self in node-subjects. Worse, it encourages the denial that the inner self is even there (sometimes under the veil of a prohibition on essentialism or humanism). It thus plays into the false self system in exactly the same way that mechanistic ideologies did for (say) the Stalinists of the 1930s. There are ways in which it is partial, rather than wrong as such. Node theory is true to the extent that it describes only relations among false selves. It is false to the extent that it ignores the persistence of inner selves, and the importance of cathexes and self-world relations in forming stable connections

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of any kind. If one provincialises the false-self system in the manner that Stirner, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari, Vaneigem, and Laing do, it becomes apparent in what ways node theory is true and false. It may well have leverage, for instance, in explaining and predicting the observed so-called behaviour of people operating in a false-self mode. It may be effective as a means for strategically manipulating people who are acting as false selves, and this makes it both useful to states ("policy relevant") and profitable for corporations. But it has very little ability to comprehend the misery of our times, or understand phenomena such as creativity, deviance, rebellion, psychology, etc.

I wish to emphasise once more that the inner self is not an essential self, juxtaposed to the false self as "mere appearance". The inner self and false self are aspects (complexes, multiple personalities, internal parts) of people who have experienced particular phenomena of existential alienation. There is a sense in which the inner self is "more real" than the false self, since it is where the self invests all its meaning and positive powers. But the inner self is not a self in a natural state. The inner self is only nihilistic, derealised, and unconnected to the world because it is held back in order to allow the operation of a false self. The

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surface is a false-self system only because of the highly damaging domination exercised in modern society, first by parents and schools, later by the system as a whole.

**Beyond Node Theory: Autonomy**

Autonomy, in which the inner self finds expression, is real in its impact: it feels like greater authenticity and realness. However, there is no need to liberate inner selves which are already connected to the world through desiring-machines. Uncolonised indigenous people might not have inner selves, because the false-self performance was never imposed. Instead, inner-self dynamics such as imagination are directly present in social practices, such as myths and rituals. Today's node-theorists want people to have the same kind of immersive participation in conditions where the false-self performance is absolutely paramount. It is this disjuncture between the moral imperative to submerge oneself in the big Other, and its impossibility or incompatibility with desire owing to a hostile social environment, which renders node theory a variety of perverse disavowal. The more radical node theorists want to realise a world of relatedness similar to *bolo'bolo* (though many of them refuse the element of choice or desire which

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is involved in forming real connections). However, they feel absolutely forbidden from the kinds of subjective splitting and agency which might bring this about. They think they are “always inside”; the all-powerful parent will crush them if they try to rebel. Instead they try to reimagine the dominant system as if it were already *bolo’bolo*, or could be made such by moralistic changes or self-change. Like any belief, a belief in connectedness has conditions of plausibility. The system destroys these conditions for most people, except to the extent that they are posited in radical antagonism with it. Node theorists try to believe in connectedness through force of will and self suggestion, so as to realise connectedness in the world. Obviously this will not work. They cannot be absolute conformists and realise their desires as well. They remain necessarily trapped in the world of false selves, even while trying desperately to insert inner-self dynamics into this world.

The system now actively tries to block, to “anti-produce”, free spaces. Spaces where difference cannot proliferate, where it is limited by what is acceptable or by a structure set by someone other than the agents involved, is space for false selves. Such false-self space now comes to dominate social life in its entirety. I do not think

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the system realises that it is imposing a false-self regime. It cannot see the inner dynamics which it suppresses and frustrates. Instead, it is focused on aggregate effects. Free, alive spaces are perceived by the system and its actors as carrying risks. These risks may be mere correlations (“there is more likely to be violence at a grime gig than an opera”), or even instances of moral judgement converted into pseudo-objective language (“raves are unsafe because they increase the risk of illegal drug use”). Often, however, the reason is that free, alive spaces are spaces in which top-down power is reduced and *gleichschaltung* is ineffective; tools such as nudging, regulating, and surveilling are harder to use. The spaces might cause, arise from, or simply coexist with a more dispersed form of power relation; in any case, they prevent top-down social control through node systems. This loss of social control is not only seen by the system as reducing the effectiveness of its powers of repression and nudging. It is also seen, in the models of node theory, as reducing moral and pro-social behaviour and causing immoral and anti-social behaviour. A good example is the opinion that anonymous online spaces cause misbehaviour such as trolling and bullying (rather than simply acting as magnets for the frustration-

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aggression that has to come out somewhere in the overall social field).

The weight now carried by node-theoretic prohibitions was in the past carried by such concepts as sin and naughtiness. These gradually came into disrepute, either because they were associated with obnoxious ideological positions and turned into markers of social conservatism, or because they were re-encoded as words for something good, or fun, or humorous. The all-powerful, puffed-up authoritarians of the 1940s-50s quickly became the targets of surrealist comedy in the 1960s-70s, becoming instead figures of mockery. One is more likely today to find the words “naughty” and “sinful” in the world of pornography than in the world of moral theory, and terms like “wicked” and “bad” have become slang for “good” in some subcultures. Is it possible to imagine a future where concepts like *unacceptable*, *bad actor*, *anti-social*, and *extremist* undergo the same mutation?

Today there is a lot of pessimism arising from the system’s disruption of existing autonomous movements and lifeways. In part, this is due to the system’s psyops and how it can appear far more totalising than it is. I believe node theory will ultimately fail, in the same way and for the

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same reasons that mechanismism eventually failed. It likely has gaps and failings that will seem obvious in retrospect but have yet to be discovered and exploited. It thoroughly misunderstands the nature of human beings and of life in general. It is unable to obtain stable cathexes or create stable meanings. It generates unwanted consequences that destabilise it (for example, polarisation and paranoia), which undermines its capacity for control. It is thus losing mass support, unable to out-compete even the most ridiculous doctrines in providing meaning and connectedness. Western states have been living on borrowed time from the trust and perceived legitimacy derived from earlier periods of relative openness. Persistent despotism is corroding this “soft power,” leading to a situation similar to historical totalitarian regimes: people may be afraid to resist, but they cooperate half-heartedly at best, and play the system as best they can. All it takes is one outlet for inner selves and the edifice may crumble. As the system loses its ability to nudge and control, so node theory will cease to work.

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*Note: These explanations are necessarily simplifications. Someone trying to get a sense of how these concepts work will understand better from seeing them used in context. Also, many of the concepts have contested meanings within a sphere of family resemblance.*

Psychoanalysis, and approaches proximate to it (such as Laing's), make certain important assumptions that differentiate them from node theory, pop psychology, everyday *common sense*, and behaviourism. One of these is the interaction of multiple forces within each person or Unique One. There is not a unitary self; the self is composed of multiple parts (drives, processes, personality components, self states). The parts can be integrated or fragmentary to different degrees. The self people are conscious of and see as *themselves* is usually just the ego, which is one of these parts, or can even be an image or ideal rather than a real part of the self. Other parts may be unconscious, meaning the conscious self does not have access to them, even though they influence thoughts and actions in subtle ways. Or they might be separated to such a degree that they

## Psychoanalytic and Other Theoretical Terms

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manifest in dissociated states or as internal antagonists. There are several personality types that vary in the strength of the different parts and how the parts are arranged. Personality is normally formed in early childhood and is sticky. Since the origins of personality are social (primarily the family and other early childhood environments), the distribution of personality types differs across cultures and through time. However, people are not simply conditioned into whatever their family or society wants from them. There is some kind of basic level of desire or drive that social mechanisms have to articulate in order to have leverage over a person. The hidden curriculum of how a person is treated often has more influence on personality formation than the overt content of what parents or others try to teach.

My approach in this work has been deliberately eclectic. There are different schools of psychoanalysis with incompatible basic axioms. I assess theories by the degree to which they aid my understanding of what's actually happening in my life and in the world. In this regard, I think psychoanalysis and its existential spin offs are nearer the truth than behaviourism or pop psychology or everyday common sense. Psychoanalysis is a major force in the background of social move-

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ments and emergent theories of the 1960s-70s, including post-left anarchy and politics of desire. But at present we don't have an anarchist or autonomous psychoanalysis, and what's more, psychoanalytic theory is riven with divisions among dogmatic sects. Some of these divisions (on issues like the relative importance of sexuality and the pursuit of meaning, or of language and bioenergy in the unconscious) are not very important here. I don't like the cultish way psychoanalytic schools are sometimes organised, and I don't agree either with the reformist goal of reconciling people with society/reality or the authoritarian revolutionary approach of the Lacano-Marxists and of those identity politicians who use Lacan (including the ones who call themselves post anarchist). So I'm trying to fumble my way towards an anarchist psychoanalysis by synthesis and experimentation. Hence, I've looked into a number of different approaches, and I've indiscriminately looted these approaches for bits I like. But I'm not yet at the stage of having integrated these bits into a system. So on close inspection there're likely to be contradictions. For instance, I use the binary of humane/authoritarian superego from the Kleinian tradition, which is based on a theory that values the integration of good and bad objects in people's perceptions. But I

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also use schizoanalysis, which opposes the goal of integrating fragments, and Reichean theory, which believes in natural self integration without superego. This could form a research project in its own right: is it possible to reject integration of the self ("humanist" strands of psychoanalysis) and also develop a humane rather than an authoritarian superego? Would a truly autonomous being have no superego at all, or is this impossible given the evidence for early superego formation? Do hunter-gatherers have humane superegos and, if not, how do they avoid forming authoritarian ones instead? At this stage, I just don't know. It seems to me that node theory is destructive both in the ways it subordinates self fragments to general models, and in the ways it undermines the effects of earlier processes of personality development. Node subjects have to disavow (not entirely deny) their fragmentary nature to keep up standardised performances, but they also seem to lack humane superegos and be plagued by phenomena of the authoritarian-superego type. But I'm not sure how it all joins together. Another issue would be, is node theory an Imaginary construct, which articulates people into simulatary systems of phantasmatic images in which they identify with an image of themselves as nodes, or is it a crude objectivism that suppresses

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the Imaginary and reduces everything to brute measurement? I can see arguments both ways.

These are just two examples, but there're lots of other questions of this type and they're very much in process for me. I ask for leeway from readers for this. My reformulation of an anarchist psychoanalysis is a work-in-progress. The point of this book is not to create an anarchist psychoanalysis, but to theorise and criticise node theory. In the same way, I also try to sidestep disputes over the nature of the dominant system (capitalism versus industrial society versus modernity versus the Spectacle, etc.) because the critique of node theory slots easily into any given theory of the system.

I take a Korzybskian approach to epistemology. There is an event-level reality that is processual, invisibly interconnected, multiple, and full of differences, in which each event is unique. Some (not all) of this makes it to the object-level reality of what humans or other organisms can sense or perceive. In humans who speak language, some of the object level also makes it to the level of what is spoken. Language also feeds into a potentially endless series of possible statements about statements, and what humans believe based on the object- and language-levels feeds back into

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the event-level via actions. Each person experiences a subtly different slice of the event- and object-levels; each way of sorting the object-level in language retains some aspects of this level, but leaves out others. Hence, I am not assuming any of my statements hold absolute truth without remainder. Event-level reality always has traits (both of difference and of continuity) which are inexpressible or poorly expressed in language.

Some approaches respond to these problems in language by preferring poetic or connotative expression, by attacking or subverting language itself, by restricting or avoiding the use of propositional truth claims, by encouraging mystical or disalienated forms of awareness outside language, or by using uncertainty to demand privilege for one's own standpoint on non-epistemological (eg. political, normative) grounds. I resonate more with the Korzybskian approach, which continues to use language but with a background assumption that this language is approximate and imprecise, to involve extensional sets of multiple entities that are neither clearly divisible from their environments nor definitively grouped in the linguistically given way, which are composed of unique events and/or continuums that are structured fundamentally differently from

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language. Language can still be used, to bring into language aspects of the object- or event-level that are currently unexpressed, to distinguish between parts of the object-level present in language and outright false language, to multiply ways of seeing the object- and event-levels and thus come to see a bigger (or a different) slice of these, etc.

The Korzybskian approach involves both precise use of language, with attempts to avoid misuse of an essentialist or Barthesian-myth kind, and the use of multiple lenses through which to interpret aspects of a situation. While there are multiple incommensurable ways of seeing, this is not an excuse for foregoing epistemological rigour and clinging to one's unquestioned so-called common sense views or favoured ideological frame. Nor does it mean that all claims are equally true; concepts may be ultimately false or partial in their relationship to the event-level, and yet, once the extensional sets have been drawn a certain way, claims using these sets can be true or false. This overlaps with the Deleuzian view, that the main role of philosophy/theory is to create concepts, and the role of new concepts is to divide up the object-level of experience in new, interesting, or useful ways. My preparedness to make direct, literal and unapologetic truth claims

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In my view, node theory is both a useful concept through which to sort the object-level facts, and a name for a particular lens that has become widespread without being recognised as just a lens (neurotics tend to believe they live in a solid reality that is related to their concepts more closely than simply that of a selective lens and an event-field). There is of course also a risk that aspects of the object- and event-levels illuminated by node theory will be occluded should this concept be abandoned. Some of the models and per-

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spectives implicated in node theory are useful in themselves, if they can be used simply as one lens among many, as ways of modelling, and not as general views of the whole of reality. Another aspect of a Korzybskian approach is to approach the same issues (here, the same problems with node theory) from a number of different theoretical angles—Stirnerian, Nietzschean, Marxian, Situationist, Freudian, Kleinian, Lacanian, Deleuzian, etc. Each of these theories is a lens, a way of seeing, a *problem field* with particular questions and attempted answers using a particular set of concepts. I adhere to none of them dogmatically, but use them as possible lenses that may sometimes show more of the object- and event-levels than does node theory or so-called common sense.

A related note: psychoanalysis has been criticised for alleged prejudices such as sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Eurocentrism, etc. In some cases, regarding claims made by particular authors, I believe these accusations are justified. Analysts who take painless social integration as their goal, or who take heteronormative relationships as a mark of the desired healthy personality, typically pathologise differences in desiring-production and personality-formation simply because they deviate from these goals. (This does

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not necessarily mean the descriptive or causal theories they advance are wrong; just that they attach oppressive moral judgements to these theories). This is particularly true of theories of perversion, which sadly are the very same theories that are most appropriate to analyse node theory and contemporary social life. Similarly, observed phenomena arising in case-studies of middle- and upper-class Europeans (for instance, the classical Oedipus complex or particular formations of male and female sexuality) are sometimes overgeneralised to humanity in general. This, along with the uses of psychoanalysis (more during Fordism than today) in attempts to remould personalities along socially desired lines, and the propensity for academics to misuse psychoanalytic theories as if they were established extra-empirical truths through which cultural and other phenomena could be decoded, has understandably brought psychoanalytic approaches into disrepute.

In other cases, however, identity politicians have advanced paranoid or nit-picking readings of psychoanalytic theories so as to block thought and discussion about alternatives to their own, structurally reductionist and sometimes behaviourist-inflected approaches to (or avoidance of) psychology. For example, the subset of radical

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feminists who are convinced that heterosexual sexuality is entirely reducible to male domination of women often cherrypick sexist comments by psychoanalysts to portray the whole of psychoanalytic theory as a male conspiracy, or a masculinity-based form of false/strategic consciousness, which serves only to perpetuate rationalisations of male dominance and brainwash women into sexual servitude. I don't believe this is the case, and I resent and defy the various attempts to use guilt, moral duty (so-called responsibility), and social pressure to induce acceptance of such claims on extra-empirical grounds (attempts that, in my view, belong to the fields of suggestion and thought reform).

In my view there is nothing inherently prejudicial nor authoritarian about psychoanalysis. I believe the most important claims of psychoanalysis involve the existence (at least in some personality types) of the unconscious, the existence and dynamics of multiple personality components, the existence of multiple psychological types (and not just a generic human nature), the "sticky" early childhood origins of personality, the existence and operation of the primary process, the irreducibility of self to ego, and the psychological roots of morality. Views of this kind are hard

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to avoid if qualitative evidence is taken seriously. To the extent that psychoanalytic theory leads to effective techniques, these can be used for many purposes, and are certainly open to misuse—but also to benign use.

Psychoanalysis has also had in general a liberalising influence on such matters as sexual liberation, free expression, the treatment of children, attitudes to sexual minorities and gender roles, treatments of deviance in general, etc. Usually this has gone no further than liberal and social-democratic reforms, but selective appropriations of psychoanalytic ideas have also been crucial for more radical movements such as anti-psychiatry, Situationism, anarcho-primitivism and post-left anarchy. In contrast, behaviourism has always reinforced social control and authoritarianism. It is having the same authoritarian influence in its modified form, when it is applied by contemporary identity politicians. These people seem very committed to the idea that desire is a bad thing—the site of unconscious structurally-oppressive habits—whereas everything good comes from the superego. This leads to an authoritarian political style built around self criticism and coercive externally-imposed change, and all criticism of this approach is warded off with orders not to

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think. The impression is unavoidable that some identitarians and leftists object to psychoanalysis precisely because its liberalising tendencies undermine authoritarianism. They hide behind labels like male, Eurocentric, and heteronormative much as their forerunners hid behind labels like petty bourgeois.

## Glossary

**Aadhaar:** An Indian ID system—apparently designed to be mandatory and biometric—consisting of a card, a fingerprint database, and a personal identity number. The courts have limited its scope and forbidden it being mandatory in law, but it is difficult for people to access public and private services and institutions without it. In addition to surveillance and privacy issues, and attempts by police to access the comprehensive fingerprint records, the database has proven a goldmine for hackers and a lot of the material has been leaked.

**Act:** In Lacanian theory, a type of agency that ruptures existing contours of what is possible, subverting both the external order and the ego's identifications. In Lacan, Acts are specific to human subjects and distinct from behaviour that also

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occurs in animals. An Act involves responsibility in the existentialist sense, i.e. an influence on actions through meanings and ethics, expressing an intention. Žižek (eg. 1997) generally restricts the concept to exceptional actions that break the contours of a social discourse or perceived reality, and thus are not reducible to social determinants. In my view, the Lacanian theory of the Act underestimates the fragmentation of the subject and is too easily recuperated by neoliberal responsabilisation. However, the important point here is that Acts are inconceivable within node theory, since they are by definition not passive-receptive.

**Active/Reactive:** In Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche, active forces are directly connected to something through desiring-production, whereas reactive forces are turned against themselves in various ways—first as frustrated active forces, then as a blocking or repressing agency and finally as active forces distorted by such a blocking. Active force reshapes the world, pushes to its own limits and affirms its own difference. It involves a direct self-world connection and is primarily affirmative. It expresses itself in formations such as affinity groups and how desire escapes from social capture. Reactive force is defined by, and reacts to,

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something outside it, rather than expressing its own creative power. It adapts to the world rather than transforming the world, and it splits and disempowers active force. It is linked to the Nietzschean concepts of ressentiment and slave morality (in which the evil precedes the good, and the good is defined as the absence of evil) and has its origins in statist despotism. Active force is poetry or poesis, reactive force is the sphere of politicians and of ideologies of lack. Active force is schizoid, whereas reactive force is paranoiac or neurotic. Schizoanalysis aspires to free active forces from their blockages and reactive entanglements. The two forces are today in Manichean struggle, but reactive force is an alienated form of active force and may eventually be overcome.

**Active and Passive Nihilism:** In Vaneigem, two modes of pre-insurrectionary consciousness; passive nihilism corresponds to decathexis with continued conformity, active nihilism to futile destructive outbursts.

**Alienation:** A complex concept in Marx, Situationism, Bey (Bey, 1985, 1994; on Bey see also McLaverty-Robinson, 2023), and others, indicating a separation from oneself or parts of oneself, from one's agency and its effects, and/or from im-

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portant relations to others and the world. Theorised differently by different writers, alienation generally prevents the exercise of active force and experiences of immediacy, empowerment, joy, etc. In Hegel, alienation refers to consciousness/spirit divided against itself, thus unable to self-actualise. In Stirner, spooks alienate people by subordinating them to imaginary abstractions, splitting their agency between the true self (Unique One) and the internalised aspect of the concept or image. In Marx, capitalism alienates workers from their creative powers by forcing their use to produce profit for a boss, and also alienates workers from one another, from the things they make, and from the production process. This is also taken as an alienation from one's human substance or "species being"—although the concept is by no means limited to humanist theories and also arises in ecology and the post left (one can be alienated not only from one's human traits, but from one's unique, animal, ecological, transpersonal traits). In Situationism, alienation involves living one's life passively, in conformity to images.

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construction of assemblages by these machines. Anti-productive machines, such as the state, exist to block the kind of subjective process of becoming that is the goal of schizoanalysis—to prevent people from forming new connections that are subjectively meaningful but outside the dominant system.

**ASBOs:** Anti-Social Behaviour Orders—A method of open-ended criminalisation used during the Blairite years in the UK. An ASBO was a civil order that a police force or local council could obtain by applying to a magistrate (the lowest level of judge in the UK). It could prohibit—in the case of this person alone—any specified behaviour. An ASBO could be awarded at the very low threshold that the person was causing “harassment, alarm, or distress” (often only minor nuisance, and with no requirement of intent), and could be applied without any criminal conviction. Breaking an ASBO carried a potential prison sentence. The system was clearly designed as a tool to facilitate widespread, personalised, inconsistent harassment of anyone who attracted the ire of council officials, police, or authoritarian neighbours, allowing open-ended criminalisation while limiting its range and creating the illusion that the people

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targeted formed an unusually malevolent category of folk devils. ASBOs were often used to ban legal activities such as riding a bicycle or carrying a marker pen, to “disrupt crime” (such as theft or graffiti); to ban neurotic and psychotic symptoms; to ban vague categories open to later interpretation, such as “doing anything that might alarm others”; to ban people from protesting or engaging in protest-related actions, such as the life bans given to some animal rights campaigners against ever again protesting about animal testing; to rescind basic liberal rights, for example by banning people from particular areas, from speech acts, from forms of expression, etc.; to render certain already illegal actions more risky for some people than others; and to persecute people whose eccentric or principled actions offended the Establishment, for example in the case of the Naked Rambler, jailed for a decade using the ASBO system because he conscientiously refused to wear clothes. Most often, ASBOs were used to harass working-class youths, homeless people, sex workers, drug users, and other targeted minorities. ASBOs did not establish a general rule against something, but took away the right to do something from selected targets, usually those who are most likely to want or need to do it: they targeted

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a person's lifestyle and connections and in many cases, the things that gave their life meaning or allowed their survival. ASBOs were followed by Control Orders, which could be used in a similarly arbitrary and draconian way against so-called terrorism suspects. Control Orders were used to impose even broader restrictions such as forcing people to live in a certain place and banning any contact with other people without prior permission from the state; again the targets did not need to be convicted of anything, and the measure was used against people who for example refused to inform on others. While ASBOs and Control Orders have been abolished, later governments have established similar instruments such as Public Space Protection Orders and Community Protection Notices, and various Blairite-era imitations of ASBOs, such as Sex Offence Prevention Orders (SOPOs) and Serious Crime Prevention Orders (SCPOs), are still in widespread use. All of these orders are used in a discriminatory way against particular individuals. In 2021, the police sought, but failed to get, an SCPO against Toby Shone, who they had tried and failed to frame for terrorism over supposed association with *325 magazine*. The purpose was to stop Toby from associating with anarchists and living a nomadic lifestyle. At

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the time of writing, a law that will establish Serious Disruption Prevention Orders (SDPOs) is passing through parliament in the UK. SDPOs will be used to head off civil disobedience and low-level direct action by imposing ASBO-type prohibitions on protest organisers, advocates, or participants (the initial targets being Extinction Rebellion and its spin-offs). Previous plans to introduce Extremism Disruption Orders were apparently stymied by the difficulty in establishing their scope in a way that would exclude members of the ruling party.

**Barthesian Myth:** An ideological construct in which a first-order signifier is used primarily to connote an abstract, usually morally/emotionally loaded, second-order referent. The resultant interplay of imaginary figures short circuits or substitutes for consideration of concrete issues. Myths appear as pseudo-natural, typically employing an empty form such as a highly abstract concept or a tautology to carry a meaning that is not explicitly articulated. The process by which the sign is produced, and the history of the meaning involved, are elided. Barthes provides many examples through his book *Mythologies*, translated in English in two volumes (*Mythologies* and

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*The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*). A contemporary example would be the reaction of media viewers/readers to images of large numbers of migrants crossing barbed-wire fences at a border. The actual scene depicts a large number of desperate people, whose circumstances are missing from the image, coming up against and challenging a system of securitisation. However, for many viewers/readers, the image will immediately be read as a threat, as a flood or swarm or swamping force which is *invading the nation* (by extension, the imaginary self), destroying its boundaries and polluting its interior. These readings are imaginary, and may be reinforced by mythicising language (the text might also refer to floods, swarms, invasion, swamping, criminals, illegals, crisis, etc.). However, a certain kind of viewer/reader will automatically decode such meanings from the image as a second-order signification. There are similar, mythical ways of reporting, viewing/reading and even experiencing “riots,” “terrorism,” “crime,” wars, and so on.

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**Catharsis:** The release of a blocked affect through being experienced either directly or vicariously. Important in early Freud, for whom symptoms were conceived as arising from undischarged, blocked emotions/affects. Therapy thus involves discharging the blocked energy.

**Cathexis, Cathect:** The process of attaching desire or subjective meaning to someone or something; the accumulation of libido (desiring energy) or other psychological energy at a particular location. In early Freud, desire is conceived as an energetic substance, libido, which can be distributed across different zones of the body or different objects in the world. Cathexis, or libidinal investment, is the connection of libido to something in particular.

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**Character Armour:** In Reichian theory, a set of typical bodily tensions and personality traits that block the flow of affect in the body and produce stereotyped reactions. Usually serves a defence function for the ego.

**Che Vuoi?:** In Lacanian theory, a purported dynamic involving the question “what am I for you?” or “what do you want from me?” directed towards the big Other—initially the pre-Oedipal mother or combined parent figure. Taken to arise in infancy, in the form of an infant imagining they are or can be the object of the single parent’s desire (before multiple others are recognised). The answer to the question is taken to be the “imaginary phallus.” The infant believes they can occupy this position, until the pre-Oedipal phase is disrupted with the emergence of autonomous fantasies or sexual desires, or some traumatic rupture from the Real. After this stage, concepts derived from “che vuoi?” remain active, for example, in the form of ideas of desirable objects one wishes to possess,

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or the desire to be beautiful so as to be what the Other wants. This causes complex interpersonal permutations, since people typically come to want this object themselves, without necessarily recognising its position as the object of the desire of the Other. Neurotic fantasy is structured around the “che vuoi?” question, the question of what the big Other wants (which is doubted). Perverse fantasy reverses this, with the perverse subject imagining themselves to be the desired object related to the big Other, providing what it wants. Lacanian analysts seek to remain mysterious so as to draw out someone’s fundamental fantasy, which will be expressed in the transference. I suspect “che vuoi?” dynamics either do not take place or are blocked early in pre-Oedipal personalities; questions of a “che vuoi?” type might instead take a persecutory form, or be expressed in the false-self system.

**Common Sense:** Used here in the Gramscian sense, as a term for an inchoate and contradictory philosophy/worldview held by most people in lieu of a systematic philosophy.

**Compromise Formation:** A symptom, belief, or practice that meets two contradictory drives simultaneously, usually by combining opposite meanings. May express both a repressed content

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and the force repressing it, or combine different drives, using ambivalent and indeterminate meanings to conceal the contradiction involved. Provides less satisfaction than a direct expression.

**Conditioning:** Non-psychoanalytic psychological concept that has two roots in its common usage: the idea of behavioural conditioning in behaviourism and the structuralist/Marxist idea of conditioning in behaviourism and the structuralist/Marxist idea of conditioning. Behavioural conditioning is the manipulation of emotional and behavioural responses through association of a stimulus with something already pursued or avoided (eg. a ringing bell with food, deviance with punishment, desired behaviour with rewards). It works mainly by habit/repetition and mainly through the ego (or pain/pleasure perception). Often gets blurred in identitarian and poststructuralist works with the vaguer use of “conditions” and “to condition” in Marxism and its spin-offs, where a “condition” is a necessary background element, a cause, or determinant (similar to a logical condition). Also gets blurred with psychoanalytic views of causality. Psychoanalysis generally opposes the idea of conditioning, because the impact of such processes is mediated by the existing personality structure, the relationship to the “conditioner,” ego strength, etc.

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Thus for example, a masochist will unconsciously seek punishment, a person who sees the conditioner as persecutor will either defy them or only conform superficially, etc. Effective conditioning only happens when there is a relationship of suggestion (see below).

**Crybullying:** Using complaints and accusations as a means to bully someone, usually by getting someone in authority to harm them. For example, filing malicious reports on social media, or deliberately provoking a person into aggressive responses then reporting these responses.

**Desiring production:** In Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis, the self is believed to be a fragmented assemblage of component forces, each of which potentially forms connections with people, things, and spaces to produce particular "desiring machines." The concept links together the Marxian view of production and the Freudian idea of cathexis; it is designed as an alternative to lack-based views of desire. In both social and desiring-production, internal forces are mobilised. The various forces are in constantly flowing or fluxing, which also involves selections or cuts (schizzes). The forces thus operate by a logic of connect-and-flow or schiz-and-break-flow. Social production, the

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production of social machines (structures, groups, institutions, etc), derived from, or an aspect of, desiring production. An effective social assemblage will be an assemblage of desiring machines flowing in articulated or complementary ways. Schizoanalytic therapy focuses on discovering and reactivating the desiring machines inside each person, and reconnecting them in assemblages with which they have resonance/affinity. Social production should be subordinated to desiring production.

**Deviance Amplification:** A sociological concept explaining the observed fact that statistical frequency of a form of deviance is often correlated with the strength of its prohibition or tabooing (for example, social groups with strict speech performance norms have higher levels of stammering than other groups). This is argued to occur because of the formation of deviant identities and/or perverse effects of punishment and stigma on opportunities.

**Devivification:** In Theweleit, a means by which soldier males seek to avoid engulfment when encountering living flows, by removing life from these flows either literally (killing, containing) or through hallucinatory perceptions (eg. stereotyping).

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**Disavowal:** A mechanism of managing psychological content or drives rejected by the ego or society by simultaneously affirming and denying them. In Freud the term is similar to the idea of being “in denial” in pop psychology. For Lacan it has the more technical meaning of being the main mechanism of exclusion in perverse personalities, distinct from repression (in neurosis) and foreclosure (in psychosis). For Lacan, it relates mainly to the traumatic fact of castration, which means something like the recognition of one’s powerlessness or non-omnipotence (initially because of the relationship to a more-powerful parent). Perverse personalities posit at once both their powerlessness and their omnipotence. In wider writings, however, just about anything can be disavowed. If a theory or viewpoint combines two or more apparently contradictory positions without adequately synthesizing them, it’s likely to involve disavowal. English psychoanalytic writings on perverse personalities focus less on castration and more on the difficult relationship to aggression: the combination of strong conflict aversion (based in fear of annihilation by a parent-figure) with aggressive or sadistic drives. Often a symptom (or other primary process formation) incorporates contradictory contents, so it satisfies opposite urges at the same time.

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227

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227



**Ecstatic media event:** Events in which saturation media coverage with imperative, moralistic framing draws viewers into a kind of emotional communion (from Choularakis, 2008).

**Ego:** In Freud, the drive or personality component focused on the so-called reality principle, derived from the id as a specialisation of the pain-avoidance aspect. The ego scans and selects from reality, particularly in relation to threats, and operates in secondary process terms. It seeks to reconcile the demands of the id, the superego, and the outer world. It imagines it is the master of the self but in reality is weaker than the id. It encompasses reason and reasoning, self preservation, social status play, pursuit of power and prestige and so on, instrumentalist and calculative thinking, western-style science. The ego is the source or site of character armour and compromise formations. Both Freud and Jung took this to be the component people most often identify with: what people mean when they talk about “themselves” acting or about autonomous individuals, willpower, etc. Many later analysts, taking from Freud’s later work, view ego strengthening and ego development as the main aims of psychoanalysis. Lacan disagrees with this, seeing the ego as a

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type of delusion operating within the Imaginary (based on someone's mirror image) and concealing the working of impersonal processes.

**Emotional Plague:** Reichean concept referring to a condition of irrational functioning from alienation and character armour, particularly reactions involving groundless hate, rage, and outrage in which the main motive is internal and the reason given (rationalisation) is not in accord with the action itself. It arises when natural, self-regulating mechanisms are suppressed and mutilated. It sometimes takes on pandemic dimensions, such as explosions of social sadism and repression. The term distinguishes a Reichean view of such phenomena as pathologies to be treated bioenergetically (both from moralistic condemnation/repression—which uses ineffective means—and their treatment as simply opinions or character traits). One of its traits is reacting to discussions of the causes of neurotic distress (the plague itself or particular plagued actions), with rage or anxiety rather than curiosity. Even conscious Reicheans experience plague reactions sometimes, but recognise them quickly as energetic disturbances. A plague reaction is conceptually similar to the pop-psychological use of “trigger-

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ing.” Ecstatic media events and moral panics are pandemics of emotional plague. So, paradoxically, are COVID-19 lockdowns.

**False-Self System:** In alienated personalities (including schizoid personalities), a false self consists of a surface performance designed to comply with the demands of powerful actors or to achieve outer results. It is experienced as radically separate from the inner self, where it is felt one's authentic self-hood resides, and which has the capacity to cathect objects. Often there is not merely one false self, but a series of personas designed for particular scenarios or relations, and sometimes fragments of performance/behaviour that are imitated directly from others. The false-self system refers to all the false selves and fragments and the relations among them. One of my arguments in this work is that perverse personalities also have false-self systems, but identify intensely with them and manage the resultant contradictions through disavowal and compromise formations. Neurotics also perform false-self roles but cathect them more systematically, establishing assemblages in which the performance is both internal expression of a character structure and external conformity, leaving only residues that are alienated or repressed.

230

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230

**Fantasy or Phantasy, Phantasmatic:** A primary process activity, conscious or unconscious, alongside normal thought. Attaches meanings of an Imaginary type to objects and situations, which may be a source of pleasure and/or meaning, and can also override conscious reasoning (for example, in phobias and hatreds). In early Freud, phantasy typically involves hallucinated wish fulfilment. However, phenomena like Barthesian myths are also usually considered as fantasy when theorised psychoanalytically. If someone processes a situation in terms of heroic agency, or martyrdom and virtuous endurance, or as a struggle between order and chaos, this is usually a phantasmatic experience. Some analysts depict phantasy as a background dreaming process that is always going on unconsciously. Fantasy components often attach to memories and experiences, which are remembered in a fantasy form. Can have positive or negative connotations depending on the author. In Lacan, each person has a fundamental fantasy around which their idea of who they are is constructed. Therapy involves traversing (crossing) this fantasy and changing someone's way of experiencing desire.

**Flow-state:** In positive psychology, a state of plea-

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surable immersion in an activity.

**Footfall (aka Foot Traffic):** Business studies slang for the number of people passing through a given space, such as a shopping mall, a particular store, a museum, art gallery, etc. Footfall can be estimated using CCTV or other sensors, and used as a metric for testing success or for promoting a site to retailers or advertisers. Easily used to exaggerate such desirability, since it does not indicate that someone has enjoyed, consumed, or been influenced by a product or service, and since it is often impossible to tell users from people passing through or to establish whether the same person is counted multiple times. It is one of the main metrics used in the “culture industry” (where most factors are qualitative) as a measurable indicator of success.

**Foreclosure:** In Lacan, the mechanism of exclusion operative in psychosis. Foreclosure amounts to being unable to enter the “house of language,” the world of supposedly common meanings, because of the inability to internalise a master signifier. The foreclosed element is not repressed or disavowed; it never forms in the first place. Foreclosure of the master signifier is basic to psychosis; a later Lacanian theory of autism suggests that

232

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**Geertzian:** Not a psychological but an anthropological term, referring to the interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz and his followers. Geertzian anthropology is distinct both from objectivist anthropology, which seeks to observe social realities from outside, and later reflexive (poststructuralist/identitarian) anthropology, which focuses on the standpoint and experience of the anthropologist. Geertzians believe cultures are bundles or webs of subjective meanings in the sense of cathexis as well as the sense of linguistic meanings. They involve particular symbolic “sources of illumination” that orient people within a culture. The point of anthropology is to gain a deep understanding of cultures, determining how they work on this level of meaning. Understanding a culture is about learning to identify and reconstruct these meanings and the part they play in social life for people who hold them; less like memorising facts than like getting a joke, says Geertz. Anthropologists should attempt “thick description” of cultures, showing how meaning works for participants and how participants in a culture experience and view life. It is important to interpret meaning, not just gather data.

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**Gleichschaltung:** German for coordination or equalisation, and in electronics, automatic stabilisation. In the Nazi era, it was the euphemism of choice for the reorganisation of social institutions on a totalitarian model, changing different aspects of state, corporate, and private society along Nazi lines. Since the role of an automatic stabiliser is to render the flow of electricity equal across a system, the word also forms a contrast with *resistenz* (electrical resistance)—a term often used to describe everyday resistance in totalitarian systems. Similar methods were used in other historical totalitarian regimes such as those of the Soviet bloc, Italian fascism, etc., whereas other systems (e.g. authoritarian or democratic) allow much greater leeway to particular institutions and sectors. Once *gleichschaltung* is carried out, all formal and legal groups are brought within the dominant structure. Particular institutions are not allowed to function with absolute or relative autonomy, but they are not necessarily subject to constant direct command. Rather, each institution is rearranged to reproduce the regime's organisational forms, ideology, goals, and command systems. *Gleichschaltung* applies to social sectors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), sports clubs, hobby groups, churches and religious or-

234

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234



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In this book it is used in the sense of a totalitarian integration of different organisations, actors, and institutions in a single structure with a dominant ideology (neoliberal, Third Way, cybernetic, etc.). In node-theoretic societies, private associations, companies, NGOs, social media networks, and so on, are allowed or even encouraged to proliferate. However, they are subject to constant (and shifting) regulation and supervision to ensure that they operate as arms of the state/system, a situation hedged around with regulations and legal or reputational risks. Non-state organisations of all kinds (NGOs, companies, social organisations, websites...) are being co-opted to play state roles and act in line with the ruling regime, thus

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to act as arms of the state, even when officially they're independent. A number of examples can be given. The "everything is a business" mantra functions in this way. In the neoliberal model, the insistence on market models extends inside state services through practices of New Public Management; sectors such as sport are aggressively subjected to marketisation and business laws. University departments for instance are subordinated to requirements to show economic impact and to train graduates for particular careers. NGOs are not allowed to operate independently of the state. For example, a group providing crisis aid is expected to operate within the disaster response infrastructure and to avoid providing aid in areas subjected to sanctions. NGOs that insist on providing aid in all circumstances are at risk of persecution for such offences as providing support for terrorism (by giving out supplies that end up with militants, or paying local taxes), corruption (for submitting to extortion), and/or facilitating offences such as undocumented migration (for rescuing people drowning at sea). NGOs running homeless shelters are exposed to legal risks if they do not implement the state's agenda of forcing so-called anti-social people into destitution—for example, if they do not expel/refuse

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beds to people who are drunk, drugged, or agitated, if they turn a blind eye to petty deviance and refuse to share information with the police, or if they do not succeed in proactively preventing drug use or dealing, or abuse among people using the shelters (even if the NGO is uninvolved in such activities, and/or even actively trying to prevent them). Doctors are expected to report private information to the state on everything from infectious diseases to gunshot wounds to paedophilic desires to evidence of female genital cutting. Banking systems are required to implement state-mandated KYC-AML-CTF measures (see page 245), and to cut off access to sanctioned people or organisations. Since the system works by means of legal risks and the law is often vague, banks will err on the cautious side in refusing accounts to controversial people, sectors, or organisations. For example, it is almost impossible for pornographic websites to obtain bank accounts in North America without deception; various campaigning groups have found they cannot establish bank accounts or their banking services are withdrawn (CAGE, London Animal Action, and Wikileaks are examples). Venues selling alcohol are expected to aggressively police underage purchases, being held responsible even if patrons

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did nothing culpable; this has led de facto to the adoption of schemes like “Challenge 21/25” in which every young-looking person has to show government-approved ID (even when this is not legally obligatory). Pubs and bars, nightclubs, music venues, and events such as festivals are expected to follow restrictive self-policing measures, to surveil and police users/participants, etc., as conditions for licensing (which can be refused based on “anti-social behaviour” or “risk,” even if the owner/planner is not responsible for these). In London this led to a de facto shadowban on pubs and music venues hosting events with particular bands or entire genres of urban music, because such music was considered likely to attract disorderly people or lead to gang fights. This was done using police nominal advice against a background of risks in relation to licensing and legal liability; the music remained entirely legal, but fans could not attend events and bands could not perform, with some dissolving as a result. Independent websites, commercial or otherwise, are expected to police user-generated content to avoid liability for users’ actions, including policing such matters as piracy, terrorist content, cybercrime, child pornography, etc. Today, most websites will censor at the drop of a hat in response to signals from

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powerful actors: for example, the Russian broadcaster RT was simultaneously cut off from most sites, including Google search results and Reddit and Facebook links, on the orders of EU officials; even sites outside the EU complied with these rules. Websites and online projects that do not proactively apply US or EU rules are often subjected to transnational persecution, with the US seeking extraditions, asset seizures, and other retaliation against people operating well outside its jurisdiction (the Megaupload, Freedom Hosting, KAT, ZLibrary, and BTC-e cases are examples). A site stepping out of line may also be subjected to cancellation by other services, as happened to 8chan. Organisations working with children are expected to comply with wide-ranging measures for safeguarding children, supposedly aimed at the risk of sexual abuse and (in reality) at the risk of accusations of abuse; these might include requiring background checks on adult participants and barring one-on-one contact between adults and children. This risk aversion extends to such matters as the risk of injuries from rough play, the risk of some children bullying others, and the risk of children carrying dangerous objects, to the point where groups and events for children virtually disappear and the few remaining are bureau-

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cratic nightmares. (Needless to say, this risk aversion does not extend to the harms done by the sparsity of provision, by the traumatic neoliberal context, by the application of such regulation to children, or to the effects of authoritative control of children). During the COVID-19 crisis, this level of control operated even more intrusively, with virtually every organisation or venue expected to jump to overnight orders to shut down, limit hours, enforce distancing or masking, demand health passports, etc. In France, things have gone even further: the state has given itself the power to “dissolve” (ban) any association it dislikes, a measure already used against some anarchist and antifascist groups. In a context where *gleichschaltung* is widespread, particular structures and ideologies promoted by the ruling regime permeate through the social structure, and become difficult to get outside of, except illegally. Anarchist and autonomous groups have generally refused to play along with *gleichschaltung* and have been subjected to escalating harassment and criminalisation as a result. Lately, however, there is a trend even for anarchist groups to pre-emptively play along extensively.

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thing parochial and specific to a particular context that is articulated as if global and universal.

**Happy Consciousness:** In Marcuse (1964), an ideological formation precluding dissatisfaction with the existing system through an exact correspondence of language to systemic functions (because of technological rationality) and therapeutic responses to dissatisfaction, including shame at feeling unhappy and difficulty expressing unhappiness with aspects of the world. The utopian aspect of language, which refers to absent possibilities or desires, is foreclosed and the capacity to feel unhappiness with the system is repressed. People thus come to think that what exists is rational and works well, without rationally assessing such claims. Associated with conformity and loss of individuality, with repressive desublimation (or release of repressed desires under controlled conditions), and the constant flow of shiny consumer goods and distracting scapegoats. Marcuse's description of happy consciousness also involves thought-blocking cliches and the elimination of analysis in favour of assertion.

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texts. The public transcript is used in situations observed by dominant groups and is characterised by false or simulated conformity (sometimes also reinflected with hidden meanings). The hidden transcript is articulated in spaces from which dominant groups are excluded, is insurrectionary in its implications, and is felt by oppressed people to be their authentic position.

**Hysteria:** An obsolete psychiatric diagnosis for a cluster of socially-deviant and usually personally-distressing phenomena, encompassing dissociative or dreamlike or “hypnoid” states, physical symptoms with psychological causes (“conversion symptoms”), emotional instability, self-destructive relationship patterns, etc. In psychoanalysis, hysteria has also come to refer to a personality type with a particular structure, a variant of neurosis in which the other (not the self) is taken as the locus of power and knowledge, but is also doubted and often tested. Whereas obsessional neurotics hold down repressed material by elaborate rituals and avoidance, hysterics typically act out the repressed material in dissociative states, or express it in physical or emotional symptoms incomprehensible to the person concerned. Usually caused by a psychosexual conflict or sexual trauma.

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**Id:** A drive or personality component that operates directly, immediately, and seeks pleasure (and in some versions pain avoidance). Often contrary to the ego; may be the source of all libido or psychological energy. Babies and arguably animals are “pure id.” Adult humans are also primarily governed by the id, even though they believe they are ego-led. Includes things like hunger, sexual desire, playfulness, etc. Dangerous for civilisation as it is not oriented to social command, nor reality-checked and is amoral. Classic writers dealing with Victorian-era character see id as largely repressed into the unconscious. Later writers focus more on the ways id is channelled and either sublimated, ie. given permitted and partial satisfactions, or “repressively desublimated,” ie. allowed release in controlled conditions in consumer society in such a way that it becomes unsubversive. Situationist and post-left theories, primitivist views of wildness, and politics of desire seek to liberate the id.

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age of the self, with conservative immersion in conventional ways of viewing things, etc. It is the source of alienation from oneself. However, the Imaginary has positive connotations for analysts like Jung, Winnicott, and Castoriadis, for whom the Imaginary is the sphere of creativity and lived experience, containing authentic aspects of self that are excluded from rational processes. This treatment of the Imaginary overlaps with Bey's "imaginal realm" (see McLaverty-Robinson, 2023; Bey, 1985, 1994) and Bergson/Deleuze's "virtual" (Deleuze, 1988).

**Introjection:** The creation of internal images or personality components based on people, relations, or things encountered in the outer world, for example, internal parents. Purported origin in incorporation fantasies, in which others are fantasied as being internalized or fused with the self. Introjection occurs at the level of fantasy, and resultant inner objects can be projected back out onto their real equivalents. They can also operate as supports, persecutors, ego ideals, and so on in the inner life. Identification with oppressors, and the category of spooks, may be introjects. On the other hand, introjects can provide a basis for ideals and inspirations, and contribute to dialogue

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and understanding.

**KYC/AML/CTF:** These stand respectively for know your customer, anti money laundering, and counter terrorist financing; they are often used in combinations, either KYC-AML or KYC-AML-CTF. These are procedures used by financial institutions and websites to force users to identify themselves and prove their identity before accessing financial (and sometimes other) systems—for example, demanding that government-recognised ID be provided, that multiple contact methods are kept on file, and/or that a person provide a photograph of themselves holding the ID. This is the main aspect in an overhaul of global financial systems after 9/11, before which many countries allowed bank accounts on request or even anonymous accounts. It is designed to allow the financial system to be used to exclude or sanction particular individuals—to freeze or seize their assets or to prevent them using the financial system. The official grounds for this are variously listed as corporate responsibility to prevent misuse and fraud (KYC), as a duty to surveil users to prevent or detect money laundering, or the conversion of illicit profits into legal money (AML), or to prevent or detect financing of banned groups (CTF).

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This can be and has been used to freeze dissident political groups or individuals out of the financial system and to stop supporters sending donations to pay fines or support prisoners. Examples include the incapacity of the British human rights group CAGE to operate a bank account, the freezing of the bank account of London Animal Action (which dissolved and reformed as a result), the closure of accounts receiving donations during the Canadian truck blockades, and suspicious closures of crowdfunding initiatives such as those for the Yellow Vests. On a wider scale, such measures have been used for geopolitical ends by the US against countries like Venezuela, Russia, and Afghanistan, whose regimes the US disapproves of; when this is done, everyone in the country is shut off from the global financial system overnight. Such systems make it even harder than before for homeless people and those without documentation to access banking and to work; its use against undocumented migrants as part of “hostile environment” programs is explicit. People can also be arbitrarily subject to sanctions as “terrorist entities” by organisations like the UN, the US Office of Foreign Assets Control, and the European Council, using these same mechanisms to effectively render them destitute. Whatever the

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**Libido:** In psychoanalysis, a type of literal or figurative energy that flows in the body and forms cathexes which attach it to desires objects or others, to zones of the body, etc. It initially referred to sexual desire, but could also emerge in sublimated forms or be blocked. In early Freud and in Reich's theory, blocked or dammed-up libido is a major cause of symptoms. Libido is distinct from self-preserved drives; in later Freud it is also distinct from the death drive. Personality types vary in their distribution and structuring of libido.

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**Macro and Micro:** In sociology, different scales of discussion. The macro refers to large-scale events, often operating impersonally or on an aggregate scale, such as economic and demographic trends and state-level politics. The micro refers to smaller social groups and relationships in which interaction takes place and personal meanings are formed.

**Masochism:** Component of desire that seeks powerlessness, harm, or degradation as a source of pleasure or relief. This can involve sexual practices or take sublimated forms such as physically arduous work, moralistic self abasement, self sabotage or unconscious punishment seeking. Many possible sources have been theorised, ranging from a “death drive” that seeks reductions in tension and fusion with the universe, to “sadistic theories of coitus” in which sexual union was imagined in childhood to be a violent act, to attempts to alleviate guilt arising from a harsh superego by constructing situations where agency and respon-

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**Moral Economy:** A term from the work of EP Thompson (1971), James C. Scott (1976), and others. Refers to economic relations in which moral and cultural concerns motivate economic choices, which are thus not reducible to rational-choice models or instrumental calculation. For example, peasant employers may feel obliged to pay a socially sanctioned minimum, wealthier peasants may come under social pressure to redistribute their wealth in traditional ways, and rioting crowds usually target only those businesses accused of wrongdoing.

**Moral Idiocy:** The widespread incapacity to make moral/ethical/normative judgements independently from those of the herd or people in authority. A moral idiot has no moral agency as their moral decisions are always taken by others. Eichmann was a prime example.

**Morality-dependent Distress:** Distress experienced by a person holding a given moral viewpoint

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of integration in most of their personality and have usually cathected dominant/mainstream social institutions and norms. The unintegrated personality components are repressed, and return in various ways as neurotic symptoms or (in so-called normal people) as subclinical phenomena such as dreams and parapraxes (“Freudian slips”). The frustration of the id by an ego oriented to the outer world is often an important source of symptoms. Neurosis is distinct from psychosis and perversion. Some theorists also posit the existence of a genital type which is post-neurotic, though this idea is unfashionable today; Reich considers hunter-gatherers to be genital types.

**Nima:** In *bolo’bolo*, a cultural background, existential orientation, lifestyle, or life path that forms the common orientation of a bolo or the personal orientation of an ibu (Unique One). “The nima defines life, as the ibu imagines it, in its practical everyday form.” Nimas can be ethnic traditions, philosophies, religions, aesthetics, sexualities, special interests, etc. “The nimas are the real wealth of the bolos (‘wealth’ = manifold spiritual and material possibilities).” The concept of nima is similar to the Lacanian *sinthome*, Deleuzian desiring machine, existentialist views of authen-

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ticity, and Geertzian views of culture.

**Paranoia:** In psychoanalysis, a complex or personality structure focused on persecutory anxiety. May involve splitting and fear of bad objects, or the projection of excluded personality components or internal images of others onto actual others. The view of persecution operates at the level of fantasy and character armour, and is usually not reality checked, although paranoia is almost obligatory in totalitarian systems where risks are pervasive. The actual persecutor might be a harsh internal superego, an insistent repressed desire or complex, personality components taken to belong to others because of the existence of a false-self system, aspects of the self perceived as bad, an introjection of a real past persecutor, etc. Some theories indicate that belief in a persecutory object serves a rudimentary organising function that is preferred by some to schizoid fragmentation. Klein sees paranoia as common in early childhood because of the splitting of experiences among supposed good and bad objects. Adult paranoiacs continue this tendency, perceiving attacks by bad objects rather than guilt about harm done to mixed objects. Lacan considers paranoia a type of psychosis in which the master-signifier

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is foreclosed. Deleuze and Guattari view paranoia as a reactive variety of otherwise schizoid desiring production.

**Parapraxes:** Accidents, mistakes, slips of the tongue and pen, forgettings, mispronunciations, and so on, that are not consciously intended, but involve unconscious motivation. Typically involve a breakthrough of repressed content or a compromise formation.

**Peak experience:** In Maslow's existential psychology (eg. 1964), a pleasurable experience of fulfillment and immersion with traits such as spontaneity, disinhibition, and holism of self.

**Perversion:** Originally used as a label for what are today called paraphilias, in which people act out desires or fantasies that are usually repressed in neurotic personalities (but which in most cases, are or were present in childhood development and the unconscious). In Lacanian theory, perverse personalities are a personality type in which the main mechanism of exclusion of personality components or psychological contents is disavowal (see above), rather than repression or foreclosure. Perverse personalities both maintain omnipotence fantasies and the use of wishful thinking

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to pursue gratifications in the outer world, and also submit to some variant of the big Other as the locus of meaning and morality. They perceive themselves as the object of the Other's desire or the object of drive, the means of the Other's enjoyment. The disavowal mechanism plays the function of reconciling the two, allowing the person to conform to the demands of the big Other without renouncing their desires (but at the expense of maintaining contradictory beliefs through wishful thinking, self suggestion, and willpower). This is accompanied by a lack of doubt, in contrast with neurosis. In English psychoanalytic theory, disavowal instead relates mainly to aggressive drives; a perverse personality is caught between strong hostile drives towards a parent perceived as all-powerful, and terror of being annihilated or abandoned by this same parent. Another variant suggests that perverse defence mechanisms disavow the clash between forbidden wishes and outer reality. Reichean theories of personality do not refer to perversion but use several categories for a similar range of personality types, for example phallic-narcissist, impulsive character, and passive-feminine character.

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ity type fixated at the phallic (Oedipal) stage, and which primarily cathects the phallus or symbolic substitutes, in the manner of the phallic stage and not that of "genitality." Phallic-narcissists are performance-oriented and often aggressive, with exaggerated self confidence and a determination to always be on top. Phallic-narcissists focus on power, not pleasure, cover up insecurity with arrogance, and have a lot of character armour.

**Pre-Oedipal:** A generic term for personality types with a structure unintegrated in the way associated with the Oedipus complex in classical psychoanalysis. (I think in terms of differences in psychological structure and experience, not disorders/diseases.) People passing through the Oedipus complex are taken to become neurotic personality types (see above). In people for whom this is not possible, earlier childhood dynamics remain active and the personality structure is formed in a more fragmented way through these dynamics. Theories differ on what these dynamics are; some analysts refer to the dominance of pre-genital drives (oral, anal, voice, gaze, skin, muscle, etc.) and others to splits between good and bad objects and related fears of persecution (by bad objects) and fragmentation, or issues

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around desires or fears of fusion with others (in a binary rather than three-way relation). Lacanians object to the term “pre-Oedipal,” but use similar concepts regarding the role of the phallus or master signifier in the psychological economy of different personality types. Pre-Oedipals often differ from Oedipal neurotics in having less-clear boundaries between inner and outer realities, tending to fragment under stress, not integrating love and hate, not forming Oedipal-type attachments, nonstandard modulation of impulses and reactions, etc. Most people classified by psychiatry as schizoid, schizophrenic, autistic, bipolar, or ADHD are probably in the pre-Oedipal range. The term pre-Oedipal can have pejorative connotations if it is associated with teleological theories of development or with goals of social integration; when a pre-Oedipal person is considered further back along some normal developmental trajectory. However, the term can also have positive connotations if the normal process of capture by dominant social systems is seen as a bad thing. This is true, for instance, of Deleuze and Guattari and of Laing. The present author is pre-Oedipal and suspects that most anarchists are pre-Oedipal; this may be why psychoanalytic theory has not taken off in anarchist circles, since it has al-

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ways been more focused on neurosis.

**Primary Process:** Freud maintains that, in addition to ordinary thought and reasoning which usually follow familiar logical and epistemological rules, there is a level of mental processing that bypasses this process and works at a more archaic level. He calls this level the primary process, since it arose first (with the id and Imaginary) and is arguably more basic, and he calls the more familiar kind of thought the secondary process. Phenomena that work on the level of the primary process include dreams, jokes, parapraxes (“Freudian slips”), free association, psychological symptoms (eg. phobias, obsessions, hallucinations, thinking in dissociated states), and much of art and culture (eg. the appeal of movies and literature and poetic writing). The primary process works with its own logic, which can be interpreted and decoded in psychoanalysis. Freud’s theory of its logic is laid down in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and includes a lot of different things. For example, the primary process treats similar things as identical, and freely leaps between them. It has no concept of negation and things can stand for their opposites. Ideas are represented by images, and there is a blurring of the boundary between inner and

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outer. Freudian interpretation is often misunderstood through an overemphasis on the interpretation of primary process phenomena in terms of supposedly universal symbols (anything tall or long is a phallus, anything containing something else is a womb, etc). Freud uses this type of interpretation as a fallback, but also thinks that everyone has their own matrix of associations related to their particular desires, life situation, childhood development, even the events of the day before. There is thus a big difference between psychoanalysis as a dialogical process of excavating idiosyncratic meanings and the way psychoanalysis is typically used in cultural studies and other academic areas, where axioms of whichever school are taken as given and used as a frame into which the scholar crams whatever material they are discussing. Primary process thinking might be considered freer and more authentic than secondary process thinking, or it might be seen as more prone to capture in certain kinds of ideological mechanisms (see: Imaginary). Psychoanalysis is arguably a systematic attempt to translate primary-process phenomena in secondary-process terms. When psychoanalytic theorists provide interpretations of texts and the like, they're generally saying what they think

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is happening in the text at a primary process level.

**Projection:** In psychoanalysis, a defence mechanism in which one's own feelings, thoughts, personality components, or internal images of others, are treated as attributes of someone or something else. For example, repressed aspects of oneself might be perceived as existing in social deviants, whether or not they are actually discernable. Initially referred to the misidentification of feelings or parts of the self as belonging to others (for example, denying one's hatred or anger and believing instead that someone else hates or is angry with oneself); I also use it in the sense of projections of internal elements in fantasy, so that real others are identified with introjects.

**Psychodynamics:** The relationship among different drives or personality components, and the impact of these elements on social relations. Refers to any psychological approach that uses concepts of forces and processes internal to the psyche. Similar to thermodynamics, the study of energy and its conversions and flows. Implies that psychological life is in a state of conflict or interaction, with relations among different components.

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one knows but nobody admits.

**Rationalisation:** In psychoanalysis, a defence mechanism in which people formulate apparently rational (or alternatively, moral) justifications for reactions, beliefs, symptoms, etc. which actually have an unconscious, irrational basis. The ego selects the most palatable explanation to believe and to present to others. This is not so much a lie as a partial truth; it might for instance be the main aspect of the ego's motivation for accepting something. It is used, like other defence mechanisms, to ward off awareness of unconscious mechanisms causing anxiety to the ego. It has the effect of screening symptoms, making it hard to detect their symptomatic character.

**Reactance:** In Anglo-American psychology, a proven tendency (conscious or unconscious) for prohibited actions to be experienced as more appealing, and engaged in, once situational controls such as surveillance are removed (Brehm and Brehm, 1981). Coerced compliance thus tends to turn into defiance when surveillance or control are removed, even if such defiance would not otherwise have happened. Reactance occurs when someone feels that others' demands or rules are restricting their freedom or opportunities, es-

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pecially if they feel others are trying to compel them to act a certain way. Reactance effects have been generally demonstrated, but reactance is also a trait that varies across individuals. Strident, aggressive, and authoritarian messages are especially likely to provoke reactance.

**Real, Lacanian:** A complex concept that is the other of the Symbolic and Imaginary in Lacanian theory. Encompasses both internal drives similar to the Freudian id, and aspects of the outer world that are not yet understood in the Imaginary or Symbolic register, and/or those that cannot be incorporated in these registers (often bodily or physical phenomena). Physical elements that disrupt an imaginary construction (such as the birth of a sibling disrupting a child's fantasy of relations with a parent) are deemed Real. Unprocessed traumas and uncanny phenomena belong to the Real. In hallucinations, something which cannot be handled in the Symbolic (because of the foreclosure of the master-signifier) returns in the Real. Authors like Žižek (2002) associate the Real mainly with traumatic events that rupture the Imaginary (his book on 9/11 is called *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*; monsters in horror films are also deemed as figures of the Real). Lacan also

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sometimes uses the term to distinguish physical objects and beings from their Imaginary and Symbolic variants (for example, the real penis from the phallic symbol, or the real father from the psychological function of paternal power: the Symbolic or Imaginary father). The Real is not the same as reality, which Lacan uses to refer to ordinary phenomenological experience and associates mainly with the Imaginary. The Real is arguably what is left over in reality/experience when the Imaginary and Symbolic are subtracted, and thus, is not usually subjectively experienced or spoken about. The Real has both positive and negative connotations: as source of trauma, but also of revolutionary possibilities. Some things might temporarily belong to the Real because they have not yet been conceptualised in the Symbolic or the Imaginary (cf. Thomas Kuhn's theory of anomalies and scientific revolutions [Kuhn, 1962]). Lacanians also seem to believe in certain aspects of experience that necessarily belong to the Real.

**Reality check, reality testing:** In Freudian theory, the practice of seeking to sort experiences in outer reality from those arising in the inner life: dreams, hallucinations, fantasies, etc. Generally this is done through experience or experiment,

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direct or vicarious. This is harder than it sounds, since inner material can manifest on a sensory level and can become mixed with outer contents. Kleinian analysts believe that infants literally hallucinate, and this may be the source of the experience of “bad” external objects (the infant remains hungry even while feeding from the hallucinated breast, attacks the breast in fantasy, imagines the breast retaliating, etc.). Material from the inner life usually operates in primary process terms (see page 258), and therefore, will often be true in a metaphorical or existential sense, but inaccurate in more nuanced terms; particular elements may be transferred among imaginatively related entities. According to classical psychoanalysis, psychotics do not reality check, and take phenomena which are true in the inner life or in primary process terms as if they were also outer realities. Perverse personalities disavow (both accept and deny) outer realities. Node theorists tend not to reality check the core axioms of node theory, and to check claims against realities that are in fact bundles of appearances (for example, to take national economic success resulting from transnational capital’s approval, or the achievement of personal economic wealth or status, as if it were proof of an objectively successful performance or

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even of virtue). They create systems of knowledge that are actually predominantly bundles of mutually-affirming imaginary constructs. Identitarians are particularly prone to treat subjective, inner-life reactions as if they were factually true (“you just committed a racist microaggression against me!”), without making any attempt to sort their subjective reactions into perceptions of reality and other constructs (such as projections, simplified interpretations, etc.).

Note that the concept of reality checking or reality testing comes up against all kinds of problems when it is cross-read with critiques of realist epistemologies. The concept does not necessarily entail any particular claims about the existence or nature of external reality, only that there is a significant difference between those experiences usually sorted as “real” and those belonging to spheres such as dreams and fantasies. Psychoanalysts are often too hasty to accept social constructs, and even social demands and norms, as aspects of reality when they are actually produced by others’ subjective actions or beliefs. In my view, it is not possible to reality check anything belonging to the domains of the id or the superego/spirit, only those claims made in an ego register.

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beliefs as a reality check, but this carries strong risks of “herd psychosis,” of the entire group mutually reinforcing a series of non-reality-checked beliefs. There are many circumstances where reality checking throws doubt on the common sense of the majority. Some groups, such as the People of Robert Wolff’s account, seem to reality test using both primary and secondary process means, or even to attach primacy to the former.

**Repression:** In psychoanalysis, repressed content has been pushed out of conscious thought and is consigned to the unconscious (or sometimes, never enters consciousness to begin with). Repressed material is present in memory, but unlike other memories (in the preconscious), cannot be brought to mind. It is usually surrounded by defence mechanisms and compromise formations. It generally contains material that is anxiety-inducing to the ego. It may be a memory, a fantasy, a drive, etc. The material is available indirectly, as it appears in primary process material such as dreams and free associations, but there are systematic blocks on its passing into the secondary process. In Lacan, repression is specific to neurotics (not psychotics or perverse personalities). Repressed material exerts constant pressure and

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considerable psychodynamic energy may be used unconsciously to keep it repressed. Repression does not eliminate a repressed drive or memory and does not necessarily prevent a drive from being acted upon, if a suitable compromise formation is found. Recovering repressed material is an important goal of classical psychoanalysis.

**Rhizomes:** In Deleuzian theory, non-hierarchical, dispersed, underground networks that function through connection, without a central “trunk”. Contrasted with arborescent (tree-like) structures. A rhizome connects heterogeneous elements without relying on a central integrating structure.

**Sacred Science:** In Lifton’s brainwashing theory, a set of doctrines meant to be accepted without question or doubt, which express the primacy of the environment over the individual’s judgement and are defended by thought-terminating cliches. Distinct from scientific claims that can in principle be falsified.

**Sadism:** a personality component or drive involving a desire to harm, dominate, or humiliate as a source of pleasure; seems to involve a fusion of ego-drives for success, prestige, and power with

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**Sadism:** a personality component or drive involving a desire to harm, dominate, or humiliate as a source of pleasure; seems to involve a fusion of ego-drives for success, prestige, and power with

aspects of the id and superego. In psychoanalysis, sadism refers not only to consensual sexual sadism and non-consensual sexual aggression, but also to apparently non-sexual enjoyment of cruelty and domination, and to sublimated mechanisms in which sadistic satisfaction is taken from various forms of aggressive, assertive, and competitive activity. Authoritarian social systems often channel sadism by offering permitted outlets for desires to (directly or vicariously) dominate, violate, degrade, etc. For example, punitive ideologies involve a barely-concealed pleasure in degrading, brutalising, and otherwise harshly treating people labelled as socially deviant, which is often visible beneath rationalisations such as deterrence, risk management, and retributive justice. May have roots in infantile theories of coitus, which interpret it as an aggressive act, in displaced masochism, an extension of the desire to exercise power in one's immediate environment, or a fusion of aggressive and sexual drives. In Klein, sadism is related to the desire to destroy bad objects perceived as persecuting the infant. Lacan considers sadism to be disavowed masochism. Sadism can also occur in the inner life, particularly in terms of a superego cruelly treating other personality components.

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**Simulation:** In Baudrillard, the derivation of serial objects from models initially existing immaterially. The latest stage of alienation, in which there is no original object that is copied or imitated.

**Sinthome:** In the Lacanian theory of psychosis, an ad hoc formation binding together the registers of Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real without the use of a master signifier. Similar to the concept of *nima* in *bolo'bolo*. A sinthome “allows one to live” by providing a way of organising jouissance (roughly speaking, libido). May entail an “invasion” of language or reality by one’s “private” jouissance or desire, a kind of artificial self creation.

**Social Death:** In Lacanian theory, a type of death in the Symbolic or Imaginary order, as opposed to a literal death; the social erasure of one’s existence, social treatment as dead or nonexistent.

**Social Symptom:** In Lacanian theory, a social problem that has a similar significance to a clinical symptom, appearing to be extraneous but in fact expressing a deep-rooted problem with the social system itself.

**Spirit:** I’m using this term to refer to a drive or personality component posited by older theorists like

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Plato and Avicenna, and discussed in psychoanalysis under the rather confusing name “maternal superego.” This part is loosely speaking the negative component of the id, seeking to avoid harm, pain, and fear by fighting or avoiding people and things perceived as persecutory, polluting, etc. Spirit is arguably the source of the type of ethos theorised by Nietzsche, and generates affects such as pride, shame, and outrage, and reacts aggressively to humiliation. I generally think of ethos as an attribute of spirit, and morality as an attribute of superego. Spirit can be described as “moral” or “ethical” in the sense of gut aversive reactions to zones of the field of becoming that threaten or are incompatible or strongly non-resonant with one’s own. The Kleinian “good” and “bad” objects are not morally judged in an analytical or separative sense, but rather, experienced as pleasure-bringing and beneficial, or as persecutory and painful, from the infant’s own point of view. Nietzschean noble morality works in the same manner; for each noble, what is valued or desired by the noble is good, what is not is bad (as opposed to slave morality in which the evil precedes the good). In the same way, for Nietzsche, a wolf is evil from the viewpoint of a sheep.

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pre-Oedipals, and large swathes of the global precariat operate morally on a level involving primarily spirit, rather than the Freudian superego found in neurotics. Ethos is likely to persist in liberated contexts, whereas superego in the narrower sense can be overcome.

**Subjective Destitution:** In Lacanian theory, the loss of the sense of being a subject or self through the removal of whatever fantasies or props are necessary to sustain this sense; in clinical analysis, an acceptance of traumas as meaningless, contingent, and indifferent.

**Sublimation:** A process whereby originally id-based (eg. sexual or violent) drives or complexes are attached to socially-valued or ego-endorsed activities, to which they are related by metaphor and other primary process mechanisms. Sublimations replace the original aim of an instinctual drive with a substitute aim (for example, shit smearing becomes action painting; infantile sexual curiosity becomes a later love of knowledge). Conceived as a redirection of libido from sexual aims, with the ego as a mediator and often with narcissistic cathexis of the ego and its achievements. For Freud, all social achievements such as those of art and science result from sublimation.

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**Suggestion:** Any of a range of techniques that manipulate others' beliefs, perceptions, or actions by means of the manipulator occupying a relational position similar to that of a parent in early childhood or the patient/victim's ego-ideal. Freud considered suggestion to operate based on an erotic (or relational) connection, rather than perception or reasoning, generating a kind of ungrounded belief. Suggestion may be the basis for successful instances of stage hypnosis, faith-healing, advertising, populism, and the like. Contrasted with psychoanalysis that aims for a different kind of relation, although analysts using active interpretations are also sometimes accused of using suggestion. Some analysts maintain that all non-psychoanalytic therapies work mainly by suggestion. Relations similar to suggestion within psychoanalysis are termed transference, and are worked through or used as analytical tools, rather than exploited as a means to influence others.

**Superego:** In Freudian theory, the drive or personality component concerned with right and wrong, morality, principles, and the like. Can be conscious or unconscious. Can manifest as conscience but also as moralised emotions such as guilt, shame, and resentment, which may arise

272

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272

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Later analysts such as Klein suggest the superego arises earlier and has its roots in a splitting of experienced objects into good and bad components. In its initial form, it is a persecutory force of the kind found in paranoia, which can be experienced as outside or as an alien object that has invaded the body. It is associated with the bad objects (eg. bad breast, penis, or excrement) themselves, but also with fears of retaliation from objects the child has imagined or desired destroying or harming. The later superego incorporates elements of guilt that arise when the growing child realises that the good and bad objects are actually a single person or thing, and worry about having damaged the good object in attacks on the bad. This later superego is less harsh and persecutory,

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and leads to attempts to make amends and repair damaged objects. In this light, Money-Kyrle distinguishes between humane and authoritarian types of superego. Fascists and suchlike have authoritarian superegos that are extremely demanding and exclusively oriented to outward conformity based on fear of authority and of whatever reparative elements and sometimes defy authority. Harsh self judgements by one's superego play an important role in depression.

**Symbolic:** In Lacan, Symbolic is distinguished from Imaginary and Real. The Symbolic is the process dealing with signs and signifiers, particularly when these have no Imaginary significance. Lacan considers the Symbolic to be mainly unconscious, and the site of the relationship to the big Other. Lacanian psychoanalysis works mainly via the Symbolic order.

**Symptom:** In psychoanalysis, a symptom is usually a visible problem recognised as such by a neurotic patient, which is actually the tip of the iceberg of difficulties in the unconscious. Symptoms perform important psychodynamic functions in maintaining a person's equilibrium, even when they are personally distressing and/or socially de-

274

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bilitating. They stem from whatever material has been repressed, foreclosed, or disavowed. Most psychoanalysts seek to remove symptoms by working with the repressed material. Rather than seeking to remove symptoms, Lacan considers symptoms to be signifiers produced by the subject (i.e. the id), a kind of subjective truth with which an analyst should identify.

**Test of History:** In Hegelian, Marxist, and similar theories, the idea that the success or failure of an idea or practice proves whether it is progressive, right, rational, etc. The moral assessment of ideas and practices is thus outsourced to History, considered as a teleological process of progression towards an ideal endpoint.

**Thought Reform, Thought Control:** I have used these terms interchangeably to refer primarily to Lifton's model, which describes methods of brainwashing used in Chinese re-education camps, cults, and similar settings. Lifton lists eight elements of thought reform and ten brainwashing processes. Central to these is the insistence of the primacy of group belief over individual belief ("doctrine over person"), both factual and moral. Individual egos, desires, and consciences are to be broken down so as to remould the per-

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son as desired by the group. Beliefs of the group are afforded the status of unchallengeable sacred science, absolute and non-negotiable. Individuals are encouraged/coerced to purify themselves and seek unattainable perfection in relation to group norms, and the group is taken to dispense existence and/or value (those who oppose it are scum). Resistances from the ego and spirit to such abjection before the group are broken down using assaults on elements of self identity, guilt tripping, and shaming (culminating in generalised shame and masochism), and practices of self betrayal, including betrayal of former beliefs, associates, and commitments. Information is controlled; people are encouraged to police any thoughts against the dominant ideology, to think in loaded and often group-specific language, and to use thought-terminating cliches to quickly silence dissident thoughts both internally and externally. "Counter-extremism" programmes, currently prevalent therapies, social media groupthink, identitarian and alt-right group construction, and various training programmes incorporate elements of Lifton's model; the families described by Laing likely also use most of these techniques.

276

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**Totality-machine:** In Theweleit, a social assemblage into which soldier males immerse themselves, that serves as their big Other and provides props for their egos.

**Unconscious:** Parts of the personality or complexes operating in the background but not accessible to the conscious mind or reflective self awareness. Distinct from the conscious and also from the pre-conscious, which refers to material accessible to consciousness but not presently conscious. There are usually systematic mechanisms preventing the conscious mind from accessing unconscious material and keeping the different personality components separate. Can be used to describe the fact of certain material being unavailable to consciousness, or as a noun to describe a particular area of the psyche in which these contents are taken to be contained. The unconscious is an important intermediate link between the body and the conscious mind. Repressed material persists

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in the unconscious. While aspects of the id are the most frequently repressed, aspects of the ego and superego are also unconscious.

**Virtual/Actual:** From Deleuze. The virtual refers to a sphere of images, models, or other formations available to desire through thought and imagination. The actual refers to the physical, embodied, or material world. Humans exist at the intersection of virtual and actual.

**Vicarious:** In psychology, something achieved or experienced through the agency of someone else, usually by identifying with the person who acts and imaginatively participating in their actions or experiences.

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