On March 30, 2020, as the global pandemic shuttered all but those workplaces deemed “essential,” workers in the Amazon warehouse known as JFK8 on Staten Island collectively walked out to protest being exposed to COVID-19 on the job. Later that day, Amazon fired Chris Smalls, one of the leaders of the walkout. Amazon senior vice president Jay Carney, a former press secretary for President Barack Obama, claimed the firing was not in retaliation for the protest but because Smalls himself had violated Amazon’s social distancing policy. Meanwhile,
Amazon’s top executives, including then-CEO Jeff Bezos, planned to vilify Smalls in order to smash this nascent worker-organizing, circulating a memo which described Smalls as “not smart or articulate” (Blest, 2020). The chances of prevailing against a company which would go on to record $386 billion in revenue that year seemed slim. Yet, almost exactly two years later, on April 1, 2022, workers at JFK8 voted to form an independent union with Smalls as its president—the first Amazon warehouse in the United States to unionize (Feliz Leon, 2022).

The story of the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) gives us an important window into the prospects for freedom today. The global economy significantly shapes people’s lives, and, as a centrally located distribution center, JFK8 is a key site in the logistics of global supply chains, the predominant form of contemporary international trade. The importance of places like JFK8 for the current structure of the global economy was attested by both the intensity of the opposition to unionizing by Amazon’s leadership and by the excitement the union’s victory generated; within weeks of the election, Smalls was being feted at the White House.

These global supply chains are inextricable from our daily lives, whether we are directly employed by them or not, even as so much of their operation is obscure to us. But thanks to the pandemic, global supply chains are having a moment in the spotlight. This rolling crisis turned into a matter of public conversation something that people, at least implicitly, already knew: we rely on distant others all over the globe for the production and distribution of many of life’s essentials, from toilet paper to the clothes on our backs to the phones we use to keep in touch with friends and family. That this knowledge remains inchoate, and retains the power to surprise when made explicit, is significant, because it suggests a mismatch between our practical experience of the world and our conceptual understanding of it.

If those of us who aren’t directly employed in supply chains don’t think about these issues more often, it’s at least in part because we have a perhaps equally inchoate sense that we wouldn’t like what we would see if we focused our attention on them. Global supply chains promise a convenient and limitless abundance of goods for consumers—exemplified by Amazon’s one-click ordering—but this fantasy is sustained by the relentless exploitation of people and natural resources. This is true of both the production and the distribution of goods. Even before the pandemic, working conditions in Amazon warehouses were notoriously oppressive, as managers ceaselessly surveilled employees, measured their movements down to fractions of a second, and set efficiency goals that were all but impossible to meet. Workers quit so frequently that Amazon’s own internal research anticipates that the company could run out of people willing to work in its warehouses by the end of 2024 (Del Rey, 2022). The environmental impact of its operations is also significant as, for example, the neighborhoods surrounding warehouses struggle against pollution from constant trucking traffic (Vgontzas, 2022).

Injustices are likewise routine in the production of goods in global supply chains. Foxconn Technology Group assembles consumer electronics like iPhones;
it employs nearly a million workers in China, making it the country’s largest private employer (Chan et al., 2020, pp. xi, 22). Working for Foxconn is so oppressive that in 2010 at least 18 workers died by jumping off the factory building. Rather than raise wages or slow down production as workers demanded, Foxconn responded by installing nets on the side of the building to catch workers who jumped—nets that remain there today (Chan et al., 2020, pp. x, xiii). Meanwhile, iPhones have made Apple the most profitable company in the United States and the second most valuable company in the world, just behind Aramco, Saudi Arabia’s national oil company.

We’re exposed to information like this all the time but often don’t retain it—largely because it’s not clear what to do with it; we can’t opt out of global supply chains and so are forced to rely on an unjust system. As the pandemic demonstrates, these supply chains are fragile. Yet rather than take the opportunity to rethink and restructure them, political and economic actors have instead largely tried to shore them up, even though their human and environmental costs are immense. At a time when carbon emissions desperately need to be zeroed out, why are people being paid pennies an hour to make a cheap t-shirt that needs to be shipped halfway around the world before it will be worn a few times and then thrown away?

One of the reasons for writing *Disorienting Neoliberalism: Global Justice and the Outer Limit of Freedom* was the desire to express a “visceral discomfort at the way we literally wear violations of our principles against our skin” (p. 107), to think about what that feeling means, and what can be done with it—in particular, how it can be used as a spur to resist and transform the global economy in solidarity with others who are also subjected to it. The existing literature on global justice offered few resources for this, rooted as it is in egalitarian liberalism and the work of John Rawls. In theory, by making inequality the keystone of injustice, few traditions are better suited to critique the hierarchies of the global economy. Yet, in practice, as many critics have noted, this global justice literature does little to orient its readers to the actual global economy or to effective political action. As I argue in *Disorienting Neoliberalism*, political theory can take our affective discomfort and orient us to effective political action when it provides an account of three things: (1) how major social and political arrangements are legitimated; (2) how they actually operate, which often diverges from the legitimation story told about their operations; and (3) the values one’s actions should promote in such a context.

The existing global justice literature has largely debated questions of values to the exclusion of questions about the operations and legitimation of the global economy. As a result, though both neoliberalism and the global justice literature began their ascendance in the mid-1970s, the latter has largely avoided engaging with the former. Yet providing an account of neoliberalism is crucial to any effort to achieve global justice today. It is essential to both recognize how the practices of the neoliberal global economy are historically continuous with settler colonialism and racial capitalism—e.g., by extracting value from peripheries and naturalizing...
the exploitation of some groups and rule by others—and to reckon with how the discourse legitimating these practices has shifted, with important consequences for organizing resistance. One cannot provide an account of how the operations of supply chains violate our values without accounting for how those operations are legitimated. Otherwise, one risks articulating the problem in a way that reinforces the legitimacy of the status quo.

Facts do not speak for themselves. Neoliberalism provides ordinary people with a comprehensible and often attractive way of looking at the world; when our power as workers is weak and the wealthy dominate political institutions, it can be more pleasurable to find freedom as a consumer and to identify as an entrepreneur than to reckon with the structures that confine and disempower us. Without an account of how the status quo is naturalized, even very grave supply chain injustices—like the collapse of the Rana Plaza factories in Bangladesh, which killed at least 1,132 garment workers—can be recuperated, for example, as a tolerable cost of a neoliberal global economy that benefits everyone in the long run. Similarly, without an account of the actual operations of the global economy, one risks accepting its legitimating story as an accurate account and acting to promote justice in a way that fails to challenge the status quo. Because neoliberalism frames itself as an emancipatory doctrine that facilitates freedom, understood as choice in the market, anyone who wants to resist injustice in the name of freedom must clearly articulate an alternative conception of freedom or risk reinforcing the prevailing legitimating story.

A political theory of global justice today thus needs to (1) explain how neoliberalism has shaped and legitimated the structure of the global economy; (2) undermine that legitimization by providing its own account of those operations; and (3) offer an account of freedom that can guide action in those circumstances. That’s what I set out to do in Disorienting Neoliberalism, using global supply chains as the key operation that can illuminate the hegemony of neoliberalism more generally and thereby facilitate resistance to it. Analyzing the function of global supply chains is an exemplary way of understanding the global economy’s actual operation and undermining its neoliberal legitimization. Neoliberalism offers a worldview in which freedom is found in the market and the state’s only legitimate function is coercion in the service of creating efficient markets. Consequently, I describe neoliberalism as “a self-consciously political project with the aim of putting politics in its place; because it rests on a theory of political legitimacy grounded on factors it deems nonpolitical, it offers the perplexing spectacle of a global political transformation enacted through decisions that are often understood to be technocratic and apolitical” (p. 23).

Many have responded to neoliberalism by trying to re-politicize politics—for example, by glorifying state sovereignty. But resisting neoliberalism effectively requires repoliticizing the economic realm itself—a project to which I contribute by tracing authority, power, and governmentality within supply chains.
Crucially, supply chains operate in a way that both links people around the world and effaces that linkage from their experience, making understanding of them a kind of expert knowledge exclusive to supply chain managers. This makes it hard for those of us subjected to supply chains as workers and consumers to organize together. As I put it in the book, “What makes the supply chain form so politically potent is the way that the rationality of the chain itself effectively conceives of workers and consumers as linked cooperating enterprises while the governing practices of the chain train workers and consumers in understandings of their role that obscure their links to each other” (p. 49). But those links are real and create shared interests. The just-in-time manufacturing characteristic of supply chains today create devastating precarity for workers, since minimizing inventory depends on them working highly variable hours as consumer demand fluctuates. But the system likewise requires massive surveillance of consumers in order to function efficiently, since it depends on anticipating demand.

I argue that we should reorient ourselves to supply chains as political entities that seek to govern us and create a shared understanding of ourselves as supply chain subjects, changing the nature of our links to each other. This opens the way toward a broader repoliticization of the economy and a more general resistance to neoliberalism, which has greatly increased inequality and hurt working people around the world.

Achieving justice requires collective action and coalition-building, including connecting working people across borders. Neoliberalism individualizes us and seeks to make us see freedom in our constrained choices. Those in the “developing world” are told they can choose a sweatshop job instead of no job; those in the “developed world” can choose among cheap supply chain goods as compensation for decades of flat wages and declining worker power. The 2008 financial crisis, and then the global pandemic, denaturalized these bargains and opened space to see things otherwise. Closed factories, bare shelves, and rising inflation cast particular doubt on the purported benefits of the supply chain status quo, but they don’t themselves give us another way to see. Changing these circumstances will require cooperating across these divisions, bringing together workers in Shenzen who assemble iPhones with workers in Ohio using them, the Amazon driver who delivers supply chain goods with the working-from-home parent who ordered them because they don’t have time to do anything else. This requires both acknowledging the different structural positions these people occupy as a result of unjust inequality and articulating interests that they nevertheless share that can move them to act.

An alternative account of freedom can reorient us to our shared interests in resisting injustice. In the book, I develop this account in a way that also models coalition-building by drawing from multiple theoretical traditions, including a transformed egalitarian liberalism. Ironically, neoliberalism facilitates these new connections between left and liberal traditions by proclaiming the supremacy of the
economic over the political, making explicit the subordination of liberal rights to markets that Marx saw as something to be unmasked. The growing power of an openly authoritarian and fascist global right today underlines the importance of coalition-building between egalitarian liberals and the left.

Accordingly, the book reinterprets Rawls and Hegel to offer an account of social freedom that can orient people from many perspectives. Rather than centering choice in the market, the book draws out a view in which freedom is expressed in those actions that come naturally to us as a product of our habits and dispositions; recognizing how institutions shape us before we could ever consciously choose them entails an ideal that Rawls calls “the outer limit of freedom,” the ability to retrospectively affirm the unchosen forces that have shaped our lives because they are in accord with justice and affirm our agency. This social freedom, which makes equality a condition of freedom, is one prized by a wide range of egalitarian traditions and offers a real alternative to neoliberal choosing. But for this ideal to guide us in a world of institutions that habituate us to injustice, it must be transformed. Hegel and Rawls assumed the world was sufficiently rational and just that the outer limit of freedom could guide us directly. But as the injustices characteristic of neoliberal capitalism illustrate, we do not live in a world where we can affirm the forces that have shaped us. Consequently, I argue, “a theory that makes inequality presumptively illegitimate still has critical uses today, but realizing the values of egalitarian liberalism should move its adherents toward a theoretical practice more aligned with critical theory” (p. 144).

I turn to W. E. B. Du Bois, Theodor Adorno, and Gloria Anzaldúa to explain how the outer limit of freedom can guide action in a world of pain and injustice. These thinkers participate in the same tradition of theorizing social freedom as Rawls and Hegel but transform it so that freedom is expressed, not by affirming the justice implicit in what already is, but by negating and resisting existing injustice. This generates a negative dialectic in which the ideal of the outer limit of freedom can guide action, impelled in part by the pain of injustice. I argue, “Such pain punctures the legitimations of our world and impels us to conceive ways of experiencing freedom; the experience of freedom in turn both heightens the pain of injustice by revealing its contingent character and offers hope that can sustain resistance to injustice” (p. 128).

This conception of freedom can form the basis for solidarity across some of the divisions that structure the global economy. I take Du Bois’s analysis of how the color line differentially harms Black and white people as a model. Du Bois’s account of double consciousness and the veil in *The Souls of Black Folk* demonstrates how the tradition of social freedom can offer an illuminating phenomenology of oppression that reveals how the oppressed can nevertheless express their freedom. Meanwhile, his analysis of whiteness as an imprisoning fantasy in “The Souls of White Folk” and as a “psychological wage” in *Black Reconstruction in America* helps explain how unjustified privilege can habituate its
recipients in damaged and confining ways, illuminating both the appeal of viciously embracing domination and the interest in rejecting it.

A coalition for resisting neoliberalism is not easily marshaled; it will require the difficult work of intersectional coalition politics. Powerful elites have a clear interest in defending the status quo, and expecting them to join in solidarity would be foolish; supply chain managers can no more be expected to end neoliberal injustice than oil company executives can be expected to end climate change. But for the rest of us, collective action to achieve justice is the best chance we have to express our freedom today. Against the governmentality of supply chains, which separate and sustain hierarchy, I emphasize social movement organizing as a form of grassroots governmentality that lets us freely connect with others. Chris Smalls, the Amazon Labor Union, and all those who act in solidarity with their struggle for justice (and a first contract) represent an outstanding example of the possibilities for and obstacles to freedom today.

Because injustice habituates us and forces us to reckon with tragic circumstances, our struggles for justice and freedom are themselves imperfect and reproduce injustice. The contributors to this Critical Exchange respond to my hope, expressed in the book, “that others take up these arguments and negate them in turn in a spirit of solidarity so that we can better understand what justice requires of us today” (p. 211). Emma Mackinnon highlights the political ambiguity of visibility, linking together Rawls’s veil of ignorance, Foucault’s accounts of surveillance, Du Bois’s conception of second sight, and Anzaldúa’s notion of *la facultad*, and questions the viability of my conception of freedom as a popular way of seeing the world. Joseph Winters develops the connection between neoliberal sociodicy and religious theodicy suggested by the book to show how orientation should be understood more as an on-going process than a settled disposition. Winters also questions whether I tarry with the negative long enough in my transformation of egalitarian liberalism and asks whether my account reckons sufficiently with the long history of coloniality or if it instead it attributes too much novelty to neoliberalism, attending to structural violence only when it “boomerangs across the color line.” Erin Pineda identifies two competing strands in the book, one orienting us to reflection and the other to action. Pineda traces the role of contemplation and imagination in my readings of Du Bois, Adorno, and Anzaldúa, showing how this strand of the book sees theory as spurring a new way of seeing, which in turn spurs new actions. She also identifies a “less straightforward” strand of the book’s narrative—one that fits with the personal experience of activism detailed in the book’s conclusion—in which action precedes reflection, a different route to the outer limit of freedom. Paul Apostolidis argues that my view “bestows a primacy” on “an impasse in moral reflection” as a motive to action when we would do better to center “bodily-affective experiences.” In support of this, he critiques my interpretations of Adorno and Du Bois.
These contributors raise important points that have pressed me to rethink how I will engage with these themes going forward. I’m extremely grateful to them for their participation in this critical exchange and for their solidarity in the struggle for freedom and global justice.

Benjamin L. McKeen

Difficult freedom

Benjamin L. McKeen’s Disorienting Neoliberalism offers a powerful account of how emancipatory politics might be possible in the context of a global economy premised on massive injustice. Centrally, it proposes a political theory of the supply chain, as both hallmark of our current economic relationships and a source of orientation that might, counterintuitively, allow us to work for greater freedom. This is no abstract account, and far from naïve: the book opens by recounting a pair of disasters at factories in Bangladesh which had been producing clothing sold by U.S. companies—first a fire at Tazreen Fashions in December 2012 and, a few months later, the collapse of Rana Plaza. The events were deadly and destructive, the latter the deadliest in the history of the global garment industry. They were followed by campaigns for compensation for the workers killed or injured and demands for greater workplace safety (p. 2). McKeen argues for understanding such events not as tragedies, and certainly not as exceptional. Instead, he describes them as political and unjust, even if this sort of injustice is “a normal part of the global economy as it is currently structured” (p. 1). And yet, he argues, they are also a starting point to think about what a more just order could look like. McKeen proposes a model for how those of us who find ourselves at the other end of the global supply chain might relate to such stories, and to the people producing the clothing we buy.

McKeen’s theory of freedom within the supply chain builds on an admirably diverse set of authors. He reads generously and synthetically across traditions to propose a comprehensive vision of how we might understand and work for genuine freedom within a global economy. Central to this is a theory of the supply chain understood as a political institution: supply chains, he argues, structure not only the exchange of goods but relationships among people, often distant strangers. McKeen offers an account of what it would take to establish relationships of political solidarity in the context of such a system. The book offers deft interventions into an array of current academic literatures, drawing from and commenting on a range of thinkers not often brought together. His view, he argues persuasively, is more responsive than the current global justice literature to the conditions of neoliberalism as both economic structure and political ideology; it is also, I take it, more responsive than much of the existing critical literature on neoliberalism within political theory. At the same time, McKeen’s proposal is constructive and
not just critical. It is also ecumenical: a theory of freedom “that can be endorsed by multiple egalitarian traditions in political theory” (p. 11). McKean offers an ambitious and compelling account of how people within an unjust society, including those occupying positions of relative privilege, might learn to see that society as unjust, and so work to change it. In this way, while the book provides both an alternative conception of global justice and an alternative critique of neoliberalism, it offers something far more ambitious as well: an alternative to a neoliberal worldview and an argument for why such an alternative might be not only necessary but also plausible.

Across its six chapters, *Disorienting Neoliberalism* offers a comprehensive theory of what it would mean to be free within a society characterized by institutions we never actually accepted, but which have shaped and conditioned us to relationships of injustice. The focus on the relationship between individuals and institutions allows McKean to offer an account that moves fluidly between questions of economics, politics, and social difference. The literatures on global justice and neoliberalism, McKean argues, misunderstand their own context; this is related to a larger failure to understand power and, relatedly, the relationship between politics and the economy. McKean proposes a view of power, and of freedom, that can better describe that context, and so orient us—as people, not just academics—within it. Implicit here, I’d suggest, is a theory of ideology (though McKean avoids the term) which combines aesthetic, material, and social dimensions.

McKean’s notion of freedom both arises out of our existing institutions and is meant to compete with a neoliberal conception. McKean identifies three distinct “neoliberal transformations” that have taken place over the last fifty-plus years: “increased domestic austerity, greater capital mobility, and the prevalence of supply chains” (p. 24). He uses the term “neoliberalism” to refer both to these three transformations and to a theoretical literature that provided legitimation for them but ultimately failed to describe them. The first chapter focuses on that neoliberal legitimation story, turning to the thought of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman to track the appeal of neoliberalism as an account of individual freedom—an account that appears empowering, as it permits us “to renarrate our lives to make ourselves the protagonist no matter what happens” (p. 42), yet ultimately enables forms of coercion. Drawing on Ronald Coase’s theory of the corporation, as well as Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality, the second chapter explains supply chains themselves as political institutions, governed by a particular “political rationality” visible to the supply chain manager (p. 50). McKean argues not for simply unmasking them as such—exposing their worst abuses so as to denounce them—but instead for “reorienting” ourselves toward them, and so toward each other (p. 70). The third chapter elaborates an account of freedom by drawing from G.W.F. Hegel an understanding of freedom as not only intersubjective but conditioned by, and expressed in, the relationships between
individuals and institutions (p. 85). McKean reads this together with John Rawls’s conception of freedom’s “outer limit” (p. 88) to argue that “a key experience of freedom is the recognition that the institutions which have shaped us are ones we could have freely chosen” (p. 16). This dispositional account draws from Hegel an understanding of freedom as intersubjective and of our choices as habituated; it is also loyal to Hegel, as I understand it, in regarding duty and freedom as not only compatible but coextensive. Within McKean’s argument, this works to explain why even those of us who might appear to enjoy some measure of freedom in the market in fact have a personal interest in global economic justice, not only out of concern for others but because it matters for our own freedom as well.

McKean turns to Rawls here to develop an account of the impediments to freedom, as well as a positive account of what freedom in an unjust society might require. He notes that, for Rawls, the fact that we are habituated to our world as it exists means that we are already habituated to injustice. In this sense, Rawls’s notion of justice is not merely a utopian one, nor does it rest on an abstract notion of self-determination. Instead, McKean writes, by focusing on the idea of freedom’s outer limit we can see that, for Rawls, “freedom is retrospective and reflective,” a view we take from a position of already being located within a particular set of institutions; in this way, it is “situated and social” (p. 85). This means it avoids the pitfalls of other, forward-looking notions of justice, which can be used to justify injustice as necessary to some future ideal (p. 107). And yet, McKean claims, Rawls himself does not provide a full account of how we might achieve freedom in the context of our habituations to, and situation within, unjust institutions (p. 114). To carry the project forward, then, the fourth chapter turns to theorists who take the fact of injustice as a starting point. McKean draws together W.E.B. DuBois’s notion of double consciousness, and what it means to be born within the veil (p. 116), with Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of la facultad (p. 121), in order to think about how people become habituated to unjust institutions, to gain perspective based on where and how they are situated within them, and to adopt strategies to navigate them. As McKean argues, the veil presents a “shared obstacle to freedom” for DuBois’s Black and white readers, “one that they should address as partners in resistance” (p. 137), precisely because it articulates different forms of sight to which those readers are habituated. In this way, the idea of the veil is at the heart of an argument, not for sympathy or shame, but for solidarity (pp. 135-138). Anzaldúa’s la facultad also describes knowledge that comes with being subject to forms of injustice; as McKean argues, it shows how a certain alienation from unjust institutions allows people to better navigate them (p. 121). For Anzaldúa, the experience of injustice, perceived as such, is painful; that pain shifts one’s field of perception, and opens one to a deeper critical awareness (p. 129). McKean argues the notion of a painful, situated vision can help describe the experience of those who are relatively privileged by institutions as well, and offer resources for what it would mean to orient oneself to justice within such conditions. He links this to
Theodor W. Adorno’s notion of negative dialectics (p. 129) in order to think about how the dispositional account of freedom developed through Rawls might operate in an unfree society, as a source of orientation rather than an achievable ideal.

The fifth chapter develops this as a theory of political solidarity specifically, and one with global applicability. In the final chapter, McKean looks to the contemporary global justice literature to show how it misapprehends power, and thus fails to respond to the demands of a global economy. The critique of the global justice literature here works as something of a bookend to the first two chapters on neoliberalism, not because they take up the same object but because they arise in the same context, and yet—though the theoretical tools were, he has shown, right there—the global justice literature largely failed to address it. Despite its debts to Rawls, and despite being written precisely in the decades following the end of the Bretton Woods system, and coinciding with the three transformations McKean tracks at the beginning, the philosophical literature on global justice, including on so-called effective altruism, addressed itself to an overly abstract and ahistorical understanding of global poverty and inequality.

The book does not directly address existing critiques of neoliberalism but rather seeks to supplant them. Here, I take it, the argument is twofold: that neoliberalism’s critics go too far in their assessment of its power, and yet not far enough in imagining alternatives. Indeed, the book’s argument for an expansive understanding of “the political” is more radical than standard arguments in many critiques of neoliberalism about the political nature of purportedly economic relationships. Rather than focus on neoliberalism as depoliticizing, or criticize it for disavowing its own politics in order to then affirm the primacy of the political, McKean focuses on the senses in which neoliberalism is already political—not because it relies on the state (though it does), but because it proposes a particular vision of how people relate to each other. Instead of just acknowledging the interrelationship of economics and politics, McKean argues that politics is a matter of how we see the world, and how that vision orients us toward other people in it. What he presents can be read, then, as a kind of counter-ideology to neoliberalism itself. The core claim that doing the work of solidarity might in fact be more freeing than going along with that neoliberal ethos—more freeing, that is, than understanding oneself as an entrepreneur, one’s own boss, and one’s own site of capital—both competes with, and is meant to be more plausible than, the account of freedom popularly proffered by neoliberalism.

In this way, McKean’s conception of freedom is not a rival concept so much as a rival orientation, a different way of understanding and relating to the world. The book is powerfully synthetic, drawing together multiple authors for whom metaphors about appearance and vision are central, and for whom such metaphors operate as more than mere analogy. The notion of vision, and metaphors of sight, help knit together a range of accounts about disposition, orientation, and situation that can otherwise risk feeling overly abstract. The focus throughout is on
articulating an alternative way of seeing and understanding one’s relationships with others. Rawls’s veil of ignorance, McKean suggests, is not merely an abstract thought experiment but a way of seeing, harnessing powers of imagination to ask how, from behind that veil, political relationships might appear just or unjust. Foucault’s notion of governmentality and surveillance is also, centrally, about how people and things are arranged in relationship to each other in ways that render them more or less visible; these arrangements and lines of sight are understood as both an operation of power and as constitutive of it. In DuBois’s notion of second sight, and of double consciousness, his use of the metaphor of veiling is not the same as Rawls’s, but their relevance for each other is clear. Anzaldúa’s notion of la facultad works alongside to bring forward the connection between position, sight, and solidarity. Reading DuBois and Anzaldúa together in this way, McKean argues, helps counter a “neoliberal sociodicy” that, in presenting market outcomes as both unpredictable and necessarily the best possible outcome, is compatible with a more general narrative of progress that can justify injustice based on the justice yet to come (pp. 132–133).

The book’s discussion about the inclination to “unmask,” and its relationship to unmasking or the “hidden abode” in Marx, is relevant as visual metaphor too, and also helps explain the nature of McKean’s intervention. As McKeans points out, there is a certain inclination to expose the horrors of the global sweatshop industry as a kind of political strategy, as though exposure in itself could provide a form of critique and overcoming. But unmasking, McKean insists, is not sufficient. After all, for Marx, commodity fetishism makes us see relationships among people as relationships among things; this itself is something to be understood and apprehended, so as to work toward transforming the system that gives commodities such power. Real transformation requires changing relationships of production themselves (p. 55). Similarly, for McKean, the task is not just to show that the global supply chain is in fact a set of relationships among people, but also to highlight the importance of how things appear, so as to understand why they appear one way, as well as how they might be viewed otherwise. This is, I think, where McKean most clearly both builds on and goes beyond the account of global justice offered by Iris Marion Young. What he proposes is more than a way of seeing: he demands that we actually work for justice. After all, as McKean reminds us, plenty of people already know their clothing was made under coercive and abusive conditions; the challenge is to do something about it. This is difficult in part because we conceive of our own agency and freedom in ways that, if not straightforwardly neoliberal, nonetheless focus on the redistributive power of the state or the charitable power of individuals.

McKean’s vision of freedom is a difficult and demanding one. Freedom, McKean argues, requires a certain disposition, which he understands as a way of seeing and orienting oneself in relationship to others. This vision itself is painful but also entails the work of solidarity. This raises immediate questions about its viability as

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a popular way of seeing the world: does anyone really want to accept that their freedom is dependent on confronting painful visions and committing to work for the freedom of others? Can that really compete with the appeal of understanding freedom as autonomy, and looking away from the fact of injustice?

McKean does not deny that his vision is a difficult one. But he claims it is a more meaningful form of freedom, perhaps precisely because of that difficulty. Of course, his approach does not have to be widely accepted in order to help inspire some people to organize and mobilize to work for justice. At the same time, McKean also suggests that the alternatives—looking away from the fact of injustice—are not as viable as we might assume. Indeed, the book suggests that neoliberalism is facing a legitimation crisis. As McKean states early on, its influence comes in part from its ability to offer a “complete orientation,” one that has been widely accepted as “common sense” (p. 21). And yet, McKean tells us, contra a literature on neoliberalism that has often emphasized its intractability, “the neoliberal legitimation story is itself showing signs of wear and tear, which presents new political opportunities” (p. 30). In the last few years, prominent disruptions to global supply chains would only seem to have intensified this dynamic: we might think of the Ever Given containership stuck in the Suez Canal in 2021, the implementation of the UK’s exit from the EU and the end of the transition agreements in 2021, and of course the effects of the pandemic itself. Without wading into the debates among historians of neoliberalism about its supposed crises and would-be endings, McKean suggests that neoliberalism may be losing its grasp. This is not an entirely new phenomenon: at least to some people, neoliberalism’s rival account has never been fully persuasive. In this sense, the imperative of organizing to transform both our institutions and ourselves is both urgent and longstanding. It is not just that an alternative view may be more plausible in our present, but that it has long been plausible, if only we could learn to see it.

The problem McKean describes is a classic one: we are caught in political institutions that have shaped our experiences and views but which we have never actually consciously affirmed. What would it mean to take political responsibility for those institutions, to affirm them? As McKean shows, the supply chain, an institution that is central to contemporary economic relationships, offers a key site for theorizing a new form of politics, and the possibility of a more meaningful kind of freedom.

Emma S. Mackinnon

Late capital and the orientation of politics

Benjamin L. McKean begins Disorienting Neoliberalism with harrowing images from the recent past: the 2012 garment factory fire in Bangladesh that killed over a
hundred people and the building collapse a few months later in the nearby Rana Plaza that took the lives of over one thousand workers. McKean’s timely and inspiring text honors the dead and injured, remembering these tragic events and citing them as emblematic of global patterns of injustice and economic inequality. This unsettling opening invites the reader to face a series of questions. What kinds of relationships and obligations do I have to people who live elsewhere (outside the United States), especially those whose labor I consume and wear? If a person is upset by the conditions that make garment factory workers acutely vulnerable to death, injury, and poverty, what is one to do? How do neoliberal policies and imaginaries cultivate notions of selfhood and freedom that diminish collective awareness of transnational linkages, chains, and possibilities for solidarity? On the flip side, how might neoliberalism’s dependence on supply chains and trans-local networks open alternative ways of relating to neoliberal arrangements and imperatives?

For McKean, any response to these questions must prioritize how neoliberalism functions as a structure of orientation. As he puts it, neoliberalism is a “self-consciously political project with the aim of putting politics in its place” (p. 23), of subordinating politics and other domains to market logics and values. This political project holds sway by forming and disciplining subjects to imagine themselves and their interactions with others in a circumscribed manner. Neoliberalism puts relentless pressure on selves to accept notions of freedom and individuality that are modeled along the lines of entrepreneurship, property, and self-branding. Building on the work of Foucault, McKean describes neoliberalism as a form of governmentality which names those “less obvious techniques for conducting the actions of subjects by shaping their self-understanding, their orientation, and the habits they adopt” (p. 39). Neoliberalism, according to this description, works to regulate how people comport themselves to their social worlds, but in such a manner that this regulation and ordering appears to the neoliberal subject as opportunities for autonomy and free choice. Consequently, a reorientation would involve becoming more aware of how political arrangements operate, registering how these arrangements sustain legitimacy, and cultivating values and norms that are appropriate to the political predicament (p. 6).

The primacy of the language of orientation in McKean’s text brings to mind discussions in religious studies. McKean gestures in this direction when he refers to neoliberalism as a “sociodicy” or a self-justifying set of arrangements, policies, and convictions. In response to Hayek’s insistence that individuals submit to the impersonal forces of the market for the sake of growth and progress, McKean writes, “As this suggests, a neoliberal orientation sets itself two tasks: on the individual level, it reconceives submission to the market as the archetype of freedom; on the level of the institution, it offers a ‘sociodicy’ which explains why market forces necessarily produce the best possible results” (p. 32). Riffing on the notion of theodicy—with its connections to Leibniz, the best-of-all-possible-worlds
argument, and the justification of suffering—McKean claims that neoliberalism provides a horizon of value and meaning by which selves desire, hope, make sense of their lives, and justify actions. Furthermore, neoliberalism habituates individuals to treating market values and economic success as the ultimate, quasi-transcendent ends of human striving. Even though McKean does not develop this insight, he suggests that neoliberalism prompts alternative ways of contemplating the relationship between religiosity and the political, beyond the secular/liberal demand to keep religion private and separate from the realm of reason, fairness, and justice. If we follow the philosopher of religion Charles Long, one way to describe religion is as “orientation [which] refers to the manner in which a culture, society, or person becomes aware of its place in the temporal spatial order of things” (Long, 2018, p. 14). Without conflating neoliberalism and religion, this pairing of McKean and Long invites an interrogation of the religious contours of the neoliberal enterprise. To put it differently, if neoliberalism is a “self-consciously political project” (p. 23), it is also a less consciously religious project that trains subjects to treat the market as a self-legislating, sovereign power and to submit to capital as the inevitable horizon of human freedom.

For Long, this orientation toward the ordering of things entails both creativity and critique; it is expressed in acts of making and un-making a world that is to some extent already given. Consequently, orientation is more of a process of becoming than a fixed or stable disposition. McKean suggests something similar throughout Disorienting Neoliberalism, as he underscores the possibility of being re-oriented to neoliberal arrangements and the ideals of freedom that keep neoliberalism in place. In fact, he makes a case for theory as a set of ideas, thought experiments, and reflections that do not provide a blueprint for action but can orient people to injustice and inequality differently. Theory or theoretical practice “can help us comprehend our relation to existing institutions by giving an account our political status and the typical relationships between our status and the political status of others” (p. 11). Along this line, theory can render people more attuned to the contradictions between neoliberal accounts of market-based agency and the structural inequities that neoliberal policies rely on and reproduce. Similarly, theoretical engagements might draw attention to the gap between the image of the autonomous individual and the fact that the clothes I don or the cell phone I use were made possible by transnational supply chains, which include exploited workers from disparate but interconnected regions of the globe. Becoming more aware of how political–economic configurations and institutions operate and maintain authority might lead to collaborative efforts among workers and consumers to switch the locus of authority from supply chain managers to democratic associations. Theory, for McKean, is crucial, not only to keep track of our comportment toward prevailing modes of power, but to imagine and inspire opposing forms of solidarity and cooperation that push against neoliberalism’s conception of self-sufficient freedom.
McKean enlists a cluster of thinkers to develop a more democratic and collaborative ethos within, and against, a neoliberal project that requires subjects to think of themselves as separate and discrete, even if this happens through the framework of a collective, national identity. For instance, he pairs Rawls and Hegel in order to provide what he refers to as a “dispositional conception of freedom” (p. 85), one that sees freedom as socially constituted and expressed through habits, practices, and attitudes. In the process, McKean goes against the grain of a tendency within political philosophy to exclusively focus on Rawls’s Kantian inheritance and his emphasis on autonomy and absolute self-determination. This allows him to underscore the importance of context and reciprocity in Rawls’s understanding of justice. In addition, McKean contributes to new and refreshing readings of Hegel that focus less on the metaphysical dimensions of Spirit/Geist and more on the practical aspects of Hegel’s formulation of ethical life. As authors like Robert Brandom and Molly Farneth have demonstrated, Hegel views freedom as a social phenomenon. Freedom is both constrained and enabled by norms, practices, and institutions. Therefore, individuals must be habituated into the proper set of social practices and norms, such as justice and fairness, which are expressed in our actions and interactions with others. To put it another way, individual freedom is articulated through the formation of habits, which develop by internalizing customs and conventions in a self-reflective manner. On this Hegelian reading, selves are not free when they treat the external world as an obstacle to their agency but when they view their actions and desires to be in accordance with social norms that make these actions intelligible and accountable to others.

As McKean points out, this dispositional notion of freedom in Rawls and Hegel is a bit too sanguine, too reliant on an idealized understanding of society. McKean’s turn to Du Bois, Anzaldúa, and Adorno is designed to consider the formation of habits and dispositions for those positioned at the edges of freedom, for whom the social order is systemically unjust and ugly. Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness—a sense of twoness, of looking at oneself through the eyes of the dominant white supremacist Other—gives Black people the gift of a second sight. This cultivates a certain disposition toward racial injustice and Western imperialism, one that is not at home in or in line with the prevailing order of things. Anzaldúa’s work develops this sense of twoness, expressed as a commitment to nepantla, or in betweenness, against the logic of separation, rigid borders, and racial and gendered dichotomies. Her notion of the open wound (herida abierta) registers the painful effects colonial and imperial regimes, the violence directed at migrants and Latinx people, as well as the possibility of developing more vulnerable and receptive relationships with others. And Adorno’s negative dialectic, as McKean demonstrates, explicitly refuses the affirmative and conciliatory tendencies in Hegel’s thought. Rather than affirming the rationality of a social world predicated on suffering and exploitation, Adorno’s persistent awareness of non-identity draws attention to antagonism, failure, and
disappointment. At the same time, there is a utopian dimension to non-identity, or the mobile gap between our conceptions and the preponderance of the objective world. In this gap exists an immanent “more,” an excess that carries the broken promise of less pernicious ways of relating to difference and plurality. The world could be radically different than it currently is, but this possibility relies on a capacity to tarry with dissonance and resist conciliatory narratives that explain away suffering.

These authors of the negative are crucial for McKean, as he contends that any dispositional conception of freedom has to be oriented to an actual world that is defined by injustice and exploitation, the kind of world in which the tragedies that occurred in Bangladesh are enabled and downplayed by neoliberal policies and rationalities. Yet I wonder if these thinkers of “ugly progress and unhopeful hope” (p. 113) might push the conversation about neoliberalism in other directions. What do I mean here? In some discussions about neoliberalism, one gets a sense that the term signifies a decisive turn from a previous period when, for instance, Keynesian ideas motivated government spending, people had a more robust sense of the public good, leftist intellectuals unflinchingly supported labor unions, and socialism still provided a viable alternative to capitalism. In other words, there is something new and unprecedented about neoliberalism or the current phase of late capital. While there is some truth to neoliberalism as a narrative category of transition, I wonder what is lost by focusing on discontinuity, especially (as McKean describes) regarding the explicit subordination of the political to the economic. There does not appear to be that much qualitatively new/neo about unregulated capital accumulation when coloniality and western imperialism are foregrounded. Consider for instance Du Bois’s description of whiteness in “The Souls of White Folk,” an essay written in his 1920 collection *Darkwater*. For Du Bois, whiteness is not necessarily about pigmentation; rather it names a set of durable attachments and commitments to ownership and domination. As he writes, “I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen” (Du Bois, 1999, p. 18). This incessant project of converting the earth into property is one that is shared by the state and corporations; it has long been an enticing pursuit that organizes and bridges political and economic agendas. It is important that in this essay, Du Bois is responding to various accounts and explanations of World War I that omit the fact that the war was largely fought for European nations in order to secure their colonies. This essay and Du Bois’s description of whiteness as ownership are also a response to those surprised by the carnage unleashed by the war but indifferent to the antecedent violence normalized in regions where darker denizens reside. In the process, Du Bois indicates that certain accounts of momentous historical events or shifts, where the prevailing discourse demands that we experience the moment as urgent and critical, often reproduce western imperial priorities and disavow the structural violence that is recognized differently when it boomerangs across the color line and devastates those in the global north.
McKean certainly understands these concerns. Throughout this brilliant book, he draws the reader’s attention to the transnational, to how neoliberal modalities necessarily rely on linkages across regions and nations, linkages that demand global solidarity in opposition to self-reliance, individual autonomy, or national exceptionalism. Moreover, his proposal for solidarity is based on a sense of common interests and a shared reorientation toward unjust conditions that many Americans have been educated to exclude from their sphere of obligation and justice. In other words, the exploitative and unsafe working environment in Rana Plaza that led to the building collapse directly implicates me as a consumer of garment factory products. In addition, the tragedy in Bangladesh anticipates the Amazon warehouse collapse in Illinois in December of 2021 which killed six workers, who were not warned to leave the building during a tornado. We might also think about how recent pandemic-related supply chain shortages and labor refusals impact the cost and availability of commodities, demonstrating in a very practical and quotidian manner the interconnections among producers, distributors, and consumers.

And yet one wonders how this awareness of interconnection can precipitate what McKean refers to as “political organization for those disposed by solidarity to see each other as partners” (p. 220). How does this notion of partnership—rather than treating severely exploited workers as mere victims and objects of humanitarian concern—across borders develop in a world where racism draws often unacknowledged lines between those who deserve to be valued, grieved, and recognized, and those who do not? How does a collective interest in solidarity emerge and break through habits of indifference, rituals of self-absorption, and fantasies of returning to the normal? I suppose what I am getting at here is the tension-filled relationship between an interest in justice and other kinds of habituated desires, drives, and attachments that often render selves unmoved or unaffected by the suffering and struggles of certain “kinds” of humans from certain regions of the world. With Adorno, I am pondering how cultural practices shape and organize our sensorium, or our capacities to respond to and be unsettled by conditions that sustain anguish and exploitation. On a more cynical level, I sometimes wonder if there is a kind of Freudian ambivalence regarding the pursuit of justice, an ambivalence that includes a kind of pleasure and enjoyment in imagining oneself separated and cordoned off from the misfortunes of others. This sense of separation might be heightened by neoliberal structures of orientation but might also have something to do with the rudiments of human desire.

But these moments of cynicism are already anticipated in McKean’s emphasis on solidarity. While various theories of power and desire can orient us differently to the world, this orientation finds its optimal expression when selves participate in movements and organizations that demand justice. Participation in movements enacts and demonstrates forms of collective freedom, power, and accountability that are absent in top-down, managerial arrangements associated with the state and...
corporations. Whatever hope there may be in combatting global injustice and inequity depends on risky, messy, and often frustrating efforts to build democratic movements and to show that another world, beyond neoliberalism, is possible. McKean’s inspiring work gives us persuasive reasons to pursue this possibility.

Joseph R. Winters II

Reorienting action

It’s an experience to which many of us relate all too well. We, consumers of goods produced by global industries, involving thousands of workers thousands of miles away, hear about the realities regularly facing those workers: dangerous—and, often, deadly—workplace conditions, exploitation and violent repression, low pay and stolen wages, toxic pollution and ecological ruin. What should we do? What must we do, if we really take ourselves to be egalitarians interested in the conditions of justice? Should we boycott the company? Post a screed on the internet? Sign a petition? Donate to an organization? All these seem too small, too ineffectual, too distant from the actual injustice and lives at stake. And what, then, about the reality that not just one consumer item, but much of the stuff of our lives, ties us to injustices in just this way? The problem is both too present and concrete—too big to take in at once, too suffused and present through all the areas of our lives—and too distant and abstract—involving agents we will never know, in places we will never visit, and seemingly connected to us only through links along the supply chain that remain, to us, maddeningly opaque. We know we should do something, but we don’t know what, and we don’t know exactly why. What relations—material, political, and ethical—tie us to the conditions of global injustice?

This is the dilemma that frames Benjamin McKean’s Disorienting Neoliberalism. His book both explains why this question recurs (and feels so unanswerable) and offers a compelling reformulation of both the question and its possible answers. As McKean argues, the questions of what must be done, and where we stand, vex us because we lack an effective orientation to the neoliberal global economy—one that can explain how the institutions and arrangements of the global economy actually operate, how they are made to appear both “legitimate and intelligible” (p. 6) to us, and what values and practices we ought to adopt or undertake if we want to “contest the authority of those institutions” (p. 7) in order to build a more egalitarian, just economic and political order.

Neoliberalism offers the prevailing orientation—one that encourages us to see the arrangements of the global economy as “apolitical, technical, and beyond our control” (p. 24)—an array of impersonal market forces which we can neither predict nor control, but which nevertheless produce “the best possible material outcomes in the long run” (p. 43). Within this framework, production is
experienced as “miraculous creation through spontaneous order beyond human control” (p. 51). Thus, in imagining our place as free consumers at one end of the supply chain where we purchase and hold the “uncanny” objects produced by exploited workers at the other end, we concede too much to this neoliberal orientation. In the spirit of critical theory, McKean alerts us to the gaps between neoliberalism’s “sociodicy” and the actual workings of the global economy to re-politicize those workings and identify the slim spaces of emancipatory potential in our current condition. Supply chains are in fact political institutions that “aim to govern individuals and make contestable appeals to authority that require justification” (p. 70) and regularly coerce workers in ways that are not admitted—let alone justified—by neoliberal theory. They can, therefore, be made subject to democratic contestation if we can develop an alternative orientation and an alternative account of freedom.

McKean’s alternative—developed through a creative, provocative, and truly wonderful coalition of theorists, tying liberal egalitarians to critical theorists, feminists, and critical race theorists—is what he calls, after Rawls, “the outer limits of our freedom.” Because we are always subject to forces beyond our control and shaped by institutions and practices long before we are capable of freely choosing them, McKean’s Hegelian reading of Rawls helps us see freedom in the retrospective affirmation of our institutions as those we could have freely chosen. When our habits and dispositions are formed by just institutions, we feel at home in the world made by them: our subjective attitudes and our relations with others support the just and equal conditions that shaped us, and we feel our freedom in this alignment. In reading Rawls this way—reading Rawls against Rawlsianism, we might say—McKean makes good on what Katrina Forrester identifies as Rawls’ longstanding (if not always thoroughgoing) commitment to “what was already there” (Forrester, 2019, p. 29): we are not Kantian noumenal selves, reasoning out of the original position to choose principles of justice we freely affirm, but relational human beings shaped by conditions we did not choose but ought to be able to embrace retrospectively.

If Rawls helps us see what freedom looks like in a just world—a disposition to reciprocity formed by the right kinds of institutions and practices—McKean turns to W.E.B. Du Bois, Theodor W. Adorno, and Gloria Anzaldúa to determine what freedom looks like in an unjust world, in which our dispositions and habits are shaped, not by institutions we could retrospectively and freely choose, but by ones that put us at odds with ourselves—the way we would like to see ourselves, the values we wish to affirm, the relations we want to enjoy with others. In our world, we don’t experience the outer limits of freedom, but we can cultivate a kind of alienation that facilitates the forms of solidarity and action that are required to build a world in which we can be free. What McKean identifies here as alienation and the development of a “disposition to solidarity” is akin to what Martin Luther King, Jr. called a position of “creative maladjustment,” through which we recognize and
embrace the feeling of being out-of-joint with the conditions of inequality and injustice, and so engage in the process of de-habituating ourselves to the unjust institutions that formed our practices and self-conceptions. For King, the conditions of injustice are durable precisely because they are shrouded in normalcy; the social order is made to appear as if it could be no other way, facilitating our habituation to its norms and practices and thus our complicity. Processes of social and individual “adjustment” to injustice enable “mob rule” to appear as popular sovereignty, “segregation and discrimination” as tradition or liberty, and “tragic militarism” as safety and security (King, 1986, p. 14). In King’s view, the practices of mass non-violent collective action offered practices of “creative maladjustment,” suggesting both the means of arriving at a position of alienation from—and maladjustment to—the normalcy and seeming inevitability of our involvement in injustice, as well as the means for acting against it to create new conditions and new relations (King, 1968).

Echoing King, McKean conceptualizes an orientation as both a way of seeing the world—an analytic frame—and a way of moving through space—a relation between ourselves and others and institutions: “when we are oriented to a location,” he writes, “we see it not as a collection of structures but as a town that we know our way around” (p. 144). Thus, orientation is tied not simply to seeing things in a new way, but to the kinds of activities we might undertake in the service of justice: we ought to move from the work of reorientation (seeing otherwise) to the work of making common cause with the primary victims of global injustice (acting otherwise). As McKean articulates, the “spatial nature of the metaphorical concept of orientation indicates how a disposition to activity is related to the normative requirements on our perceptions; what we see guides how we act. Seeing things rightly facilitates acting rightly” (p. 144). How, then, should we go about the work of developing this new orientation, and cultivating the appropriate new dispositions? How can we learn to see rightly in the first place?

In answer to this question, McKean’s book—in both substance and form—orient us to reflection and to contemplation, and perhaps to a more thoroughly public and political role for political theory. In the introduction, McKean offers theorizing as one crucial source of our orientations—enabling the possibility that critique can provide a means of effective reorientation (p. 9). This is echoed through the readings of Du Bois, Adorno, and Anzaldúa, which suggest how we can experience freedom amidst injustice through imagination and contemplation. McKean turns to Du Bois’ Souls of Black Folk, for example, not only to conceptualize a form of alienation that enables knowledge of the injustice of the world—double consciousness—but also to capture the fugitive moments of reflective freedom that remain possible, however partial, within the world as it is. Du Bois “dwells above the Veil” when he moves “arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas,” when he “[summons] Aristotle and Aurelius…and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension” (Du Bois, 1986, p. 438). Study,
contemplation, and imagination unburden him, temporarily freeing him of the
constraints of white supremacy. This moment of “unconstrained contemplation” is
crucial, not because it provides a brief respite from injustice, or not only for that
reason, but because it enables Du Bois to feel free and thus to envision the kind of
world that might sustain such a freedom for more than mere moments. As McKeans
writes, “The experience of philosophy and art makes it possible for him to imagine
free, egalitarian relations emancipated from racial injustice, thereby providing an
image that facilitates envisioning freedom at its outer limit” (pp. 125-126). Such
thought counteracts the despondency one might feel at being not at home in an
oppressive world. It also—as Du Bois would later suggest in a 1949 lecture—
allows one to see new possibilities, “infinite freedoms” beyond the conditions that
we are habituated to accept as necessary and inevitable ones. These freedoms
“outstretch this day of slavery” by revealing that “the universe of suns
outmeasures our little earthly system” (Du Bois, 1973, pp. 259-260).

Disorienting Neoliberalism suggests that these fleeting and individual—but
nevertheless real and important—experiences of freedom in thought are what that
motivate a shift in orientation and prompt the development of our capacities for
action. As a whole, the progression of the book beautifully enacts this movement
for its readers: naming and alerting us to the experiences of alienation produced by
the world as it is; guiding us through the development of a new orientation to help
us make sense of our experiences; and seeing us, by the book’s final pages, ready to
hear calls for solidarity and join transnational social movements aimed at resisting
and transforming the institutions of the global economy. In acting in response to
our new orientations and dispositions, we can likewise “further deepen our
appreciation of the social nature of our freedom” (p. 221) to which we are newly
oriented.

It is a compelling narrative and, in a way, a natural one for political theory:
theory, broadly construed, enables us to see (theorein) in a different way, and on
that basis we are newly disposed or differently attuned to action in the world. Yet
the book and its overlaps with King’s account of “creative maladjustment” suggest
an alternative possibility—a less straightforward one, rooted not in forms of
reflection that ready us for solidarity and action but in the messy, incipient
potentialities of collective action itself. While King often called his audiences—
listeners and readers—to become “maladjusted” to injustice in response to his
exhortations, he also repeatedly insisted on how collective struggle itself could be
the site of such transformations (see Pineda, 2021). I see a similar conception,
though perhaps an inchoate one, in McKean’s work as well.

In his concluding chapter, McKeans reflects on his own experiences in social
movement activism, and provides an illuminating discussion of the contingent,
accidental, and in some sense not fully knowable reasons for becoming active in
this way. As he reflects, “people decide to take action” for a variety of reasons,
including seemingly trivial and incidental ones. More to the point, the reasons that
lead people to heed calls for solidarity and take action do not always lend themselves to a narrative that positions moral awakening (or the work of reorientation) as prior to action: “Jarred out of their habits, they may be just curious or bored. One of the most common reasons to become involved is simply because members of one’s social network are, as friends ask them to spend an afternoon together at a march and so on” (p. 224). Yet acting in this way, alongside others, often is transformative. Indeed, it may be the case that the kinds of reorientation to which McKean is committed—the kinds of reorientation required for acting in solidarity against global injustice—come not through forms of reflection that precede action, but through action itself. Running (productively and suggestively) counter to the book’s narrative as a whole, McKean offers a different sequence of events at its close: “Finding oneself a committed social movement participant who can articulate and defend consistent principles is a result of action, not a cause; rather than an existential leap, the change is more akin to a dawning awareness where one retrospectively acknowledges undergoing a process that was less clear as it was being experienced” (p. 224).

In this way, those who join social movements need not first develop an appropriate orientation; they aren’t necessarily all that attuned to solidarity. Instead, it is the experience of acting in concert itself—of sharing space and power with others, being accountable to them, learning to view them as partners and equals, and developing new ways of understanding our relations with the world—that is the source of new ways of seeing as well as new ways of acting. It is not in reflection but in acting together that we begin to see the world anew; it is only after the fact that we can reconstruct these novel visions and give an account of our own actions as having any sort of logic or coherence. Here, freedom is, in a quasi-Arendtian sense, the freedom to act together and to bring something new into the world—not out of nothing, but from where we already are; not as an expression of our unique personhood so much as our newly sensed relation to each other. It is through this activity that we are transformed in ways we could not have predicted but can perhaps narrate and affirm retroactively.

Thus, social movements themselves become the spaces for experiencing something like the outer limit of our freedom. While McKean seems to stop just short of conceptualizing movements in this way, I would argue that forms of collective organizing and shared struggle offer something that the fugitive freedom of reflection and individual imagination cannot. Social movements, as Deva Woodly (2022) has recently argued, are institutions central to the practice of radical, democratic politics. Though we cannot truly be at home in a world in which we are formed by conditions of injustice, social movements offer the possibility to build new institutions through our engagement with them; often we enter them before we can articulate precisely why we are doing so, or what we hope to achieve through acting together in this way, and we are changed by what happens within them. And like all such experiences of freedom at its outer limits, it is only

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retrospectively that we can affirm how they have shaped our capacities, habits, orientations, and relations—that we can really choose them as ours, let alone chart the coordinates of the new orientations forged through this collective self-(re)making activity.

Erin R. Pineda

Crisis, suffering physicality, and the politicization of supply chains

In the early autumn of 2021, the UK media lit up about a “supply chain crisis” in Britain. Commentators blamed the combined effects of Covid and Brexit for the disastrous shortage of truck drivers that was keeping goods tied up at ports and warehouses. Many recent drivers have been East Europeans who returned home when the pandemic broke out and then found their UK re-entry blocked by new Brexit-based constraints on international mobility. Meanwhile, transport workers who had stayed in Britain were having difficulty keeping their jobs because Brexit had altered the rules about who could work legally in the UK. The main objects of media concern in the “crisis,” however, were the travails of consumers. Desperate to fill up their tanks, Britons queued for hours at petrol stations waiting for scarce fuel deliveries. Along with panic-buying gas at record prices, British consumers foraged around picked-over supermarket shelves for dwindling food items. Looming on the horizon was the catastrophe to be feared most gravely, in this country that is singularly obsessed with the Yuletide season: a “bleak Christmas” with no turkeys, trees or toys (Guardian, 2021)

For a brief time in Britain in September 2021, it thus appeared that the normally hidden operations of the supply chain economy and their potential for breakdown had cracked through the surface of everyday life. Although supply chains fundamentally organize early twenty-first-century economic experience, they hardly register in ordinary consciousness. It is as though the more wildly dispersed commodity production and distribution have become geographically, and the greater the sheer numbers of actors required to bring petrol to the pump or milk to the fridge, the more bedazzling the commodity’s enchantments as fetish have become. This seems paradoxical, because the nodes of possible dysfunction and opportunities for claiming credit have proliferated with such abandon.

Disorienting Neoliberalism provokes insights into this “crisis” that is at once very British and brimming with global portents. McKean argues that supply chains have assumed economic dominance largely because neoliberal orientations have wormed their way into the tissues of people’s everyday habits of thought and action. The unreflective disposition to perceive supply chains in our roles as consumers, when it occurs to us to consider them at all, has become very difficult to dislodge. McKean observes that for Hayek, “the experience of living under neoliberal institutions can make one into a properly oriented neoliberal subject who
will submit to the market” (p. 38), through a subjectivating process that Foucault’s concept of governmentality clarifies. Following McKean, we might thus wonder: what mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality were at work in BBC narratives and the Johnson government’s actions in response to the British supply chain crisis? How might these governmental mechanisms have reaffirmed popular faith in supply chains, not only as a comforting expectation that they soon would resume running smoothly, but, more crucially, as a matter of mundane, unthinking purchasing practice?

The Nativity as normalization would be one answer. All the hue and cry about the crisis robbing good Britons of their holiday certainly stoked anxiety. Yet it also folded neatly into a narrative that Christmas would come, just the same, unlike in 2020, but like every other year and with plenty of packages, boxes, and bags. Such hopefulness was not misplaced. The retail and logistics industries had been investing massively for years in expanding their capacities. Then came Covid-19. The pandemic may have caused logistics snarls, but it also delivered record profits to Amazon as online orders shot through the roof. This, in turn, accelerated an already-in-motion global dynamic of increasing land purchases for warehouse construction. In California’s Inland Empire east of Los Angeles, known as the west coast hub for the logistics industry, warehouse-building is pushing further east into agricultural territory, where one farmworker aid organization’s representative noted, “We see them pulling down the grapevines every day.” Even as the industry moves into the Coachella Valley and stakes out more distant territory in Phoenix and Salt Lake City, new industrial real estate construction in the already saturated Inland Empire was still over 20 million square feet (a 3.6 percent expansion) for the third quarter of 2020 (Garland, 2021). Warehouse development in the UK in the wake of the pandemic has been even more eye-popping. The Guardian reported in August 2021 that “nearly 37m sq ft (3.4m sq metres) of warehouse space is slated for construction in 2021, up from 23m sq ft last year and 21m in 2019’ pandemic” (Kollewe & Davies, 2021). Online orders had “risen to 60 percent of all sales, from 40 percent before the pandemic” (Kollewe & Davies, 2021). The big companies are beefing up their capabilities to ensure that, over the long haul, supply chains will govern ever more of the earth and never keep Christmas from coming. Keeping labor costs down by hiring through temp-agencies, paying low wages, and thwarting unionization among workers, who are predominantly Latinx in the Inland Empire and largely non-UK-born in Britain, is crucial to this process (De Lara, 2018; Reese & Struna, 2018).

McKean argues persuasively that in view of the consumerist fixations of supply chain subjectivity, changing capitalist society requires concerted efforts to get consumers and workers to see themselves as ruled by common conditions of domination. He then elaborates a normative philosophical basis for people implicated in supply chains to democratize supply chain governance in the interest of pursuing certain ideals of justice. McKean’s insights that supply chains
materialize a “political rationality” and that bringing this “political effectiveness” under the people’s control requires worker–consumer solidarity, however, can also inform critiques of discursive patterns that bolster supply chains as neoliberal apparatuses. During the Christmas supply chain crisis, for instance, the British media mostly confined reporting on labor issues to the lorry drivers. Of course, these laborers’ rights and working conditions deserve careful attention. Yet this narrow angle for covering work-related matters displaced consideration of all the other groups of workers implicated in supply chains. The event could have prompted consumers of festive delights to mull over their dependence on workers in poultry abattoirs, tree farms, and toy factories, made more palpable by the supply chains’ sudden fragility, and perhaps to inquire about these laborers’ working conditions. Instead, spotlighting truckers reinforced a prevalent ideology in supply chain management discourses: “if supply chains have a telos, it is neither consumption nor production but the creation of value through movement along the chain” (p. 57). News coverage of the crisis personified that problematic by keeping the public preoccupied with the people whose job it was to move things rather than make things.

Although McKean focuses on how critical orientations toward supply chains could emerge under conditions in which supply chains are operating normally, system breakdowns might offer uniquely advantageous opportunities for transforming supply chain subjectivity. The intense ideological work at such moments suggests as much: the effort to titrate just the right mixture of fear that eagerly sought-after products might become unavailable with reassurance that the fix is merely technical. A special threat to this discursive economy, and the chain of equivalences that defines it, however, might arise from the experiences of material loss that such crisis-events precipitate for consumers. Consider, for example, the major disruption in the US meat supply chain that followed the onset of the pandemic. Despite prolific reporting on meatpacking workers’ shocking Covid-19 infection rates, no major media figures, apart from John Oliver (2021), seized the obvious opportunity to underscore how severe and even lethal health hazards in meat factories were hardly anything new. More ink needed spilling over the reality that meat-eaters’ reliance for nourishment on meatpackers’ exposure to bodily injury and disease wasn’t just a cruel consequence of authoritarian action by the Trump administration in the face of Covid-19 but a core dynamic of the industry. Empty meat counters could have spurred such a new awareness of these supply chain subjects’ mutual implications in each other’s lives. Yet, ironically, genuine sympathy over slaughterhouse workers’ scandalous exposure to a virus that threatened everyone overshadowed any recognition of the more deeply embedded shared fates wrought by meat supply chains. McKean’s exhortation to acknowledge supply chains’ political logics, and availability for democratic politicization, invites more attentiveness to these and to other strategic opportunities.
I agree with McKean about the vital importance of political action that cultivates worker–consumer connections, in part because this was such a powerful mode of organizing in the immigrant meatpacking workers’ struggle, about which I wrote in my book *Breaks in the Chain* (Apostolidis, 2010). To develop these links, community leaders and I founded a non-profit organization called Safe Work/Safe Food in partnership with the workers’ union. We appealed to consumers by stressing that the same production processes that destroyed workers’ bodies yielded meat contamination risks that threatened to sicken people who ate Tyson’s beef. Such an embodied interest in the matter made a real difference in motivating participation in the movement by people who were spared the physical horrors of meatpacking work. These individuals’ bodies were not subjected, day in and day out, to the ultra-high risks of laceration, spinal injury, and musculoskeletal disorder that abounded in the packinghouse. Yet community supporters’ bodily wellbeing was at stake when the pressures of capitalist competition fostered high-speed production practices that compromised the life-enhancing benefits these people were supposed to receive as meat consumers. That mattered, politically.

This brings me to a critical comment about the book: I am more skeptical than McKean about how strongly the moral–philosophical dilemmas that he discusses in connection with Rawls can kindle political solidarity between privileged persons and the working-class people whose labor makes supply chains hum. McKean argues that individuals who do not have to endure the dangerous and precarious labor conditions that many supply chain workers face can be moved to seek solidarity with such workers in order to gain relief from an impasse in moral reflection. The problem, McKean contends, is that the supply chain economy makes it impossible for consumers, who do not depend (directly) on supply chains for employment, to affirm the justice of the society that has shaped them as moral agents. This, in turn, costs such persons their own self-respect, which is frustrating and shame-inducing. As McKean writes: “The self-respect of consumers is threatened when they too face a constrained set of options that lead them to live their lives in contradiction with their principled beliefs in fairness. They cannot look back on a life that has been shaped by a habitual reliance on unjustly produced commodities and freely affirm the forces and relations that have shaped their self-conceptions” (p. 110).

No doubt, McKean has a valid point that this moral–philosophical quandary could help generate support for social movements that challenge the power of supply chains by inspiring individuals to form relations of solidarity with differently situated others. Yet the book bestows a primacy on these concerns that seems unwarranted, attributing to them a decisive ability to catalyze an effective reorientation to the political economy. In contrast, I would argue for giving supply chain subjects’ embodied personal and intersubjective experiences stronger weight when theorists envision how the social links forged by supply chains could be re-purposed as nodes and conduits of politicization. It might be
particularly important to cultivate the transformative potential of such bodily-affective experiences when the challenge is to forge solidarity between severely oppressed groups and others whose social circumstances are more favorable. Eliciting this potential would help avoid making political cooperation hinge, rather paternalistically, on privileged people’s moral repugnance toward suffering endured by others, notwithstanding the translation of such disquiet into diminished self-regard that McKeans sees as morally motivational.

Two distinct intellectual reference points can help us elaborate this line of thought. Insofar as a change in consumers’ critical consciousness is needed, the activation of thought through sense-experience in what Theodor W. Adorno calls “the somatic moment” may generate more transformative energy than Rawlsian thought experiments. McKean quotes the following memorable line from Negative Dialectics: “…the smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering” (p. 129). Adorno devised his negative-dialectical procedure, in which suffering physicality initially takes precedence over the concept, even as it catalyzes the critical work of mind, specifically as an antidote to the reification of the world through omnipresent commodification. This is precisely the nut that must be cracked if we are to become able to decipher supply chains as maps of strategic points for political intervention, rather than as the always-already-forgotten machinery that gives “the mystical character of commodities” ever-more global and speedier opportunities to manifest its wonder (Marx, 1977, p. 164). De-naturalizing commodity fetishism depends on exploding everyday embodied experience more than it needs the judging of society by abstractly derived criteria of justice. As Adorno suggests, the latter perpetuates the fetishization of rational thought itself, as the effect and mirror image of captivation by the commodity’s mysterious antics. Rather than “the pain of injustice” (p. 129), as McKeans puts it in his passage on Adorno, what has real incendiary power is literal, physical pain: not pain that can be coherently thought as injustice but rather pain that the mind cannot make sense of, and that therefore can provoke genuinely new thinking.

Du Bois, whom McKeans also enlists to help craft his argument, offers another critical vantage point on the book’s questionable investment in Rawlsian political philosophy. McKeans argues that from Du Bois’s perspective, white people would be moved to participate in “partnerships across the veil,” primarily because they “face threats to their self-respect and self-knowledge” (p. 137). This thesis depends on a rather selective reading of The Souls of Black Folk, and of Du Bois’s writings more generally, notably neglecting Black Reconstruction. As I read Souls, it is far more intent upon activating new affective interchanges between Black and white people than on instigating white moral self-evaluation in relation to an ideal of freedom. Regarding the implications of Souls for white Americans, McKeans writes: “They too have reason to ally with Black people in order to realize their egalitarian convictions so they can achieve greater knowledge of the forces that have shaped
them and acquire the self-respect that comes from the confidence that one’s achievements are justly one’s own” (p. 137). This strikes me as a forced effort to read Rawls into Du Bois. It reconstructs as an austere labor of philosophical reflection, sequestered within the separate minds of white and Black individuals, the warmer challenge of affective re-awakening that Du Bois evokes in the ninth chapter: “I have thus far sought to make clear the physical, economic, and political relations of the Negroes and whites in the South … But after all that has been said on these more tangible matters of human contact, there still remains … the atmosphere of the land, the thought and feeling, the thousand and one little actions which go to make up life” (Du Bois, 1986, p. 487). What gets lost in McKean’s reading of Du Bois is the latter’s preoccupation with the dwindling “intellectual commerce” and casual, physical commingling of Black and white people in everyday social life, which diminishes the necessary experiential basis of “sympathy and cooperation” (Du Bois, 1986, pp. 489-490). Transgressions of the veil in ordinary experience, not pursuing “the freedom that [one] experiences in the thinking that lets [one] dwell above the veil” (p. 128), which sounds discordantly like the forgetting implied in Rawls’s “veil of ignorance,” is what Du Bois prescribes to alter Black and white consciousness. Musicality, more than liberated reason, sets the tone for Du Boisian political practice in Souls: the musicality of a text that heads each chapter with a line from one of the “sorrow songs,” and thus with a painful expression of suffering that language alone, without the notes, cannot articulate meaningfully.

This Du Bois likely offers more fecund material for the organizers whom McKean wants to set loose on supply chains than the Rawlsian avatar of Du Bois favored in Disorienting Neoliberalism. McKean rightly underscores the immense political challenge of fostering solidarity in a society that is governed as a whole by confluent dynamics of capitalist, racial, and gender power, even as those same forces incessantly generate highly variegated social experiences and thought-orientations among countless situated groups. As he concludes the book, McKean also makes the compelling point that participating in anti-capitalist social movements aimed at supply chains yields an “experience of agency” that is vital to realizing the broader transformative potential of such activism. He again employs Foucault to good and novel effect, suggesting that we think of organizing practice as a “conduct of conducts” that enables individuals to “experience an efficacy that neoliberalism may otherwise deny them” as they “express their freedom and equality with those they seek to conduct” (pp. 225-226). Yet the dualist political–philosophical impulse to distinguish rational ideals from their willed manifestation in practical action sits just as uneasily with the turn to Foucault, given the latter’s theory of subject-formation through corporeally applied power, as it does with McKean’s appeals to Adorno and Du Bois. In this sense, Disorienting Neoliberalism offers more a testament to the durable divides among political theorists than an example of how to bridge them. Theorists who join
McKean in affirming a passion for organizing, as I and many others do, need to face this problem squarely.

Thanks in part to the effects of supply chains in breaking down and re-organizing labor processes, the contradictory temporalities and spatial disruptions characteristic of precaritized work life now pervade virtually all levels of the employment hierarchy, albeit with varying intensities. Meanwhile, as McKean points out, workers who manufacture, assemble, and distribute the goods channeled through supply chains feel the “uncanny” condensations of space and time thereby produced, and the way these elude full cognition, no less than those who mainly relate to supply chains as consumers. Ultimately McKean’s book makes me suspect that efforts to politicize supply chain relations should focus, first, on making physically present, calling to mind, and historically interrogating these entangled temporal–spatial experiences of work and commodity enjoyment. If a sense and notion of global justice were then to arise, it would do so in the midst of such collective action.

Paul Apostolidis

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