
Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming

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*We live in difficult times,
in times of monstrous chimeras
and evil dreams and criminal follies.
Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes**

Slouching Toward Bethlehem

The global triumph of capitalism at the millennium, its Second Coming, raises a number of conundrums for our understanding of history at the end of the century. Some of its corollaries—“plagues of the ‘new world order,’” Jacques Derrida (1994: 91) calls them, unable to resist apocalyptic imagery—have been the subject of clamorous debate. Others receive less mention. Thus, for example, populist polemics have dwelt on the planetary conjuncture, for good or ill, of “homogenization and difference” (e.g., Barber 1992); on the simultaneous, synergistic spiraling of wealth and poverty; on the rise of a “new feudalism,” a phoenix disfigured, of worldwide proportions (cf. Connelly and Kennedy 1994).¹ For its part, scholarly debate has focused on the confounding effects of rampant

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liberalization: on whether it engenders truly global flows of capital or concentrates circulation to a few major sites (Hirst and Thompson 1996); on whether it undermines, sustains, or reinvents the sovereignty of nation-states (Sassen 1996); on whether it frees up, curbs, or compartmentalizes the movement of labor (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, in this issue); on whether the current fixation with democracy, its resurrection in so many places, bespeaks a measure of mass empowerment or an “emptying out of [its] meaning,” its reduction “to paper” (Negri 1999: 9; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997).² Equally in question is why the present infatuation with civil society has been accompanied by alarming increases in civic strife, by an escalation of civil war, and by reports of the dramatic growth in many countries of domestic violence, rape, child abuse, prison populations, and most dramatically of all, criminal “phantom-states” (Derrida 1994: 83; Blaney and Pashsa 1993). And why, in a like vein, the politics of consumerism, human rights, and entitlement have been shown to coincide with puzzling new patterns of exclusion, patterns that inflect older lines of gender, sexuality, race, and class in ways both strange and familiar (Gal 1997; Yudice 1995). Ironies, here, all the way down; ironies, with apologies to Jean-Paul Sartre, in the very soul of the Millennial Age.

Other features of our present predicament are less remarked, debated, questioned. Among them are the odd coupling, the binary complementarity, of the legalistic with the libertarian; constitutionality with deregulation; hyperrationalization with the exuberant spread of innovative occult practices and money magic, pyramid schemes and prosperity gospels; the enchantments, that is, of a decidedly *neoliberal* economy whose ever more inscrutable speculations seem to call up fresh specters in their wake. Note that, unlike others who have discussed the “new spectral reality” of that economy (Negri 1999: 9; Sprinker 1999), we do not talk here in metaphorical terms. We seek, instead, to draw attention to, to interrogate, the distinctly pragmatic qualities of the messianic, millennial capitalism of the moment: a capitalism that presents itself as a gospel of salvation; a capitalism that, if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity wholly to transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999b).

to bear on it. Finally, in Mbabatho, South Africa, where much of this essay was written, Jennifer Seif came to our aid innumerable times in innumerable ways. We appreciate her grace and generosity under challenging conditions.

1. “New Feudalism Is Flourishing in an English Country Garden,” *Guardian*, 26 August 1995, 37. See also the series on “The Downsizing of America,” *New York Times*, 3–9 March 1996.

2. Tham Moyo and Christine Chiweshe-Adewal, “Why We Hate South Africa,” *Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), 29 October–4 November 1999, 32.

Such interrogatory observations point to another, even more fundamental question. Could it be that these characteristics of millennial capitalism—by which we mean *both* capitalism at the millennium and capitalism in its messianic, salvific, even magical manifestations—are connected, by cause or correlation or copresence, with other, more mundane features of the contemporary historical moment? Like the increasing relevance of consumption, alike to citizens of the world and to its scholarly cadres, in shaping selfhood, society, identity, even epistemic reality? Like the concomitant eclipse of such modernist categories as social class? Like the “crises,” widely observed across the globe, of reproduction and community, youth and masculinity? Like the burgeoning importance of generation, race, and gender as principles of difference, identity, and mobilization? The point of this essay lies in exploring the possibility of their interconnection; even more, in laying the ground of an argument for it.

As this suggests, our intent in this special issue of *Public Culture* is to animate further debate on the enigmatic nature of millennial capitalism, and also on its implications for theorizing history and society at the start of the twenty-first century. However we wish to characterize our current moment—as an age of death (of ideology, politics, the subject) or rebirth (of the spirit of Marx, Weber, and the Adams Ferguson and Smith)—ours are perplexing times: “Times of monstrous chimeras” in which the conjuncture of the strange and the familiar, of stasis and metamorphosis, plays tricks on our perceptions, our positions, our praxis. These conjunctures appear at once to endorse and to erode our understanding of the lineaments of modernity and its postponements. Here, plainly, we can do no more than offer preliminary observations and opening lines of argument on a topic whose full extent can only be glimpsed at present.

Let us, then, cut to the heart of the matter: to the ontological conditions-of-being under millennial capitalism. This begins for us—as it did for the “fathers” of modernist social theory—with epochal shifts in the constitutive relationship of production to consumption, and hence of labor to capital. This requires, in turn, that we consider the meaning of social class under prevailing political and economic conditions, conditions that place growing stress on generation, gender, and race as indices of identity, affect, and political action. In light of these reflections we go on to explore three corollaries, three critical faces of the millennial moment: the shifting provenance of the nation-state and its fetishes, the rise of new forms of enchantment, and the explosion of neoliberal discourses of civil society.

First, however, back to basics.

The political history of capital [is] a sequence of attempts by capital to withdraw from the class relationship; at a higher level we can now see it as the history of the successive attempts of the capitalist class to emancipate itself from the working class.

Mario Tronti, "The Strategy of Refusal" (Tronti's emphasis)

Specters, Speculation: Of Cons and Pros Consumption, recall, was the hallmark disease of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of the First Coming of Industrial Capitalism, of a time when the ecological conditions of production, its consuming passions (Sontag 1978; cf. Jean Comaroff 1997a), ate up the bodies of producers.³ Now, at the end of the twentieth century, semiotically transposed, it is often said to be the "hallmark of modernity" (van Binsbergen and Geschiere n.d.: 3), the measure of its wealth, health, and vitality. An overgeneralization, maybe, yet the claim captures popular imaginings and their representation across the earth. It also resonates with the growing Eurocultural truism that the (post)modern person is a subject made with objects. Nor is this surprising. Consumption, in its ideological guise—as "consumerism"—refers to a material sensibility actively cultivated, for the common good, by Western states and commercial interests, particularly since World War II. It has even been cultivated by some noncapitalist regimes: In the early 1990s, Deng Xiaoping advocated "consumption as a motor force of production" (Dirlik 1996: 194).

In social theory, as well, consumption has become a prime mover (van Binsbergen and Geschiere n.d.: 3). Increasingly, it is *the* factor, *the* principle, held to determine definitions of value, the construction of identities, and even the shape of the global ecumene.⁴ As such, tellingly, it is the invisible hand, or the Gucci-gloved fist, that animates the political impulses, the material imperatives, and the social forms of the Second Coming of Capitalism—of capitalism in its neoliberal, global manifestation. Note the image: the invisible hand. It evokes the ghost of crises past, when liberal political economy first discerned the movements of the market beneath swirling economic waters, of "free" enterprise behind the commonweal. Gone is the *deus ex machina*, a figure altogether too concrete, too industrial for the "virtualism" (Carrier and Miller 1998) of the post-Fordist era.

3. The following paragraphs follow closely ideas developed in the opening section of Comaroff and Comaroff 1999c.

4. "Ecumene" refers to a region of "persistent cultural interaction and exchange" (Kopytoff 1987: 10; cf. Hannerz 1989: 66).

As consumption has become the moving spirit of the late twentieth century, so there has been a concomitant eclipse of production; an eclipse, at least, of its *perceived* salience for the wealth of nations. This has heralded a shift, across the world, in ordinary understandings of the nature of capitalism. The workplace and labor, especially work-and-place securely rooted in a stable local context, are no longer prime sites for the creation of value or identity (Sennett 1998). The factory and the shop, far from secure centers of fabrication and family income, are increasingly experienced by virtue of their erasure: either by their removal to an elsewhere—where labor is cheaper, less assertive, less taxed, more feminized, less protected by states and unions—or by their replacement at the hands of nonhuman or “nonstandard” means of manufacture. Which, in turn, has left behind, for ever more people, a legacy of irregular piecework, of menial “workfare,” of relatively insecure, transient, gainless occupation. Hence the paradox, in many Western economies, of high official employment rates amidst stark deindustrialization and joblessness.⁵ In the upshot, production appears to have been superseded, as the *fons et origo* of wealth, by less tangible ways of generating value: by control over such things as the provision of services, the means of communication, and above all, the flow of finance capital. In short, by the market and by speculation.

Symptomatic in this respect are the changing historical fortunes of gambling. The latter, of course, makes manifest a mechanism integral to market enterprise: it puts the adventure into venture capital. Financial risk has always been crucial to the growth of capitalism; it has, from the first, been held to warrant its own due return. But, removed from the dignifying nexus of the market, it was until recently treated by Protestant ethics and populist morality alike as a “pariah” practice. Casinos were set apart from the workaday world. They were situated at resorts, on reservations and riverboats: liminal places of leisure and/or the haunts of those (aristocrats, profligates, “chancers”) above and beyond honest toil. Living off the proceeds of this form of speculation was, normatively speaking, the epitome of immoral accumulation: the wager stood to the wage, the bet to personal betterment, as sin to virtue. There have, self-evidently, always been different cultures and mores of betting. However, the activity—whether it be a “flutter” on the horses or a domestic card game, on a sporting contest or an office pool—has generally been placed outside the domain of work and earning, at best in the ambiguous, nether space between virtue and its transgression. Over a generation, gambling, in its marked form, has changed moral valence and invaded

5. The following joke did the rounds in the United States in the late 1990s: “Sure there are plenty of jobs to be had. At the moment I have three, and I still can’t afford to eat!”

everyday life across the world.⁶ It has been routinized in a widespread infatuation with, and popular participation in, high-risk dealings in stocks, bonds, and funds whose fortunes are governed largely by chance. It also expresses itself in a fascination with “futures” and their downmarket counterpart, the lottery. Here the mundane meets the millennial: “Not A LOT TO TOMAR, OW!” proclaims an ironic inner-city mural in Chicago (see *Millennial Transitions*, in this issue), large hands grasping a seductive pile of casino chips, beside which nestles a newborn, motherless babe.⁷ This at a moment when “gambling [is] the fastest growing industry in the US,” when it is “tightly woven into the national fabric,” when it is increasingly “operated and promoted” by government.⁸

Life itself has become the object of bookmaking; it is no longer the sole preserve of the “respectable” insurance industry, of its abstract argot of longevity statistics and probability quotients. A recent article in *Newsweek* sports the headline “Capital Gains: The Lottery on Lives”:

In America’s *fin de siècle* casino culture, no wager seems *outré*. So how about betting on how long a stranger is likely to live? You can buy part or all of his or her insurance policy, becoming a beneficiary. Your gamble: that death will come soon enough to yield a high return on the money you put up. The Viatical Association of America says that \$1 billion worth of coverage went into play last year.⁹

A much better bet, this, than the sale of the Savior for thirty pieces of silver. Inflation notwithstanding.

In the era of millennial capitalism, securing instant returns *is* often a matter of life and death. The failure to win the weekly draw was linked with more than one suicide in Britain in the wake of the introduction of national lottery in 1994; in 1999, the *India Tribune* reported that one of the biggest central Indian States, Madhya Pradesh, was “caught in the vortex of lottery mania,” which had claimed

6. On the moral valence of gambling, see, for example, George F. Will, “Hooked on Gambling: Other Comment,” *Herald Tribune*, 26–27 June 1999, 8; also Michael Tackett and Ted Gregory, “Gambling’s Lure Still a Divisive Issue,” *Chicago Tribune*, 20 May 1998, 3.

7. By Jeffrey Zimmermann, this mural, entitled “Paid Programming,” captures superbly the poignant, mundane millennialism that we allude to here. It is painted alongside an American flag-turned-bar-code. The artist told us that he used “Spenglish” in the work to address the local Chicano population.

8. Will, “Hooked on Gambling.”

9. Jane Bryant Quinn, “Capital Gains: The Lottery on Lives,” *Newsweek*, 15 March 1999, 55. “Viaticals” are insurance policies bought from the terminally ill, especially those in the late stages of AIDS.

several lives.¹⁰ Witnesses described “extreme enthusiasm among the jobless youth towards trying their luck to make a fast buck,” precisely the kind of fatal ecstasy classically associated with cargo cults and chiliastic movements (Cohn 1957). More mundanely, efforts to enlist divine help in tipping the odds, from the Taiwanese countryside to the Kalahari fringe, have become a regular feature of what Weller (in this issue) terms “fee-for-service” religions (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999b). These are locally nuanced fantasies of abundance without effort, of beating capitalism at its own game by drawing a winning number at the behest of unseen forces. Once again that invisible hand.

The change in the moral valence of gambling also has a public dimension. In a neoliberal climate where taxes are anathema to the majoritarian political center, lotteries and gaming levies have become a favored means of filling national coffers, of generating cultural and social assets, of finding soft monies in times of tough cutbacks. The defunct machinery of a growing number of welfare states, to be sure, is being turned by the wheel of fortune. With more and more governments and political parties depending on this source for quick revenue fixes, betting, says George Will, has “been transformed from a social disease”—subjected, not so long ago, to scrutiny at the hands of Harvard Medical School—“into social policy.”¹¹ Once a dangerous sign of moral turpitude, “it is now marketed almost as a ‘patriotic duty.’”¹²

Put these things together—the explosion of popular gambling, its legitimate incorporation to the fiscal heart of the nation-state, the global expansion of highly speculative market “investment,” and changes in the moral vectors of the wager—and what has happened? “The world,” answers a reflective Fidel Castro, has “become a huge casino.” Because the value of stock markets has lost all grounding in materiality, he says—anticipating a point to which we shall return—their workings have finally realized the dream of medieval alchemy: “Paper has been turned into gold.”¹³ This evokes Susan Strange (1986: 1–3; cf. Harvey

10. “Lottery Mania Grips Madhya Pradesh, Many Commit Suicide,” *India Tribune* (Chicago), 2 January 1999, 8. We thank Arjun Appadurai for alerting us to this reference.

11. Will, “Hooked on Gambling.” On the Harvard Medical School study, see Brett Pulley, “Compulsion to Gamble Seen Growing,” *New York Times*, 7 December 1997, 22.

12. Tackett and Gregory, “Gambling’s Lure Still a Divisive Issue,” 3; the words quoted are those of James Dobson, president of Focus on the Family, a Christian media ministry. They echo observations made by a range of witnesses for the U.S. National Gaming Impact Study Commission, set up in 1996 to study the effects of gambling.

13. Fidel Castro, “Castro: World Has Become a Huge Casino,” *Sunday Independent* (Johannesburg), 6 September 1998, 4; the article is a transcript of a speech given to the South African parliament.

1989: 332; Tomasic and Pentony 1991), who, in likening the Western fiscal order to an immense game of luck, was among the first to speak specifically of “casino capitalism”: “Something rather radical has happened to the international financial system to make it so much like a gambling hall. . . . [It] has made inveterate, and largely involuntary, gamblers of us all.” Insofar as the growth of globalized markets, electronic media, and finance capital have opened up the potential for venture enterprise, the gaming room has actually become iconic of capital: of its “natural” capacity to yield value without human input (Hardt 1995: 39), to grow and expand of its own accord, to reward speculation.

And yet crisis after crisis in the global economy, and growing income disparities on a planetary scale, makes it painfully plain that there is no such thing as capitalism sans production, that the neoliberal stress on consumption as the prime source of value is palpably problematic. If scholars have been slow to reflect on this fact, people all over the world—not least those in places where there have been sudden infusions of commodities, of new forms of wealth—have not. Many have been quick to give voice, albeit in different registers, to their perplexity at the enigma of this wealth: of its sources and the capriciousness of its distribution, of the mysterious forms it takes, of its slipperiness, of the opaque relations between means and ends embodied in it. Our concern here grows directly out of these perplexities, these imaginings: out of worldwide speculation, in both senses of the term, provoked by the shifting conditions of material existence at the end of the twentieth century.

We seek, here, to interrogate the *experiential* contradictions at the core of neoliberal capitalism, of capitalism in its millennial manifestation: the fact that it appears both to include and to marginalize in unanticipated ways; to produce desire and expectation on a global scale (Trouillot 1999) yet to decrease the certainty of work or the security of persons; to magnify class differences but to undercut class consciousness; above all, to offer up vast, almost instantaneous riches to those who master its spectral technologies—and, simultaneously, to threaten the very existence of those who do not. Elsewhere (1999c) we have argued that these contradictions, while worldwide in effect, are most visible in so-called postrevolutionary societies—especially those societies that, having been set free by the events of 1989 and their aftermath, entered the global arena with distinct structural disadvantages.¹⁴ A good deal is to be learned about the

14. By “postrevolutionary” societies we mean societies—such as those of the former Soviet Union—that have recently witnessed a dramatic metamorphosis of their political, material, social, and cultural structures, largely as a result of the end of the Cold War and the growth of the global market economy.

historical implications of the current moment by eavesdropping on the popular anxieties to be heard in such places. How do we interpret the mounting disenchantment, in these “liberated zones,” with the effects of hard-won democracy? Why the perceptible nostalgia for the security of past regimes, some of them immeasurably repressive? Why the accompanying upsurge of assertions of identity and autochthony? How might they be linked to widespread fears, in many parts of Eastern Europe and Africa alike, about the preternatural production of wealth?

The end of the Cold War, like the death of apartheid, fired utopian imaginations. But liberation under neoliberal conditions has been marred by a disconcerting upsurge of violence, crime, and disorder. The quest for democracy, the rule of law, prosperity, and civility threatens to dissolve into strife and recrimination, even political chaos, amidst the oft-mouthed plaint that “the poor cannot eat votes or live on a good Constitution.”¹⁵ Everywhere there is evidence of an uneasy fusion of enfranchisement and exclusion; of xenophobia at the prospect of world citizenship without the old protectionisms of nationhood; of the effort to realize modern utopias by decidedly postmodern means. Gone is any official-speak of egalitarian futures, work for all, or the paternal government envisioned by the various freedom movements. These ideals have given way to a spirit of deregulation, with its taunting mix of emancipation and limitation. Individual citizens, a lot of them marooned by a rudderless ship of state, try to clamber aboard the good ship *Enterprise*. But in so doing, they find themselves battling the eccentric currents of the “new” world order, which short-circuit received ways and means. Caught up in these currents, many of them come face to face with the most fundamental metamorphoses wrought by the neoliberal turn: the labile role of labor in the elusive algorithm connecting production to consumption, the pro to the con of capitalism.¹⁶

Which brings us back to the problematic status of production at the turn of the new century.

Labor’s Pain: Producing the Class of 2000 The emergence of consumption as a privileged site for the fabrication of self and society, of culture and identity, is

15. Ebrahim Harvey, “Spectre of Capitalism Haunts ANC,” *Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), 29 October–4 November 1999, 43.

16. All this pace the simplifying optimism of Francis Fukuyama (1999), who claims that the “Great Disruption” that beset the industrialized world from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s—a result of the rise of the “postindustrial economy” and the “information age”—is coming to an end.

closely tied to the changing status of work under contemporary conditions. For some, the economic order of our times represents a completion of the intrinsic “project” of capital: namely, the evolution of a social formation that, as Mario Tronti (1980: 32) puts it, “does not look to labor as its dynamic foundation” (cf. Hardt 1995: 39). Others see the present moment in radically different terms. Scott Lash and John Urry (1987: 232–33), for instance, declare that we are seeing not the denouement but the demise of organized capitalism, of a system in which corporate institutions could secure compromises between management and workers by making appeal to the national interest. The internationalization of market forces, they claim, has not merely eroded the capacity of states to control national economies. It has led to a decline in the importance of domestic production in many once industrialized countries—which, along with the worldwide rise of the service sector and the feminization of the workforce, has dispersed class relations, alliances, and antinomies across the four corners of the earth. It has also put such distances between sites of production and consumption that their articulation becomes all but unfathomable, save in fantasy.

Not that Fordist fabrication has disappeared. There is a larger absolute number of industrial workers in the world today than ever before (Kellogg 1987). Neither is the mutation of the labor market altogether unprecedented. For one thing, as Marx (1967: 635) observed, the development of capitalism has always conduced to the cumulative replacement of “skilled laborers by less skilled, mature laborers by immature, male by female”—also “living” labor by “dead.” As David Harvey (1989: 192–93) reminds us, the devaluation of labor power has been a traditional response to falling profits and periodic crises of commodity production. What is more, the growth of global markets in commodities and services has *not* been accompanied by a correspondingly unrestricted flow of workers; most nation-states still try to regulate their movement to a greater or lesser extent. The simultaneous “freeing” and compartmentalizing of labor, Peter Geschiere and Francis Nyamnjoh (in this issue) point out, is a tension long endemic to capitalism.

Nonetheless, Harvey insists, if not in quite the same terms as Lash and Urry (1987), that the current moment *is* different: that it evinces features that set it apart, fracturing the continuing history of capital—a history, Engels once said, that “remain[s] the same and yet [is] constantly changing” (quoted by Andre Gunder Frank [1971: 36]). Above all, the explosion of new markets and monetary instruments, aided by sophisticated means of planetary coordination and space-time compression, have given the financial order a degree of autonomy from “real production” unmatched in the annals of political economy (cf. Turner n.d.: 18). The consequences are tangible: “Driven by the imperative to replicate

money,” writes David Korten (1996: 13; cf. McMichael 1999: 98), “the [new global] system treats people as a source of inefficiency”: ever more disposable. The spiraling virtuality of fiscal circulation, of the accumulation of wealth purely through exchange, exacerbates this tendency: it enables the speculative side of capitalism to act as if it were entirely independent of human manufacture. The market and its masters, an “electronic herd” (Friedman 1999) of nomadic, deterritorialized investors, appear less and less constrained by the costs or moral economy of concrete labor.

If capital strives to become autonomous of labor, if the spatial and temporal coordinates of modernist political economy have been sundered, if the ontological connection between production and consumption has come into question, what has happened to the linchpin of capitalism: the concept formerly known as class?

Denunciations of the concept, Fredric Jameson (1999: 46–47) laments, have become “obligatory.” Even for Marxists. This in spite of the fact that class names an “ongoing social reality,” a persistently active dimension of “post-Cold War maps of the world system.” He is, moreover, unconvinced by claims that it no longer makes sense of the transnational division of labor; nor is he persuaded that gender, race, and ethnicity are more constitutive of concrete experience in the contemporary moment. For Jameson, gender and race are too easily reconciled with the demands of liberal ideology, with its solutions to social problems, with the sorts of politics it proffers. Class, finally, remains more intractable and more fundamental. Thus Tom Lewis (1999: 151): the failure to recognize it as “the most effective subject position” through which to organize against racism and sexism is “particularly regrettable.”

But surely the matter runs deeper than this? Subject positions are multiply determined, shaped less by political expediency than by the compelling truths of sense and perception. As Jameson himself notes (1999: 49), “Nothing is more complexly allegorical than the play of class connotations across the . . . social field.” Our task, surely, is to examine how consciousness, sentiment, and attachment are constituted under prevailing conditions; why class has become a less plausible basis for self-recognition and action when growing disparities of wealth and power would point to the inverse (cf. Storper, in this issue); why gender, race, ethnicity, and generation have become such compelling idioms of identification, mobilizing people, both within and across nation-states, in ways often opposed to reigning hegemonies.

Once again, this problem is hardly new. There has long been debate about the two big questions at the nub of the historical sociology of class: Why do social classes seem so seldom to have acted for themselves (*für sich*)? And why have

explicit forms of class consciousness arisen relatively infrequently, even under the worst of Fordist conditions (see, e.g., Wallerstein 1972: 173; Comaroff and Comaroff 1987)? Complex, poetically rich, culturally informed imaginings have always come between structural conditions and subjective perceptions—imaginings that have multiplied and waxed more ethereal, more fantastic, as capitalist economies have enlarged in scale. Neither the absolute increase in industrial workers across the globe nor the fact that 70 percent of the population in advanced capitalist societies “structurally belong to the working class” (Lewis 1999: 150–51) dictates that people will experience the world, or act upon it, in classic proletarian terms.

Quite the opposite. As we have already said, the labile relation of labor to capital may have intensified existing structures of inequality, but it is also eroding the conditions that give rise to class opposition as an idiom of identity and/or interest. Key here is the dramatic transnationalization of primary production (this by contrast to trade in raw materials and finished products, which has long crossed sovereign borders; see Dicken 1986: 3). A world-historical process, it is having profound effects on the configuration, and the cognition, of social relations of production everywhere: (1) By undermining the capacity of states to sustain economies in which “production, plant, firm and industry were essentially national phenomena” (Hobsbawm 1979: 313), it renders obsolete the old system of bargaining in which labor and capital could negotiate wages and conditions within an enclaved territory (Lash and Urry 1987: 232–33; see above); (2) by subverting domestic production in industrialized countries, it encourages the cutting of labor costs through casualization, outsourcing, and the hiring of discounted (female, immigrant, racialized) workers, thereby either making blue-collar employees redundant or forcing them into the menial end of the service sector; (3) by widening the gulf between rich and poor regions, it makes the latter—via the export of labor or the hosting of sweatshops and *maquiladoras*—into the working class of the former; and (4) by reducing proletarians everywhere to the lowest common denominator, it compels them to compete with little protection against the most exploitative modes of manufacture on the planet.

To the extent, then, that the nation-state is, as Aijaz Ahmad (1992: 318) says, “the terrain on which actual class conflicts take place,” it follows that the global dispersal of manufacture is likely to fragment modernist forms of class consciousness, class alliance, and class antinomies at an exponential rate. It is also likely to dissolve the ground on which proletarian culture once took shape and to

disrupt any sense of rootedness within organically conceived structures of production. Already, in many places, there has been a palpable erosion of the conventional bases of worker identity. Thus, while it is possible to argue, with Terence Turner (n.d.: 25; cf. Cox 1987: 271), that transnational flows of capital and labor have replicated “internal” class divisions on an international scale, existing relations among labor, place, and social reproduction—and, with them, the terms of class conflict itself—have been thoroughly unsettled for now.

While the contours of the global proletariat are ghostly at best—and while middle classes seem everywhere to be facing a loss of socioeconomic security, their center ground ever shakier (cf. Storper, in this issue)—a transnational capitalist class is taking more and more tangible shape. Here, again, there are questions of nuance about the old and the new: international bourgeoisies are, arguably, as old as capitalism itself. Dependency theorists have long insisted that they were a critical element in the making of modern European states and their national economies; also that their exploitation of colonial wealth was indispensable to the development of the Western metropolises. The new transnational capitalist elite—its frequent-flier executives, financiers, bureaucrats, professionals, and media moguls—may appear to be the planetary version of those older cosmopolitan bourgeoisies, its cadres centered in the imperial capitals of the world. But, as Leslie Sklair (1998: 136–37) argues, this new elite is distinctive in several ways. Above all, its interests are vested primarily in globalizing forms of capital: capital whose shareholder-driven imperatives are unrelated to any particular local enterprise, metropolitan or colonial. Hence, while its business ventures might loop into and out of national economies, this does not, as Saskia Sassen (n.d.) stresses, make them “national” enterprises. The entrepreneurial activities of this class are conceived in terms of markets, monetary transactions, and modes of manufacture that transcend national borders. They seek to disengage from parochial loyalties and jurisdictions, thus to minimize the effects of legal regulations, environmental constraints, taxation, and labor demands.¹⁷

Decontextualization, the distantiation from place and its sociomoral pressures, is an autonomic impulse of capitalism at the millennium;¹⁸ crucial, in fact, to its ways and means of discounting labor by abstracting itself from direct confrontation or civic obligation. The poor are no longer at the gates; bosses live in

17. It is a matter of note, in this respect, that neither the chartered companies nor the imperial enterprises operated by old international bourgeoisies globalized production itself in the way that transnational corporations now do (Dicken 1986: 57).

enclaved communities a world away, beyond political or legal reach. Capital and its workforce become more and more remote from each other: frequent fliers and frequent friers seldom meet on the global highways they travel—in contrapuntal rhythm. Here is the harsh underside of the culture of neoliberalism. It is a culture that, to return to our opening comment, re-visions persons not as producers from a particular community, but as consumers in a planetary marketplace: persons as ensembles of identity that owe less to history or society than to organically conceived human qualities.

This logos does not go uncontested, of course—neither by popular nationalisms nor by social movements of various stripes, left and right, North and South, especially among the marginal (Sklair 1998: 137; Turner n.d.). But the gospel of laissez-faire is a potent presence in contemporary capitalist societies, its axioms reinforced by quotidian experience and its truths instilled in its subjects by the remorseless commodification of ever more finely targeted areas of everyday life. Witness the following interpolation:

You are at one with the world. . . . The real world where time treads with a leisure measure. You express your commitment to the new age . . . in the way you think, the way you talk, the way you dress. Leisure time dressing is YOU.”

The off-the-peg poetics of this call to postproletarian identity comes from a label attached to a pair of women’s shorts marketed in a climate of “patriotic capitalism” by a South African chain store.¹⁹ The thickening hegemony to which it speaks is borne also by the global communicative media, themselves seeking to construct a planetary “ecumene” (see n. 4 above), whose satellite signals and fiber-optic nerves reach the widest possible audience. Those signals are designed to evade control exercised by states over flows of images and information—flows once integral to the creation of political communities and national “publics” (cf. Anderson 1983: 63).

18. As this implies, we see the progressive abstraction entailed in processes of decontextualization as part of the evolving logic of capitalism—a point made by Marxian theories of reification, whose salience endures. To suggest, as Daniel Miller (1999: 212; Carrier and Miller 1999) does, that “virtualism,” one manifestation of these processes, may be a “replacement for ‘capitalism’” in comprehending the current moment—or that it may provide a “new political economy”—is to confuse cause and effect.

19. On “patriotic capitalism,” see the press announcement for the annual general conference of the South African Black Management Forum, 18–20 November 1999, on the theme of *Patriotic Capitalism: The Dilemma of the New Millennium*. It was published in, among other places, *Sowetan*, 2 November 1999, 29.

For all their transformative power, as anthropologists have repeatedly insisted, these material and cultural forces do not have simple, homogenizing effects. They are, in some measure, refracted, redeployed, domesticated, or resisted wherever they come to rest. What we call globalism is a vast ensemble of dialectical processes (J. L. Comaroff 1996; Jean Comaroff 1997b), processes that cannot occur without the grounded, socially embedded human beings from whom they draw value. Nor can these processes occur without the concrete, culturally occupied locales—villages, towns, regions, countries, subcontinents—in which they come to rest, however fleetingly. Still, they are re-forming the salience of locality, place, and community in ways that often bypass the state. Hence the proliferation of attachments at once more particular and more universal than citizenship (Turner n.d.: 8)—from those based on gender, sex, race, and age through those organized around issues such as environmentalism and human rights to those, like the Nation of Islam or the hip-hop nation, that mimic nationhood itself.

The paradox of class at the millennium, in sum, must be understood in these terms. Neoliberalism aspires, in its ideology and practice, to intensify the abstractions inherent in capitalism itself: to separate labor power from its human context, to replace society with the market, to build a universe out of aggregated transactions. While it can never fully succeed, its advance over the “long” twentieth century has profoundly altered, if unevenly in space and time, the phenomenology of being in the world. Formative experiences—like the nature of work and the reproduction of self, culture, and community—have shifted. Once-legible processes—the workings of power, the distribution of wealth, the meaning of politics and national belonging—have become opaque, even spectral. The contours of “society” blur, its organic solidarity disperses. Out of its shadows emerges a more radically individuated sense of personhood, of a subject built up of traits set against a universal backdrop of likeness and difference. In its place, to invert the old Durkheimian telos, arise collectivities erected on a form of mechanical solidarity in which *me* is generalized into *we*.

In this vocabulary, it is not just that the personal is political. The personal is the only politics there is, the only politics with a tangible referent or emotional valence. By extension, *interpersonal* relations—above all, sexuality, from the peccadillos of presidents to the global specter of AIDS—come to stand, metonymically, for the inchoate forces that threaten the world as we know it. It is in these privatized terms that action is organized, that the experience of inequity and antagonism takes meaningful shape. In this sense, Jameson (1999: 47) is correct. There is no autonomous discourse of class. Certainly not now, if

ever. Oppositions of gender and race, even if not in themselves explicit vehicles for that discourse, are frequently “reinvested” in its practical dynamics and express its stark antagonisms. This is inevitable. Reigning hegemonies, both popular and academic, may separate the construction of identity from the antinomies of class. But the market has always made capital out of human difference and difference out of capital, cultivating exploitable categories of workers and consumers, identifying pariahs, and seeking to silence enemies of established enterprise. As lived reality, then, social class is a multiply refracted gestalt. Its contrasts are mobilized in a host of displaced registers, its distinctions carried in a myriad of charged, locally modulated signs and objects—from the canons of taste and desire to the niceties of language use, the subtle discriminations of advertising to the carnal conflict of sport.

In short, as neoliberal conditions render ever more obscure the rooting of inequality in structures of production, as work gives way to the mechanical solidarities of “identity” in constructing selfhood and social being, class comes to be understood, in both popular and scholarly discourse, as yet another personal trait or lifestyle choice. Which is why it, like citizenship, is measured increasingly by the capacity to transact and consume; why politics is treated as a matter of individual or group entitlement; why social wrongs are transposed into an issue of “rights”; why diffuse concerns about cultural integrity and communal survival are vested in “private” anxieties about sexuality, procreation, or family values; why the fetus, neoliberal subject par excellence, becomes the focus of a macabre nativity play, in which, “vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,” moral antagonists lock in mortal battle over the right to life (Jean Comaroff 1997a; Berlant 1997). Analytically, of course, it is imperative for us *not* to take these things at face value. The problem, rather, is to explain why, in the millennial age, class has become displaced and refracted in the way that it has. Which is why, finally, its reduction, to the mere “experience of inferiority,” as Jameson (1999: 47) would have it, is insufficient. The concept of class so reduced captures neither the complex construction of contemporary experience nor the crises of social reproduction in which much of the world appears to be caught.

Generating Futures: Youth in the Age of Incivility That sense of physical, social, and moral crisis congeals, perhaps more than anywhere else, in the contemporary predicament of youth, now widely under scrutiny (Comaroff and Comaroff n.d.). Generation, in fact, seems to be an especially fertile site into which class anxieties are displaced. Perhaps that much is overdetermined: it is on the backs of the pubescent that concerns about social reproduction—about the viability of

the continuing present—have almost always been saddled. Nonetheless, generation as a principle of distinction, consciousness, and struggle has long been neglected, or taken for granted, by theorists of political economy. This will no longer do: the growing pertinence of juveniles—or, more accurately, their imper-tinence—is an ineluctable feature of the present moment, from Chicago to Cape Town, Calcutta to Caracas. Preadulthood, of course, is a historically constructed category: while, in much of the late-twentieth-century English-speaking world, young white persons are *teenagers*, their black counterparts are *youth*, adolescents with attitude. And most often, if not always, male.

There are startling similarities in the current situation of youth the world over, similarities that appear to arise out of the workings of neoliberal capitalism and the changing planetary order of which we have spoken. These similarities seem to be founded on a doubling, on simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. On one hand is their much remarked exclusion from local economies, especially from shrinking, mutating blue collar sectors. As the expansion of the free market runs up against the demise of the welfare state, the modernist ideal in which each generation does better than its predecessor is mocked by conditions that disenfranchise the unskilled young of the inner city and the countryside (cf. Abdullah 1998). Denied full, waged citizenship in the nation-state, many of them take to the streets, often the only place where, in an era of privatization, a lumpen public can be seen and heard (cf. Appadurai forthcoming). The profile of these populations reflects also the feminization of post-Fordist labor, which further disrupts gender relations and domestic reproduction among working people, creating a concomitant “crisis of masculinity”: a crisis as audible in U.S. gangsta rap as in South African gang rape, as visible in the parodic castration of “The Full Monty” as in the deadly machismo of soccer violence or the echoing corridors of Columbine High. This crisis is not confined to youth or workers, of course—world cinema has made that point cogently in recent years—but it is magnified among them.

On the other hand is the recent rise of assertive, global youth cultures of desire, self-expression, and representation; in some places, too, of potent, if unconventional, forms of politicization. Pre-adults have long been at the frontiers of the transnational: the waxing U.S. economy in the 1950s was marked by the emergence of “teens” as a consumer category with its own distinctive, internationally marketable culture. This, however, intensified immeasurably during the 1980s and 1990s. To a greater extent than ever before, generation became a concrete principle of mobilization, inflecting other dimensions of difference, not

least class, in whose displacements it is closely entailed (cf. Corrigan and Frith 1976). Youth activism, clearly, has been hugely facilitated by the flow of information, styles, and currencies across old sovereign boundaries. The signifying practices on which it is based appear to flourish, more than most things, with space-time compression.

This is not to imply that the young form a “homogeneous, sociological category of people which thinks, organizes and acts” in coherent ways (Seekings 1993: xiv). The fact that youth culture is increasingly capacious in its reach does not mean that the situation of “kids,” or the nature of their social experience, is everywhere the same. But it *is* to say that, in recent times, this segment of the population has gained unprecedented autonomy as a social category *an und für sich*, both in and for itself; this in spite, or maybe because, of its relative marginalization from the normative world of work and wage. In many Western contexts they, along with other disenfranchised persons (notably the homeless and the unemployed), constitute a kind of counternation: a virtual citizenry with its own twilight economies, its own spaces of production and recreation, its own modalities of politics with which to address the economic and political conditions that determine its plight (Venkatesh 1997).

As a consequence, youth tend everywhere to occupy the innovative, uncharted borderlands along which the global meets the local. This is often made manifest in the elaboration of creolized argots, of streetspeak and cybertalk, that give voice to imaginative worlds very different from those of the parental generation. But these borderlands are also sites of tension, particularly for disadvantaged young people from postrevolutionary societies, from inner cities, and from other terrors incognita who seek to make good on the promises of the free market; also for anyone who jostles against the incivilities, illegalities, and importunities of these precocious entrepreneurs. In the late twentieth century, the image of youth-as-trouble has gained an advanced capitalist twist as impatient adolescents “take the waiting out of wanting” by developing remarkably diverse forms of illicit enterprise²⁰—from drug trafficking in the urban United States, through the “bush” economies of West and Central Africa, which trade diamonds and dollars, guns and gasoline over long distances (Roitman 1999; De Boeck 1999),

20. The phrase “take the waiting out of wanting” was the advertising slogan of a major British credit card in the 1970s. The “twilight” economies at issue here are seldom entirely in the hands of the young. The drug trade, for instance, is a vast transnational business that conforms with brutal clarity to the principles of capitalist enterprise. As Sudhir Venkatesh (1997) shows, black youth on U.S. city streets depend upon bosses on whose account they take large risks for small profit.

to the supply of services both legal and lethal. In this they try to link the poles of consumption and production and to break into the cycle of accumulation, often by flouting received rules and conventions. The young have felt their power, power born partly of the sheer weight of numbers, partly of a growing inclination and capacity to turn to the use of force, partly of a willingness to hold polite society to ransom.

Bill Buford (1993: 264–65) has suggested that British soccer fans experience a compelling sense of community in moments of concerted violence. Others have said the same of gangland wars in North American cities, witch burning in the northerly provinces of South Africa, and cognate social practices elsewhere. Is it surprising, then, that so many juveniles see themselves as ironic, mutant citizens of a new world order? Or that the standardized nightmare of the genteel mainstream is an increasingly universal image of the adolescent, a larger-than-life figure wearing absurdly expensive sports shoes, headphones blaring gangsta rap, beeper tied to a global underground economy—in short, a sinister caricature of the corporate mogul? Is this not a dramatic embodiment of the dark side of consumerism, of a riotous return of the repressed, of a parallel politics of class, social reproduction, and civil society?

Precisely because of its fusion of monstrosity, energy, and creativity, this figure also subsumes some of the more complex aspects of millennial capitalism, if in the manner of a grotesque: its tendency to spark the pursuit of new ways and means for the production of wealth; its ambivalent, contradictory engagement with the nation-state; its play on the presence and absence of civil society. It is to these three faces of the “rough beast, its hour come round at last,” that we now turn.

Three Faces of Millennial Capitalism

Liberal democracy . . . has never been . . . in such a state of dysfunction. . . . Life is not only distorted, as was always the case, by a great number of socio-economic mechanisms, but it is exercised with more and more difficulty in a public space profoundly upset by techno-tele-media apparatuses and by new rhythms of information and communication, . . . by the new modes of appropriation they put to work, by the new structure of the event and its spectrality.

Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

Occult Economies and New Religious Movements: Privatizing the Millennium A striking corollary of the dawning Age of Millennial Capitalism has been the global proliferation of “occult economies.”²¹ These economies have two dimensions: a material aspect founded on the effort to conjure wealth—or to account for its accumulation—by appeal to techniques that defy explanation in the conventional terms of practical reason; and an ethical aspect grounded in the moral discourses and (re)actions sparked by the (real or imagined) production of value through such “magical” means. It is difficult, of course, to quantify the presence of the occult—and, therefore, to make any claim to its increase. As we note above, finance capital has always had its spectral enchantments, its modes of speculation based on less than rational connections between means and ends. Both its underside (the pariah forms of gambling of which we spoke a moment ago) and its upper side (a fiscal industry, embracing everything from insurance to stock markets) have been rooted, from the first, in two inscrutables: a faith in probability (itself a notoriously poor way of predicting the future from the past) and a monetary system that depends for its existence on “confidence,” a chimera knowable, tautologically, only by its effects. Wherein, then, lies the claim that occult economies are presently on the rise?

In the specific context of South Africa, we have demonstrated (1999b, 1999c) that there has been an explosion of occult-related activity—much of it violent, arising out of accusations of ritual killing, witchcraft, and zombie conjuring—since the late apartheid years. These also include fantastic Ponzi schemes, the sale of body parts for “magical” purposes, satanic practices, tourism based on the sighting of fabulous monsters, and the like. Here middle-class magazines run “dial-a-diviner” advertisements, national papers carry headline articles on medicine murders, prime-time television broadcasts dramas of sorcery, and more than one “witchcraft summit” has been held. Patently, even here we cannot be sure that the brute quantum of occult activity exceeds that of times past. But what *is* clear is that their reported incidence, written about by the mainstream press in more prosaic, less exoticizing terms than ever before (Fordred 1999), has forced itself upon the public sphere, rupturing the flow of mediated “news.” It is this rupture—this focus of popular attention on the place of the arcane in the everyday production of value—to which we refer when we speak of a global proliferation of occult economies.

21. This section owes much to an earlier essay (1999b), in which we explore the rise of occult economies in South Africa.

It is not difficult to catalogue the presence of occult economies in different parts of the world. In West Africa, for example, Peter Geschiere (1997), among others, has shown how zombie conjuring is becoming an endemic feature of everyday life, how sorcery and witchcraft have entered into the postcolonial political economy as an integral element of a thriving alternative modernity, how magic has become as much an aspect of mundane survival strategies as it is indispensable to the ambitions of the powerful (see also Bastian 1993). Nor is all of this based in rural situations or among poor people. In South Africa a recent case involved a well-known physician: she was “turned into a zombie” by a “Nigerian devil-worshipper,” who, having rendered her insensate, took a large sum of money from her bank account.²² By labeling the accused a Nigerian devil worshipper, the report ties the menace of the satanic to the flow of immigrants across national borders.

Nor is this only an African phenomenon. In various parts of Asia occult economies thrive, often taking surprising turns (see Morris, in this issue). In Thailand—where fortune-telling has been transformed by global technology and e-mail divination has taken off—one “traditional” seer, auspiciously named Madam Luk, reports that her clients nowadays ask three questions to the exclusion of all others: “‘Is my company going broke?’ ‘Am I going to lose my job?’ and ‘Will I find another job?’”²³ In the United States, too, the fallout of neoliberal capitalism is having its impact on magical practice. There is, for instance, a growing use (“seeping into the grassroots” of the U.S. heartland and taking its place beside other millennial pursuits) of tarot readings as a respectable form of therapy—described by the director of the Trends Research Institute as a low-cost “shrink in the box.”²⁴ By these means are psychology, spirituality, and fortune-telling fused.

Sometimes dealings in the occult take on a more visceral, darker form. Throughout Latin America in the 1990s, as in Africa and Asia, there have been mass panics about the clandestine theft and sale of the organs of young people, usually by unscrupulous expatriates (Scheper-Hughes 1996). Violence against

22. Mzilikazi Wa Afrika, “I Was Turned Into a Zombie: Doctor Says She Endured Eight Days of Torment After a Devil-Worshipper Lured Her into a Trap,” *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg) [Extra], 11 July 1999, 1.

23. Uli Schmetzer, “Letter from Bangkok: Thai Seers Dealt Reversal of Fortune,” *Chicago Tribune*, 18 November 1997, 4.

24. Connie Lauerman, “Got a Problem? Pick a Card: Tarot Has Moved out of the Occult Realm—to Become the Low-Cost ‘Shrink in a Box,’” *Chicago Tribune*, Tempo Section, 4 December 1997, 1, 13.

children has become metonymic of threats to social reproduction in many ethnic and national contexts, the dead (or missing) child having emerged as the standardized nightmare of a world out of control (Jean Comaroff 1997a). There, and in other parts of the globe, this commerce—like international adoptions, mail-order marriage, and indentured domestic labor—is seen as a new form of imperialism, the affluent North siphoning off the essence of poorer “others” by mysterious means for nefarious ends. All of which gives evidence, to those at the nether end of the global distribution of wealth, of the workings of insidious forces, of potent magical technologies and modes of accumulation.

That evidence reaches into the heart of Europe itself. Hence the recent scares, in several countries, about the sexual and satanic abuse of children (La Fontaine 1997); about the kidnapping and murder of street “urchins,” most recently in Germany by “Russian gangs,” for purposes of organ harvest and export; about the alleged “trafficking in women [especially] from . . . nations of the former Soviet bloc” for prostitution, labor, and other “personal services” in Western Europe, the Americas, Japan, and China.²⁵ Again, the United States is not exempt from anxieties over the pilfering of human bodies and body parts for profit. Note, for just one extreme instance, the urban myth that traversed the Internet in 1997 about the secret excision of kidneys, by apparently incredible means, from business travelers.²⁶

In other contexts, the occult concentrates itself in purely financial dealings. Thus there seems to have been an extraordinary intensification of pyramid schemes lately, many of them tied to the electronic media. These schemes, and a host of scams allied with them—a few legal, many illegal, some alegal—are hardly new. But their recent mushrooming across the world has drawn a great

25. There have been countless stories in British tabloids about the sexual and satanic abuse of children. For an especially vivid one, see Brian Radford, “Satanic Ghouls in Baby Sacrifice Horror,” *News of the World* (London), 24 August 1997, 30–31. Its two subtitles—“Cult Is Cover for Pedophile Sex Monsters” and “They Breed Tots to Use at Occult Rites”—reflect well the moral panic to which they speak. On the kidnapping of German children for these purposes see “Children Killed for Their Organs,” *Sunday World* (Johannesburg), 31 October 1999, 10; the report, based on German secret service documents from Berlin, originated with Reuters. The quotation about the trafficking in women is in Vladimir Isachenkov, “Enslaving Women from Former Soviet Bloc is Widespread,” *Santa Barbara News-Press*, 8 November 1997, A8; see also Denis Staunton, “Couple on Trial for Child Torture Offer,” *Guardian* (London), 8 August 1997, 13.

26. According to this urban myth, whose telling is always accompanied by authenticating detail, the victim is offered a drink at an airport—New Orleans appears to be a favorite—and awakes in a hotel bath, body submerged in ice. A note taped to the wall warns him not to move, but to call 911. He is asked, by the operator, to feel carefully for a tube protruding from his back. When he finds one, he is instructed to remain still until paramedics arrive: his kidneys have been harvested.

deal of attention—partly because of their sheer scale and partly because, by crossing national borders and/or registering at addresses far from the site of their local operation, they insinuate themselves into the slipstream of the global economy, thereby escaping control. Recall the ten or so whose crash sparked the Albanian revolution early in 1997, several of which took on almost miraculous dimensions for poor investors. One pyramid manager in Albania, according to the *New York Times*, was “a gypsy fortune teller, complete with crystal ball, who claimed to know the future.”²⁷ Even in the tightly regulated stock markets of the United States there has been a rise in illegal operations that owe their logic, if not their precise operation, to pyramids: another *New York Times* report attributes this to the fact that investors are presently “predisposed to throw dollars at get-rich-quick schemes.” Six billion dollars were lost to scams on the New York Stock Exchange in 1996.²⁸ These scams also bring to mind others that arise from a promiscuous mix of scarcity and deregulation, among them, the notorious Nigerian-based “419,” a truly transnational con that regularly traps foreign businessmen into signing over major assets and may actually have fabricated a national election at home (Apter 1999); also the Foundation for New Era Philanthropy, a U.S. pyramid created “to change the world for the glory of God.” On the basis of a promise to double their money in six months, its founder, John Benett, persuaded five hundred nonprofit organizations, Christian colleges, and Ivy League universities to invest \$354 million.²⁹ The line between Ponzi schemes and evangelical prosperity gospels is very thin indeed.³⁰

All of these things have a single common denominator: the allure of accruing wealth from nothing. In this respect, they are born of the same animating spirit as casino capitalism; indeed, perhaps they *are* casino capitalism for those who lack the fiscal or cultural capital—or who, for one or another reason, are reluctant—to gamble on more conventional markets. Like the cunning that made straw into gold (Schneider 1989), these alchemic techniques defy reason in promising unnaturally large profits—to yield wealth without production, value without

27. Edmund L. Andrews, “Behind the Scams: Desperate People, Easily Duped,” *New York Times*, 29 January 1997, 3. See also Celestine Bohlen, “Albanian Parties Trade Charges in the Pyramid Scandal,” *New York Times*, 29 January 1997, 3.

28. See Leslie Eaton, “Investment Fraud Is Soaring Along with the Stock Market,” *New York Times*, 30 November 1997, 1, 24. Eaton also notes that these scams have been facilitated “by the rise of low cost telecommunications and . . . the internet.”

29. “Charity Pyramid Schemer Sentenced to 12 Years,” *Chicago Tribune*, 23 September 1997, 6.

30. Large-scale scams have occurred in Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and other former communist countries; see Andrews, “Behind the Scams.” They are also common in Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999b).

effort. Here, again, is the specter, the distinctive spirit, of neoliberal capitalism in its triumphal hour. So much for the demise of disenchantment.

Speaking of the neoliberal spirit, occult economies have close parallels in the spread of new religious movements across the planet. To wit, the latter may be seen as holy-owned subsidiaries of the former. These movements take on a wide variety of guises. In the case of the Vissariontsi, “disenchanted Soviet intellectuals” who follow a traffic warden-turned-messiah, members renounce their earthly wealth for life in the City of Sun, a congregation in Siberia that recalls a communist farm. The Second Coming here, led by a man with a sense of both history and irony—a City of *Sun*, in Siberia? A career in Russian *traffic* management for the Son of God?—envisages a future in the past, a hereafter (or therebefore?) that recaptures the glories of a socialist commune.³¹ But the renunciatory orientation of the Vissariontsi is not usual among new religious movements at the millennium. Much closer to the global mood of the moment are fee-for-service, consumer-cult, prosperity-gospel denominations. These creeds are well exemplified by any number of neo-Pentecostal sects; best perhaps by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (*Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*), a denomination of Brazilian origin which, true to its name, has opened up outposts in many parts of the world (Kramer 1999).

The Universal Church reforms the Protestant ethic with enterprise and urbanity, fulsomely embracing the material world. It owns a major television network in Brazil, has an elaborate web site, and, above all, promises swift payback to those who embrace Christ, denounce Satan, and “make their faith practical” by “sacrificing” all they can to the movement.³² Here Pentecostalism meets neoliberal enterprise. In its African churches, most of them (literally) storefronts, prayer meetings respond to frankly mercenary desires, offering everything from cures for depression through financial advice to remedies for unemployment; casual passersby, clients really, select the services they require. Bold color advertisements for BMWs and lottery winnings adorn altars; tabloids pasted to walls and windows carry testimonials by followers whose membership was rewarded by a rush of wealth and/or an astonishing recovery of health. The ability to deliver in the here and now, itself a potent form of space-time compression, is offered as the measure of a genuinely global God, just as it is taken to explain the power of satanism (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999b); both have the instant effi-

31. Tom Whitehouse, “Messiah on the Make in Sun City,” *Observer* (London), 30 May 1999, 26.

32. The phrases in quotes were uttered to us in 1997 by a Universal Church pastor in Mafikeng, South Africa, where the denomination is growing fast: it has two storefront chapels, several rural centers, and a much watched daily program on the local television channel.

cacy of the magical and the millennial. As Kramer (1999: 35) says of Brazilian neo-Pentecostals, “Inner-worldly asceticism has been replaced with a concern for the pragmatics of material gain and the immediacy of desire. . . . The return on capital has suddenly become more spiritually compelling and imminent . . . than the return of Christ.” This shift is endemic to the new religious movements of the late twentieth century. For them, and for their many millions of members, the Second Coming evokes not a Jesus who saves, but one who pays dividends. Or, more accurately, one who promises a miraculous return on a limited spiritual investment.

Why? How—to put the matter more generally—are we to account for the current spread of occult economies and prosperity cults?

To the degree that millennial capitalism fuses the modern and the postmodern, hope and hopelessness, utility and futility, the world created in its image presents itself as a mass of contradictions: as a world, simultaneously, of possibility and impossibility. This is precisely the juxtaposition associated with cargo cults and chiliastic movements in other times and places (Worsley 1957; Cohn 1957). But, as the growth of prosperity gospels and fee-for-service movements illustrates, in a neoliberal age the chiliastic urge emphasizes a privatized millennium, a personalized rather than a communal sense of rebirth; in this, the messianic meets the magical. At the end of the twentieth century, the cargo, glimpsed in large part through television, takes the form of huge concentrations of wealth that accrue, legitimately or otherwise, to the rich of the global economy—especially the enigmatic new wealth derived from financial investment and management, from intellectual property and other rights, from cyberspace, from transport and its cognate operations, and from the supply of various post-Fordist services. All of which points to the fact that the mysterious mechanisms of a changing market, not to mention abstruse technological and informational expertise, hold the key to hitherto unimaginable fortunes amassed by the ever more rapid flow of value, across time and space, into the fluid coordinates of the local and the global; to the much mass-mediated mantra that the gap between the affluent and the indigent is growing at an exponential rate; and to the strange convolutions in the structural conditions of labor, discussed above, that seem at once to reduce and produce joblessness by altering conventional terms of employment, by feminizing the workforce, and by deterritorializing proletariats.

This, of course, is the flip side of the coin: the sense of impossibility, even despair, that comes from being left out of the promise of prosperity, from having to look in on the global economy of desire from its immiserated exteriors. Whether it be in post-Soviet Central Europe or postcolonial Africa, in Thatch-

erite Britain or the neoliberal United States, in a China edging toward capitalism or neo-Pentecostal Latin America, the world-historical process that came to be symbolized by the events of 1989 held out the prospect that everyone would be set free to accumulate and speculate, to consume, and to indulge repressed cravings in a universe of less government, greater privatization, more opulence, infinite enterprise. For the vast majority, however, the millennial moment passed without visible enrichment.

The implication? That, in these times—the late modernist age when, according to Weber and Marx, enchantment would wither away—more and more ordinary people see arcane forces intervening in the production of value, diverting its flow toward a new elect: those masters of the market who comprehend and control the production of wealth under contemporary conditions. They also attribute to these arcane forces their feelings of erasure and loss: an erasure in many places of community and family, exacerbated by the destabilization of labor, the translocalization of management, and the death of retail trade; a loss of human integrity, experienced in the spreading commodification of persons, bodies, cultures, and histories, in the substitution of quantity for quality, abstraction for substance.³³ None of these perceptions is new, as we have said. Balzac (1965: 418, 117) described them for France in the 1840s, as did Conrad (1957) for prerevolutionary Russia; Gluckman (1959), moreover, spoke of the “magic of despair” that arose in similarly dislocated colonial situations in Africa. Nonetheless, to reiterate, such disruptions are widely *experienced* throughout the world as intensifying at a frightening rate at present. Which is why the ethical dimensions of occult economies are so prominent; why the mass panics of our times tend to be moral in tone; why these panics so often express themselves in religious movements that pursue instant material returns and yet condemn those who enrich themselves in nontraditional ways. To be sure, occult economies frequently have this bipolar character: At one level, they consist in the constant quest for new, magical means for otherwise unattainable ends; at another, they vocalize a desire to sanction, even eradicate, people held to have accumulated assets by those very means.

Occult economies, then, are a response to a world gone awry, yet again: a world in which the only way to create real wealth seems to lie in forms of power/knowledge that transgress the conventional, the rational, the moral—thus to multiply available techniques of producing value, fair or foul. In their cultural

33. This progressive sense of loss, it hardly needs saying, has been a touchstone of the culture industry throughout the 1990s: consider such “condition of England” films as *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off*, their European parallels (*The Dreamlife of Angels*, for example), and innumerable non-Western counterparts.

aspect, they bespeak a resolute effort to come to terms with that power/knowledge, to account for the inexplicable phenomena to which it gives rise, and to plumb its secrets. The unprecedented manifestation of zombies in the South African countryside, for instance, has grown in direct proportion to the shrinking labor market for young men. The former provides a partial explanation for the latter: the living dead are commonly said to be killed and raised up by older people, witches of wealth, to toil for them (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999b), thereby rendering rural youth jobless. There are, in this era of flexitime employment, even part-time zombies, a virtual working class—of pure, abstract labor power—that slaves away at night for its masters. In this context, furthermore, the angry dramas during which ritual murderers are identified often become sites of public divination. As they unfold, the accusers discuss, attribute cause, and give voice to their understanding of the forces that make the postcolony such an inhospitable place for them. This is an extreme situation, obviously. But in less stark circumstances, too, these economies tend to spawn simultaneous strivings to garner wealth *and* to put a stop to those who do so by allegedly misbegotten means.

As all this suggests, appeals to the occult in pursuit of the secrets of capital generally rely on local cultural technologies: on vernacular modes of divination or oracular consultation, spirit possession or ancestral invocation, sorcery busting or forensic legal procedures, witch beliefs or prayer. But the use of these technologies does not imply an iteration of, a retreat into, “tradition.” On the contrary, their deployment in such circumstances is frequently a means of fashioning new techniques to preserve older values by retooling culturally familiar signs and practices. As in cargo cults of old, this typically involves the mimicking of powerful new means of producing wealth (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xv–xvi).

In short, the rise of occult economies—amidst and alongside more conventional modes of economic practice that shade into the murky domains of crime and corruption—seems overdetermined. This, after all, is an age in which the extravagant promises of millennial capitalism run up against an increasingly nihilistic, thoroughly postmodern pessimism; in which the will to consume outstrips the opportunity to earn; in which, relatively speaking, there is a much higher velocity of exchange than there is of production. As the connections between means and ends become more opaque, more distended, more mysterious, the occult becomes an ever more appropriate, semantically saturated metaphor for our times. Not only has it become commonplace to pepper media parlance, science-speak, psychobabble, and technologese with the language of enchantment; even the drear argot of the law is showing signs of the same

thing.³⁴ And we all remember voodoo economics, that Reagan-era insult to the rationality of Caribbean ritual practice. But, we insist, occult economies are not reducible to the symbolic, the figurative, or the allegorical. Magic is, everywhere, the science of the concrete, aimed at making sense of and acting upon the world—especially, but not only, among those who feel themselves disempowered, emasculated, disadvantaged. The fact that the turn to enchantment is not unprecedented, that it has precursors in earlier times, makes it no less significant to those for whom it has become an integral part of everyday reality. Maybe, too, all this describes a fleeting phase in the long, unfinished history of capitalism. But that makes it no less momentous.

Of all the enchantments that accompanied the First Coming of Capitalism, perhaps the most perduring was nationalism. And the nation-state, a political community—conjured always out of difference, often against indifference—that gave the Durkheimian conscience collective a distinctive, effervescent twist. Recently, as everyone knows, there has been much talk of its death, especially with the end of the Age of Empire, the close of the Cold War, and the onset of the postcolonial era; it is as if the Treaty of Westphalia has finally given way to the Failure of the West. We shall consider this view, and the articulate dissent it has provoked, in a moment. What *is* beyond question, however, is that the Second Coming, the dawning Age of Millennial Capitalism, has had complex, controversial effects on the present and future of the nation-state.

Alien-Nation, Hyphen-Nation, Desti-Nation: The Future of the Nation-State and the Fetishism of Law

In its broad outlines, the scholarly debate over the current condition of *the* nation-state—the definite, singular article—has become something of a cliché. The thesis that the hyphenated modernist polity is being dramatically subverted, doomed even, has been rehearsed ad infinitum, with varying degrees of nuance; aspects of it have been foreshadowed in what we have already said.

Nation-states, from this vantage, have been rendered irrelevant by world market forces (1) because capital has become uncontrollable and keeps moving, at its own velocity, to sites of optimum advantage; (2) because the global workforce has become ever more mobile as job seekers, increasingly managed by private agencies, migrate ever further in pursuit of even the most menial of jobs, under even

34. We were struck by one recent instance that resonates so obviously with our concerns here: Michael Metelits, speaking of labor legislation in the “new” South Africa, referred to it as a “tricky, not to say occult business.” See Michael Metelits, “‘Toiling Masses and Honest Capitalists,’” *Work to Rule: A Focus on Labour Legislation*, supplement to *Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), 15–21 October 1999, 11.

the most feudal of conditions;³⁵ and (3) because these human flows seem, in varying proportions, to elude surveillance, despite the highly repressive mechanisms often put into place to monitor national frontiers. Under such conditions, it is said, state regulation of both capital and labor becomes obsolete, impossible; so, too, do fiscal designs that run counter to the mechanisms of global markets and/or the imperatives of global corporations. As Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson (1996: 175–76), who argue the antithesis, put it, “[States] can no longer independently affect the levels of economic activity or employment within their territories. . . . [Their] job is to provide the infrastructure and public goods needed at the lowest possible cost.”

In its historical framing, this thesis sees the leitmotif of the twentieth century as the “battle between government and the marketplace” (Yergin and Stanislaw 1998), the latter winning out to the point that “public sectors are shrinking, deregulation is everyone’s priority, state companies are being auctioned off to private investors, and Wall Street is the most powerful influence on economies everywhere” (Garten 1998: 7). As Sassen (n.d.: 4–5) notes, this perspective casts the strength of the nation-state in a zero-sum opposition to the global economy —note, not to neoliberal capitalism, nor globalization *tout court*, but to the global *economy*. Where one gains, the other must lose. Thus, says Robert Ross (1990: 206–7, 218), until recently the regulatory role of national governments expanded progressively. Now, however, corporations are able to prevail on states “to restrain regulations, cut taxes, and allocate more public funds toward subsidizing production costs,” which puts “global capital in a position to *demand* changes in state policy” (211, emphasis ours). Taken together, this adds up to the prognosis that, “in the long run, the power of the state, of centralized government, will weaken everywhere, an inevitability which will change profoundly the very texture of history” (Lukacs 1993: 157).

In all this, as will be clear, it is the workings of transnational corporations, and especially the mobility of their productive operations, that are held accountable for the imminent demise of the nation-state. Others have also laid causal stress on the fiscal mechanics of the world economy, in particular on their technological transformations. Joel Kurtzman (1993), for example, holds that the growth of a global electronic economy—based on an “electronic commons” in

35. A striking example of the management of the global workforce by private agencies is Staff Solutions, a U.K. company that recruits foreigners—producing them “like magic”—to toil in British agriculture for a pittance under “new feudal conditions” that the U.K. government has refused to regulate, preferring to allow neoliberal enterprise free reign. “New Feudalism Is Flourishing in an English Country Garden,” *Guardian* (London), 26 August 1995, 37.

which virtual money and commodities may be exchanged instantly via an unregulated world network of computers—has shattered the integrity of sovereign polities (85–86, 214–15): it has eroded their monopolistic control over the money supply, their capacity to contain wealth within borders, and even their ability to tax citizens or corporations. From this perspective, the emergence of a global economy is said to be undermining the nation-state by deconstructing currency, credit, and customs boundaries—which formerly gave governments a major means of control over the wealth of their nations—by creating mobile markets across the planet, thus dispersing the production and circulation of value. Which is why, it is so commonly said, many states are finding it impossible to meet the material demands placed upon them by their citizenry or to carry out effective economic development policies; why few can adequately house, feed, school, and ensure the health of their populations; why even fewer can see their way clear to settling their national debt or reducing their deficits; why only a handful can be confident about the replacement of infrastructure over the medium term; why almost none have the capacity to control their money supply, let alone flows of goods and people; and why a growing number have shown a startling inability to regulate violence.

The thesis has also been argued in terms other than the simply economic, of course. The eroding boundedness of the nation-state, its loss of sovereignty as a commonwealth of signs, has been variously attributed, not least on the pages of this journal, to the impact of planetary cultural flows and electronic media (see e.g., Appadurai 1990; Hannerz 1989: 69–70; Moore 1989; Foster 1991); to the assertive spread of transnational communities, social movements, and identities; to the universalization of many aspects of the law (if not of justice; Silbey 1997: 209), the expansion of tribunals that subject national jurisdictions to supranational ones (Darian-Smith 1995, 1999), and the rise of an intercontinental commercial arbitration establishment (Garth and Dezalay 1996); to “worldkill,” the commodification of violence that makes it possible for corporations, political blocs, shadow states, or nations to rent soldiers on the Internet, to arrange for the application of force in breach of sovereign borders, even to buy a coup from a multinational company (John L. Comaroff 1996);³⁶ to the shift in dominant patterns of warfare from confrontations between countries to civil conflicts that tend to translocalize themselves, to kill higher proportions of civilians than ever before, and to feed an arms industry that has metamorphosed from a highly regulated import-export business

36. See, for example, Doug Brooks, “SA Private Armies Can Supply Peacekeepers to DRC,” *Star* (Johannesburg), 3 November 1999, 10.

to a global trade in illicit gun-running;³⁷ to the assimilation of many of the traditional functions of government either into the private sector or into supranational combinations.

As Peregrine Worsthorne recently noted, in an essay tellingly entitled “Farewell to England’s Nation State,” the “only area where [the country] remains independent and sovereign is sport.” On which Patriotic Front, he adds laconically, “miserable results say all that needs to be said.” Even here, labor has become a mobile commodity as citizens of convenience take the field in acquired (“naturalized”) colors; although it is true that this is perhaps the most significant, sentiment-inspiring, trauma-inducing site of national effervescence in many parts of the world.³⁸ In every other domain, Worsthorne continues, English institutions, all of them dysfunctional, have been replaced by more effective international or global ones. “But who cares?” he asks. “It is time to change our thinking.”³⁹ This from a notable public intellectual, in Britain’s most widely read conservative newspaper, about *England*, self-appointed cradle of modernity, democracy, and the state—not some struggling postcolony still trying to throw off the effects of the Age of Empire.

Some do care—and are not prepared to give up so easily on the salience of the nation-state. It is not yet time, says Khachig Tölölyan (1991: 5), “to write [its] . . . obituary.” Turner (n.d.: 25), for one, argues that the “development of the global capitalist system” has “not led to any withering away of the state” at all. Quite the opposite, the relevance of “[nation-]state boundaries” has been heightened; contemporary states, especially successful ones, still “attempt to regulate, encourage or obstruct flows of workers, capital and commodities across their borders” (25). In stark contrast to the likes of Kurtzman, Turner also speaks of the perceived “need for national economies to remain competitive under global conditions” (23–24); a far cry, this, from the notion that there no longer is any such thing. Similarly Hirst and Thompson (1996: 17): “The globalization of production,” they hold, “has been exaggerated.” Companies, of which few are truly transnational (see above), are “tethered to their home economies and are likely

37. See, for example, Richard Norton-Taylor and Owen Bowcott, “Deadly Cost of New Global Warfare,” *Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), 29 October–4 November 1999, 20.

38. See “The High Price of Defeat,” *Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), 5–11 November 1999, 21, in which it is noted that losses by national teams may cause the fall of governments. In New Zealand, a recent defeat in the Rugby World Cup had such a “shattering” effect on the “national psyche” that a local “university is offering grief counselling.” See “Blues Counselling for All Black fans,” *Star* (Johannesburg), 5 November 1999, 1.

39. Peregrine Worsthorne, “Farewell to England’s Nation State,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), 29 June 1988, 14.

to remain so” (2). Also overstated are claims for “the dominance of world markets and their ungovernability” (6); in point of fact, financial flows and trade are concentrated in the “triad” of North America, Europe, and Japan (2). Here, in a nutshell, is the countercase.

This antithetical position has a nontrivial political dimension for its advocates, especially those on the left. To the degree that globalization dissolves the sovereign nation-state into a sea of planetary economic forces and legal jurisdictions, it would appear to negate any real prospect of progressive or proletarian politics—be they international or intranational—as they would have no terrain on which to occur, no concrete object in terms of which to frame itself, no obvious target against which to act (cf. Hirst and Thompson 1996: 1; Ahmad 1992: 317).⁴⁰ We share the concern. As it is, there is a strong argument to be made that neoliberal capitalism, in its millennial moment, portends the death of politics by hiding its own ideological underpinnings in the dictates of economic efficiency: in the fetishism of the free market, in the inexorable, expanding “needs” of business, in the imperatives of science and technology. Or, if it does not conduce to the death of politics, it tends to reduce them to the pursuit of pure interest, individual or collective—or to struggles over issues (the environment, abortion, health care, child welfare, human rights) that, important though they may be, are often, pace Jameson (1999: 47), dissociated from anything beyond themselves. It is here that the analytic case for the sustained salience of the modernist polity merges into the normative case for its desirability.

A parenthetical comment here. There are those who would muddy the argument by pointing out that the notion of a strong nation-state has always been something of a fantasy. This on three grounds: the state, the nation, and the hyphen. Recall, in respect of the first, Philip Abrams (1988: 75–77), for whom the state was always “the distinctive collective *misrepresentation* of capitalist societies”: an “essentially imaginative construction,” it was, at once, a “triumph of concealment” and an ongoing “ideological project.” Even more extreme is Ralph Miliband’s (1969: 49) famous claim that “the ‘state’ . . . does not, as such, exist.” Shades here of things written long ago. Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer (1985: 7) remind us that Marx (1967) believed the state to be “in an important sense an illusion . . . : [it] is at most a message of domination—an ideological artifact attributing unity, structure and independence to the disunited, structureless and dependent workings of the practice of government.” For Weber (1946: 78), too, it

40. This is not to say that there have not been efforts to create new forms of politics. Derrida 1994, for example, posits the possibility of a “new International,” the formulation of which, however, has drawn criticism from, among others, Aijaz Ahmad (1999: 104–5).

was “a *claim* to legitimacy, a means by which politically organized subjection is simultaneously accomplished and concealed, and it is constituted in large part by the activities of institutions of government themselves” (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985: 7). A truly curious force of history, this: at once an illusion, a potent claim to authority, a cultural artifact, a present absence and an absent presence, a principle of unity masking institutional disarticulation. But nothing like the kind of essentialized “thing” that much of the current debate treats either as alive or dead. Likewise the nation: the enormous literature on the topic—both before and after *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983)—makes it abundantly clear that neither at its dawn nor in its high modernist phase was this polity homogeneous, that even its European exemplars were as different as they were alike. What is more, their capacity to regulate boundaries and to control flows—of capital and cultural property, communications and currencies, persons and information—was invariably incomplete in the face of transnational pressures and incentives. So, too, was their hold over the loyalty of their citizens and subjects. Indeed, the nation-state has always and everywhere been a work in progress, nowhere a fully realized accomplishment. The same may be said, by extension, of its hyphenation: of the articulation of state to nation. Politics across the planet vary hugely in both the extent to which, and the manner in which, nation and state are conjoined in them, of which more shortly.

In part, it is just such complexities that have led to reformulations of the argument from both sides—and to the opening up of a middle ground. Even those who have made the case most forcibly for the continuing relevance of the nation-state do not deny that it is undergoing transformation or that it has been weakened in some respects in the face of global capitalism (see, e.g., Hirst and Thompson 1996: 170–71). The problem, of course, is to specify *how* it has changed. For some, its metamorphosis is captured in an aphoristic shift, an apt metaphor for the millennial moment: Philip McMichael (1998: 113), for one, speaks of the substitution of the “citizen state” for the “consumer state.” This is a polity, adds Susan Hegeman (1991: 72–73), in which identity, at all levels, is defined not merely by the consumption of objects, but also by the consumption of the past (89–91). Echoes, here, of Jean Baudrillard (1998); also of the language of national charters, in which the protection of consumers takes precedence over the protection of workers and citizens are redefined as “stakeholders.”

More substantively, synthetic positions typically begin by deconstructing the zero-sum opposition between globalization and the autonomous functioning of nation-states. Few would continue to deny that the sovereign independence of the latter *has* contracted, not least in the realms of economic management, defense,

and communications; that, for all their efforts to regulate the flow of labor, their hold over the mobility of people, inward or outward, *has* been more or less undermined; that their parliamentary politics *are* devoted, in increasing proportion, to safeguarding the operations of the market, to providing stable and secure environments for transnational corporations, and to attracting overseas investment. In this respect, add Hirst and Thompson (1996: 179), it is also true that, without international warfare and conventional enemies, the state *does* become less immediately significant to its citizens; “national efficiency” (in such things as industrial growth, education, health care, welfare, and the provision of infrastructure) *does* diminish; and solidarity, save for sporting allegiances, *does* pale. At the same time and in counterpoint, Sassen (n.d.: 6–9) observes, “most global processes materialize in national territories, [largely] through national institutional arrangements, from legislative acts to firms.” These may be transformed in the process, but they remain perceptibly national in their location and operation. To be sure, Sassen continues, states often participate actively in setting up those fiscal and legal frameworks through which the global economy works, and without whose specialized instruments it could not exist—they are not just inert objects on which that economy impacts. Nor are they inert objects in the face of the emergence of regional economic spheres that breach their frontiers—whether these be officially constituted, like the Oresund Region in Scandinavia (Peebles n.d.), or spaces of unregulated activity dominated by armed factions, like the Chad Basin in West Africa. With regard to the latter, in fact, Janet Roiman (1998) demonstrates that, far from proclaiming the demise of the nation-state, these transnational networks exist in complicated, mutually perpetuating, often complicitous relations with it; this notwithstanding the fact that those who control the networks—often very powerful armed factions—compete with government for financial and regulatory ascendancy. In doing so, they depend on the very national frontiers they transgress and the institutions of the state in order to produce wealth; conversely, the state establishes its own legitimacy, and justifies its own existence, by doing battle with these armed factions.

It is also the case, as we have intimated, that not all nation-states submit to the demands of the global economy without some mediation or intervention; few administrations would survive if they did. Take postcolonial South Africa again: while the African National Congress (ANC) government is unreservedly committed to participating in the global capitalist economy, its new labor laws seek to protect workers in ways that do not simply serve the interests of transnational business; quite the opposite, employers have protested these laws for that very reason. Whether or not they will survive, and what their effects will be over the

long run, is still very much in question. But the general point of which this is an exemplary instance—that nation-states *do* seek to hold a measure of control over the terms on which their citizens engage with the market—will be clear. So too will the fact that the processes by which millennial capitalism is taking shape do not reduce to a simple narrative according to which the nation-state either lives or dies, ebbs or flourishes. Its impact is much more complicated, more polyphonous and dispersed, and most immediately felt in the everyday contexts of work and labor, of domesticity and consumption, of street life and media-gazing.

This brings us back full circle to the relationship between the nation-state and millennial capitalism—which, we reiterate, is not synonymous with globalism, although globalization is an inherent part of it. Rounding off the dialectics of the argument we have just outlined, we would like to make a few points about this relationship. All flow from things already said.

Let us begin with the most basic. There is an antinomy at the heart of the contemporary history of the modernist polity. On one hand, there is no such thing, save at very high levels of abstraction, as “*the* nation-state.” Self-evidently, the sociology of the polities that exist under its sign varies dramatically. It is difficult to establish any terms in which, say, Germany and Guinea, Bhutan and Belgium, Uganda and the United States, England and Eritrea may be held to belong to anything but the most polythetic of categories. Nor are the substantive differences among them—differences that are *growing* as a result of their engagement with global capitalism—satisfactorily captured by resort to vapid oppositions, to conventional contrasts like rich versus poor, North versus South, successful versus unsuccessful countries. In some places, as we all know, the state can hardly be said to perdure at all, or to perdure purely as a private resource, a family business, a convenient fiction; in others, the nation, as imagined community, is little more than a rhetorical figure of speech, the color of a soccer stripe, an airline without aircraft, a university rarely open. More complicatedly, there are many postcolonial, postrevolutionary polities, not least but not only in Africa and the former Soviet Union, in which there have developed deep fissures between state and government, this being a corollary of the transition from old to new regimes, in which, as often as not, the power brokers, bureaucrats, and administrative personnel of the past are either left in situ—typically to ensure the confidence of foreign investors—or succeed in finding less visible ways to keep their hands on the levers of authority. Almost invariably, this sets in motion a struggle into which neoliberal capitalist enterprise inserts itself, often with decisive effects. On occasion, too, as in Russia (Ries 1999), organized crime seizes on that struggle to fashion itself into a spectral, underground para-state, providing civic amenities

and policing on a fee-for-service basis (cf. Derrida 1994: 83). This, in turn, leads to the popular impression that government has retreated, that order has evaporated, that the nation-state is no longer.

On the other hand, despite this variability in their political sociology, nation-states *appear*, at least in their exterior forms, to be more similar than ever before, converging on the same notions of the rule of law, enacting similar constitutions, speaking more and more English, borrowing from a single stock of signs and symbols, worshipping together at the altar of Adam Smith, and, yes, all alike dealing with the impact of the global economy—as well as the sense of crisis, real or imagined, to which its implosion has given rise. Even the strongest, for reasons we have spelled out, find themselves hard put to sustain past levels of public expenditure and/or the costs of infrastructural reproduction. Many of them, moreover, have been witness both to calls for “less government” and to a widening rupture in their hyphen-nation; in the disarticulation, that is, between nation and state. Indeed, the assertion of civil society *against* the state, itself a burgeoning global phenomenon, is just one symptom of that disarticulation. Of, so to speak, alien-nation. Again, none of this is unprecedented. Throughout their history, states have suffered legitimation crises, been held to account for excessive public spending, and had to deal with threats to the integrity of the political community. That, however, does not diminish their significance in the white heat of the millennial moment.

The millennial moment.

As the term suggests, it is out of the current sense of change and crisis, especially in its impact on the hyphen-nation of the modernist polity, that the millennial dimensions of millennial capitalism reenter our narrative in two ways.

First, it is striking that almost everywhere that occult economies have arisen, the perceived need to resort to magical means of producing wealth is blamed, in one way or another, on the inability of the state to assure its national citizens a regular income: to protect them from destitution as productive employment migrates away across its borders; to stop the inflow of immigrants and others who divert the commonweal away from autochthons; to incarcerate criminals, witches, and other nefarious characters who spoil the world for upright, hard-working people. The state is also held culpable for failing to safeguard those upright people from violence. To wit, when communal action is taken—in the name of informal justice, cultural policing, or whatever—against those who ply the immoral economy, it is often in the millennial hope of restoring coherence and control in a world run amok, of filling the void left by the withdrawal of the

state and making good on its sundered obligation to the nation (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999d).

Second, in the face of the same rupture, there is a strong tendency for states to appeal to new or intensified magicalities and fetishes in order to heal fissures and breaches in the fabric of the polity. Here, again, an interpolation: recall our comments on the question of identity. For reasons alluded to earlier (and explored *in extenso* elsewhere; John L. Comaroff 1996) one of the most notable corollaries of the changing face of nationhood in the neoliberal age, and especially after 1989, has been an explosion of identity politics. Under these conditions, imagining the nation rarely presumes a “deep horizontal fraternity” any longer, not even in what once regarded themselves as the most undifferentiated of polities. While the vast majority continue to live as citizens *in* nation-states, they tend to be only conditionally, partially, and situationally citizens *of* nation-states. Ethnic struggles, ranging from polite altercations over resources to genocidal combat, seem immanent almost everywhere as membership is claimed on the double front of innate substance and primordial sentiment, as culture becomes intellectual property (Coombe 1998), as indigenous knowledge becomes an object of commerce, as aboriginal spirituality becomes the site of a consumerist quest (Povinelli, in this issue), as self-imaginings, visual representations, even genes become copyright incarnate.⁴¹ In the event, homogeneity—as “national fantasy” (Berlant 1991), national aspiration (Anderson 1983), national imperative—is giving way rapidly to a recognition of the irreducibility of difference. All of which puts even greater stress on hyphen-nation; all of which presses even more the necessity of finding its millennial key. The more diverse nation-states become in their political sociology, the higher the level of abstraction at which “*the* nation-state” exists, the greater the imperative to find that key. By their very nature, as David Harvey (1989: 108) notes, modernist states had always “to construct a . . . sense of community . . . based on [more than] money,” and, hence, to conjure up “a definition of public interests over and above the [bourgeois] class and sectarian interests” they served. They still have to fabricate that sense of community. But, with the displacement of class, the interests that they have now to encompass lie in cultural and other forms of identity.

That states rely on magical means to succeed in the work of hyphen-nation, of articulating nationhood, is a point recently made by Michael Taussig (1997) and

41. Even those considered, by popular stereotype, to be anything but “modern” have taken to asserting legal rights over their mass-mediated image. The !Xoo, a San group in Namibia, are suing for the use of pictures of themselves in postcards and an airline magazine advertisement, claiming financial compensation. Bobby Jordan, “San People in Legal Action over ‘Insulting’ Ad,” *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), 31 October 1999, 9.

Fernando Coronil (1997), each in his own way. A resort to mass-mediated ritual both to produce state power and national unity and to persuade citizens of their reality is epidemic in the age of millennial capitalism—in rough proportion, perhaps, to populist perceptions of crisis, to the inability of governments to sustain their monopoly over the means of violence and the flow of wealth, and to the alienation of their subjects. Thus, suggests Eric Worby (1998: 560), in those parts of Africa where the hold of ruling cadres is tenuous at best, executive authority has become dependent on the performance of quotidian ceremonial, extravagant in its dramaturgy and improvisational content alike, to ensure the collusion of citizen-subjects. The latter, he goes on (562; after Mbembe 1992a: 3–4), live with the state in a promiscuous hybrid of accommodation and refusal, power and parody, embodiment and detachment. This, in turn, tends to rob “the public” of its vitality and, reciprocally, vulgarizes the political—with it, nationhood as well—reducing it to a chimera, which creates the need for yet more magic.

Here, it seems, lies the key to the magicity of the state in the age of millennial capitalism. It is not just that ruling regimes resort to theatrical display or to illusion to conjure up the present and future of the political community, its destination; this has always been true, from Elizabethan royal progresses (cf. Geertz 1977) to the trumped-up rites of colonial regimes (cf. Fields 1985). It is, rather, that they become caught up in cycles of ritual excess in which ceremonial enactments of hyphen-nation, alike in electronic space and real time, stand as alibis for realpolitik—which recedes ever further as its surfaces are visible primarily through the glassy essence of television, the tidal swirl of radio waves, the fine print of the press. By constantly narrating hyphen-nation, moreover, these ceremonial enactments tend to draw attention to its fragility, to the ineluctable differences on which the body politic is built, to the divergence of interests that it must embrace. State ritual itself, then, becomes something of a pyramid scheme: the more it is indulged, the more it is required. Hence its cyclicality, its excess, its millennial qualities.

But it is not only in the register of ritual that nation-states engage with the millennial. Another crucial dimension is the fetishism of the law, of the capacity of constitutionalism and contract, rights and legal remedies, to accomplish order, civility, justice, empowerment. Like all fetishes, the chimerical quality of this one lies in an enchanted displacement, in the notion that legal instruments have the capacity to orchestrate social harmony. This misses a point once cogently made, in prose fiction, by Carlos Fuentes (1992), namely that power produces rights, not rights power; that law in practice, by extension, is a social product, not a prime

mover in constructing social worlds. Still, like many fetishes—including the “free” market itself—this one continues to survive its repeated demystification.

The modernist nation-state has, from the first, been grounded in a culture of legality. Its spirit, with a nod to Montesquieu, has always been the spirit of the law. Globalization and the growth of neoliberal capitalism intensify this by an order of magnitude. The latter, because of its contractarian conception of human relations, property relations, and exchange relations, its commodification of almost everything, and its celebration of deregulated private exchange, all of which are heavily invested in a culture of legality.⁴² The former, because of the way in which it demands new institutional modes of regulation and arbitration to deal with new forms of property, practice, and possession—as well as with the abrogation of old jurisdictional lines and limits (cf. Jacobson 1996; Salacuse 1991; Shapiro 1993). But the fetishism of the law goes way beyond this.

In situations of ruptured hyphen-nation, situations in which the world is constructed out of apparently irreducible difference, the language of the law affords an ostensibly neutral medium for people of difference—different cultural worlds, different social endowments, different material circumstances, differently constructed identities—to make claims on each other and the polity, to enter into contractual relations, to transact unlike values, and to deal with their conflicts. In so doing, it forges the impression of consonance amidst contrast, of the existence of universal standards that, like money, facilitate the negotiation of incommensurables across otherwise intransitive boundaries.⁴³ Hence its capacity, especially under conditions of moral and cultural disarticulation, to make one thing out of many, illocutionary force out of illusion, concrete realities out of often fragile fictions. Hence, too, its hegemony, despite the fact that it is hardly a guarantor of equity. As an instrument of governance, it allows the state to represent itself as the custodian of civility against disorder: as having a mandate to conjure moral community by exercising the monopoly of which Harvey (1989: 108) spoke—a monopoly over the construction of a commonweal out of inimical, immanently fractious diversities of interest. This, in large part, is reflected in the rash of new constitutions written since the late 1980s. If law underpins the *langue* of neoliberalism, constitutionalism has become the *parole* of universal human rights, a global argot that individuates the citizen and, by making cultural

42. Hence the affinity between neoliberal economics and the work of the “law and economics” school of legal theory closely associated with the University of Chicago Law School. Almost any recent text emanating from that school will serve to substantiate the point.

43. We have made a parallel argument for the salience of law to colonial states—which, in this respect, foreshadowed the situation we describe here; see John L. Comaroff 1998.

identity a private asset rather than a collective claim, transmutes difference into likeness. It is an open question whether or not these constitutions yield any empowerment at all. (Interestingly, the celebrated South African one has recently been dubbed a Tower of Babel: it is utterly incomprehensible in the vernaculars of those whom it was supposed to enfranchise.⁴⁴) After all, as we have said, not one of them actually speaks of an entitlement to the means of survival. They do not guarantee the right to earn or to produce, only to possess, to signify, to consume, to choose. This is consistent not only with the neoliberal mood of the millennium but also with another of its panaceas: the renaissance of procedural democracy, a “universal human right” that transposes freedom into choice by offering empowerment through the ballot—the black box that reduces politics to the rough equivalent of a quinquennial shopping spree (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997)—all in the name of the rule of law, of its magical capacity to promise new beginnings.

But cultures of legality, constitutionality, right, and democracy speak primarily to the question of hyphen-nation, to moral community and citizenship, from the discursive vantage of the state and its functionaries. From the other side of the hyphen, from the side of “society *against* the state,” there has emerged another, complementary discourse of populist, millennial optimism: civil society.

Postnative, Posthuman, Postscript: Civil Society in Pursuit of the Millennium

More than any other sign, perhaps, civil society has surfaced as the Big Idea of the Millennial Moment;⁴⁵ indeed, as an all-purpose panacea for the postmodern, postpolitical, postnative, even “posthuman” condition.⁴⁶ Its recent genealogy, before and after 1989, is too well known to detain us here (see, e.g., Walzer 1992; Cohen and Arato 1994; Krygier 1997), save to say that the more of a global obsession it has become, the less clear it is what the term might actually *mean*—as a concrete object(ive), as an abstract concept, or as a political practice. Civil society, it seems, is known primarily by its absence, its elusiveness, its incompleteness, from the traces left by struggles conducted in its name. More aspiration than achievement, it retreats before the scrutinizing gaze. For all those, like

44. Goloa Moiloa, “Constitutional Tower of Babel,” *Sunday World* (Johannesburg), 31 October 1999, 16.

45. The topics discussed in this section are dealt with in extenso in Comaroff and Comaroff 1999a.

46. *Postnative* is used by Geertz (1995: 6) to describe Obeyesekere’s subject position in his debate with Sahlins over the death of Captain Cook, but it applies as well to the generic subject in the age of neoliberal capitalism. *Posthuman* appears for the first time, to our knowledge, in Hayles 1999.

Václav Havel (n.d.), who seek a way *Toward a Civil Society*, there are others who deny the point of so doing. Why? Some, like Michael Hardt (1995: 27), argue that we are already in the “postcivil society” era, an era incapable of producing the conditions of its possibility. Others simply dismiss it as an inherently polymorphous, inchoate, unspecifiable signifier. Worse yet, it is said to conflate an analytic construct with an ideological trope, thus rendering the former promiscuous and the latter vacuous (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999a).

In spite of this, *civil society* has served as a remarkably potent battle cry across the world. During inhospitable times, it reanimates the optimistic spirit of modernity, providing scholars, public figures, poets, and ordinary people alike a language with which to talk about democracy, moral community, justice, and populist politics; with which, furthermore, to breathe life back into “society,” declared dead almost twenty years ago by the powerful magi of the Second Coming, especially Maggie Thatcher. Amidst *fin de siècle* cynicism and retrospection, protagonists of civil society look bravely toward a new world. True, their idyll has been disparaged for its excessive Eurocentrism, for its naive liberalism, for re-presenting old-style imperialism in a seductive new garb, and for the manner of its export by such latter-day evangelists as non-governmental organizations. True, too, it has been downsized, localized, tailored to the neoliberal age; purged, in short, of global historical visions and grand emancipatory dreams (cf. Cohen and Arato 1994: xii). But, notwithstanding the skepticism, the Idea—the fetish—has worked its magic, kindling a reformist spirit all over the place as it promises rescue from the political vacuum of post-modern nihilism.

What is it, then, about civil society that so fires the moral imagination? What makes it such a trenchant trope for these millennial times? An answer is to be found in the parallels between the history of the here and now and the history of the First Coming of the Idea in the late eighteenth century; the post-Enlightenment age in Europe, that is, that spawned the hyphenated nation-state, the concepts of political economy, culture, the civil, civility, civilization—and the distinction between “the state” and something that came to know itself as “society” (cf. Keane 1988a: 15).

It is common cause that the world-historical conditions of the late eighteenth century embraced philosophers and everypersons alike in a phenomenology of uncertainty (Becker 1994: xii–xiv); a sense of unease occasioned by the intersection of epochs, at which time the generic nature of humanity, of sociality, of selfhood and its abstraction in labor, property, and rights, of the value of things, of received means and ends was under ontological reconstruction. Though they

could not have known it, they were living at the front end of an Age of Revolution (Hobsbawm 1962), an age that posed profound issues of practical epistemology. Those issues were formulated, in the first instance, in political terms: they grew out of a malaise of governance, of populist opposition to absolutist rule and monarchical despotism (see, e.g., Woods 1992: 79; Keane 1988b: 65).

But behind the surfaces of the political were working much more fundamental processes of reconstruction: those attendant upon the advance of capitalism and commodity relations; upon the birth of the right-bearing citizen-subject; upon the empowerment of the bourgeoisie and the emergence of a public “with its own opinion[s]” and “interests” (Taylor 1990: 108; cf. Habermas 1989); upon the dawn of modernist nationhood; upon the rise of what Crawford Macpherson (1962) was famously to dub “possessive individualism.” In light of these processes, the problem of “the social” presented itself with particular force. How, given the erosion of old ways of being and knowing—not to mention the expanding scale and cumulative abstraction of human relations—was the present and future of “society” to be grasped? Wherein lay its moral, material, and regulatory moorings? It became imperative, says Tester (1992: 7), to “explain how society was [even] possible” in a world in which “time-honoured answers were collapsing through mixtures of political crisis, intellectual enlightenment, technological development and the . . . rapid urbanization of social life”; in which new, national divisions of labor were taking root amidst the encroachment on everything of finance; in which the sanctity of the family was seen to be at risk; in which people, things, and nature (cf. Coronil, in this issue) were being objectified in an altogether unprecedented manner. In which the prospect of Adam Smith’s faceless “society of strangers” stalked disturbingly close to hand—novel specters of a haunted gothic fiction dramatized the strangeness of what had become real (Clery 1995: 174).

It is not hard to see why, at the time, discourses of civil society, in both their analytic and utopic registers, should have focused on the issues that they did: on the relationship between state (or, more generally, political authority) and society; on the posited existence, in the space between the citizen and the sovereign polity, of an interpolated public with its own will; on the role of voluntary associations in providing alternative loci for the achievement of the commonweal; on a democratizing image of self-generating moral community, whose elemental atom was the Christian family; on the significance of the free market in underwriting the prosperity of that community; on the capacity of commerce to inscribe civility in a new civics. Foreshadowing here of Hegel, Simmel, Durkheim, Habermas.

The parallels with the present are more than obvious; indeed, they knit together all the various strands of our portrait of the Age of Millennial Capitalism. Now, as then, the call for civil society typically presents itself as an emancipatory reaction to a familiar doubling: on one hand, to the greater opacity, intrusiveness, and monopolistic tendencies of government; on the other, to its diminishing capacity “to satisfy even minimally the political and economic aspirations” of its component publics (Haynes 1997: 16), to guarantee the commonweal, or to meet the needs of its citizenry. Thus, for example, in Central Europe the pursuit of the Idea, which took on millennial features from the first, is said to have arisen in response to increasingly repressive communist rule—and in postcolonial times, to have been sustained by the memory of Soviet excesses (see, e.g., Rupnik 1988; Krygier 1997). In the West, a cause for it has been found in burgeoning corporatism of the state (Taylor 1990: 95–96) and a disenchantment with politics *tout court*. And in Africa it is ascribed to the rise of antistatist, promarket populism occasioned by the collapse of totalitarian regimes (Young 1994: 36), whose “politics of the belly” (Bayart 1993) and vulgar spectacles of power (Mbembe 1992b) persuaded citizens that governments no longer “champion society’s collective interests” (Haynes 1997: 2).

But this, too, speaks purely to surfaces. Now, as then, the roots of the process lie deeper: in the interiors, and the animating forces, of the Age of Millennial Capitalism—in particular, in its impulse to displace political sovereignty with the sovereignty of “*the market*,” as if the latter had a mind and a morality of its own; to reorder the ontology of production and consumption; to reconstruct the essence of labor, identity, and subjectivity; to disarticulate the nation from the state; to reduce difference to sameness by recourse to the language of legality; to elevate to first causes “value-free” technological necessity and the ostensibly neutral demands of economy; to treat government as immanently undesirable, except insofar as it deregulates or protects “market forces”; to fetishize “the law” as a universal standard in terms of which incommensurable sorts of value—of relationship, rights, and claims—may be mediated; to encourage the rapid movement of persons and goods, and sites of fabrication, thus calling into question existing forms of community; to equate freedom with choice, especially to consume, to fashion the self, to conjure with identities; to give free reign to the “forces” of hyperrationalization; to parse human beings into free-floating labor units, commodities, clients, stakeholders, strangers, their subjectivity distilled into ever more objectified ensembles of interests, entitlements, appetites, desires, purchasing “power.” And so to raise the most fundamental question of all: In what consists the social? Society? Moral community?

Here, then, is our point. As in the late eighteenth century, and in strikingly similar fashion, the Idea of Civil Society makes its appearance just as the fabric of the social, the possibility of society, the ontological core of humanity, the nature of social distinction, and the essence of identity are being dramatically challenged; just as we experience an epochal metamorphosis in the organization of production, labor, and the market, in technology and its sociocultural implications, in the constitutive connections between economy and polity, nation and state, culture and place, person, family, and community; just as we find it impossible to sustain the dominant terms of modernist sociology-as-lived, of received anthropologies of knowledge, of our geographical grasp of an increasingly four-dimensional world (Harvey, in this issue). Amidst populist moral panics, mass-mediated alienation, crises of representation, and scholarly perplexity, Civil Society, in its Second Coming, once more becomes especially “good to think,” to signify with, to act upon. The less substance it has, the emptier its referents, the more this is so; which is why its very polyvalence, its ineluctable unfixability, is intrinsic to its power as panacea. It is the ultimate magic bullet in the Age of Millennial Capitalism. For it promises to conjure up the most fundamental thing of all: a meaningful social existence. And, thereby, to lay to rest—for now at least—Adam Smith’s ghostly phantasm: the Society of Strangers.



We have argued that many of the enigmatic features of economy and society circa 2000—be they the allegorical transfiguration of the nation-state, the assertive stridency of racinated adolescence, the crisis of masculinity, the apotheosis of consumption, the fetishism of civil society, the enchantments of everyday life—are concrete, historically specific outworkings of millennial capitalism and the culture of neoliberalism. For all their apparent polysemy and disarticulation, these things are closely interrelated, all at once rooted in the past and new in the present. Together, they point to the fact that we inhabit an age that is both revolutionary and yet is also an ongoing chapter in the story of capital, a story that, in Theodor Adorno’s (1981: 96) phrase, “sound[s] so old, and yet [is] so new.” Despite the proclamations of neoliberal prophets, history has not come to an end. Nor will it soon. As Felipe Fernandez-Armesto (1999) puts it, “Millenarianism will survive the millennium.” Today’s apocalypse will become tomorrow’s mundane reality, laying down the terms of a dialectic out of which human beings will struggle to make sense of the world, to make livelihoods, politics, communities.

Already there are signs of altered configurations, of fresh efforts to challenge the triumphal reign of the market, to turn aside the sweeping consequences of

transnational economic pressures. In the wake of fragmenting national identities, Turner (n.d.) observes, newly assertive social movements have begun to pursue common cause on a world scale, forging an alternative, critical “global civil society.” It is too early, patently, to take the measure of their success. But their “passionate intensity,” to invoke the spirit of Yeats one last time, might yet kindle the mature politics of a new age; “the worst” might yet become the best. There are also signs that organized labor is seeking expansive ways and means to deal with the emergent economic order. Thus a leading unionist: “The end of the century is the starting point of . . . an international labor fightback. . . . Global unionism is born.”⁴⁷

We can only hope. History, of course, will determine the substance of the politics of the twenty-first century. For our part, we find it unimaginable that innovative forms of emancipatory practice will not emerge to address the excesses of neoliberal capitalism. But that is in the future. For now, in introducing this special issue of *Public Culture*—a rich array of analyses of, among other things, economy and society, the production of knowledge, the fashioning of public spheres and popular discourses, the nature of nature, citizenship, subjectivity, and identity—we seek to stress the epistemic importance of critical distance. Of a refusal, that is, to be seduced into treating the ideological tropes and surface forms of the culture of neoliberalism—its self-representations and subjective practices, identities and utilities—as analytic constructs. Life, under millennial capitalism, is neither a game nor a repertoire of rational choices. It is irreducible to the utilitarian pragmatics of law and economy or to methodological individualisms of one kind or another. Indeed, these and other theoretical discourses are part of the problem. Critical disbelief, in pursuit of a reinvigorated praxis, is the beginning of a solution.

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47. Frank Nxumalo, “Global Capital Can Bank on Worldwide Resistance,” *Sunday Independent* (Johannesburg), 7 November 1999, *Business Report*, 1. The unionist is John Maitland, president of the International Chemical Energy Mining and General Workers Union, which represents 20 million workers.

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