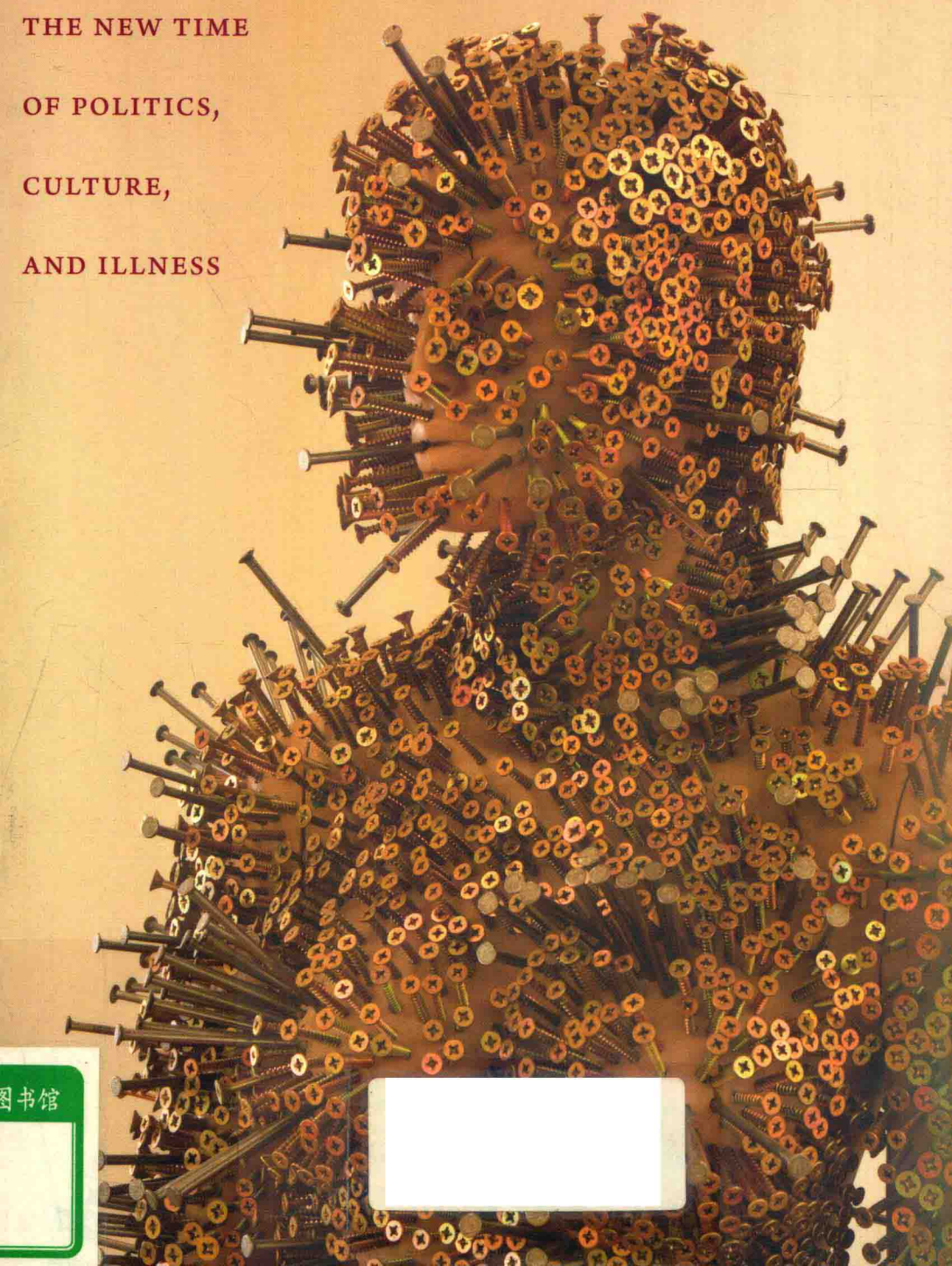
THE ALREADY DEAD

Eric Cazdyn

THE NEW TIME OF POLITICS, CULTURE, AND ILLNESS



The Already Dead

The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness

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INTRODUCTION

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When asked whether he would see a new patient, a psychoanalyst wanted to know if it was an emergency. "No, the patient's relatively stable, functional, adjusted—not in crisis," the referring doctor replied. "Oh no!" the analyst exclaimed. "In that case I better see him right away."

What attracts me to this scenario is the short-circuiting of a whole series of expectations and assumptions, not only about psychoanalysis, but about crisis, time, illness, cure, capitalism, life, death, and politics—the very problems around which this book is organized. The lesson here is that if you really want to understand a system and make significant change (and not just manage symptoms), you must look away from what appears to be the immediate crisis and toward the crisis that is at work even when the system is functioning well. This crisis constitutes the system itself; the system cannot function without its internal crisis. Psychoanalysis is less about digging up buried treasures than about carefully inspecting the ground—a relentless listening to and intervention with the patient when he or she is most functional and thus symptomatic (or most symptomatic and thus functional). Psychoanalysis, therefore, is not a last-ditch effort at disaster relief. It might serve as an object lesson to study why this project of psychoanalysis departs so radically from the vast majority of cultural representations of

psychoanalysis, representations in television, film, not to mention many clinical case studies in which the "aha moments" are perfectly cued by close-ups, cloying music, or narrative momentum. *Crisis is not what happens when we go wrong; crisis is what happens when we go right.*

The logic of this last sentence will serve as a sort of mantra throughout this work. Take, for example, capitalism: crisis is not what happens when capitalism goes wrong, but when it goes right. In this light, Alan Greenspan's mea culpa in October 2008 (when the bankruptcies and bailouts began to flow) is particularly revealing. Greenspan was shocked; he thought he understood how things worked. But what really shocked Greenspan is that today's capitalism is still capitalism. He believed that we were in some mode of production that could have the productivity and wealth-generation of capitalism without capitalism's crises, or at least a capitalism in which the crises could be managed by mathematicians and derivative dealers. What a horror it must have been for Greenspan to realize that capitalism is still the system it has always been: one that cannot suspend its fundamental rules of profit creation and expansion under any circumstances (and thus cannot suspend class conflict, gender inequality, imperial violence, brutal dispossessions, ecological destruction, and psychological suffering). The point is that crisis is built right into the system of capitalism—not only when it busts, but when it booms.

Exploitation occurs within capitalism, therefore, not only when pensions disappear, jobs are slashed, and factories burn down, but it is also present when contracts are obeyed and factories are clean and safe. To prove this point, one should consider the valorization of surplus value and the logic of the commodity. For example, the inequality built into capitalism is due not simply to the pursuit of profit or so many bad capitalists, but to the seemingly natural and benign control a capitalist has over a worker's labor power. That labor power is reproduced daily with the making, selling, and buying of commodities—especially when the capitalist is kind, compassionate, and humane. Such an understanding of capitalism, one that emphasizes a larger structural logic over the personalities of the individual actors, is, in fact, the foundation of all economic theories, from neoclassical to Marxist. Moreover, understanding capitalism in such a way compels us not to moralize cheaply about factory layoffs or be incredulous about financial meltdowns. These should be expected by anyone who understands capitalism. In other words, these adverse effects are not simply

about greedy politicians and corrupt executives. There are plenty of them. But to focus on them is a strategic error.

In March 2009, headlines were filled with outrage over the bonuses paid to Wall Street executives. The problem, however, was, and still is, not the bonuses at American International Group, but the radical inequality of income that sustains the larger economic system itself. Yes, outrage should be directed at the executives who received lavish bonuses despite selling the very financial products that exacerbated the meltdown. But a more focused and sustained outrage should be directed at the hard socioeconomic fact that these executives make $15,000 an hour compared to the $8 an hour of the custodial staff. Somehow this legal and even celebrated model of wealth distribution does not deserve our condemnation, but the latest scandal or public humiliation does. The great trauma of the economic meltdown of 2008, I believe, is only now descending upon us. That trauma has to do with the recognition that capitalism is still here, that despite the most significant economic crisis since the Great Depression the very structures in place since capitalism's inception have not substantially changed. It is brutal enough to lose one's job or one's home due to the crisis, but when very little changes in the process then we lose on both fronts. We lose our savings and our exhilaration, if not our joy, at watching the system give way—not to mention our desire, however unconscious, for the world to be organized differently.

This rethinking of crisis returns us to the anecdote about the psychoanalyst and to the problem of time. If crisis is always at work and not a sign that something has gone wrong, then how might we understand the *time* of crisis? Crisis used to be defined by its short-termness—requiring a decision on the spot, with no possibility of deferral, evasion, or repression. A crisis means we can, perhaps, suspend our usual rules and ethical standards because we must "act now!" But something has happened on the way to the shelter. The bombs have been launched, but they are suspended overhead, allowing us to continue on with our lives under the shadow of destruction. If crisis is always already with us, if it is the rule of the system rather than its exception, then in what cases could we justify suspending our principles? Would we have to live by them all the time? Or would this new temporality of crisis demand the rethinking of our society's cherished principles altogether?

Rethinking the meaning of crisis not only affects our temporal experi-

ence of the present, but also colonizes and preempts claims upon the future. Paul Virilio once argued that what defines the post–Cold War moment of accelerated communications and military technologies is a deadly simultaneity, a temporality in which a target is destroyed the moment it becomes visible. "When a missile threatening in 'real time' is picked up on a radar or video, the present as mediatised by the display console already contains the future of the missile's impending arrival at its target."[1] To see the enemy is to have already killed him. This logic intensifies an older paradigm in which one first scopes a target before trying to kill it. The converse logic holds that one kills the target even though one does not see it. Instead of precision bombs, we have under this converse logic carpet or cluster bombs and casualties, intended and unintended, that are identified after the fact. The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the improvised weapons detonated by suicide bombers, also fall into this lethal category.

This series of military logics, however, requires one more turn: today one kills the target but it does not die, at least not immediately. The target has been killed but has yet to die. There is a time warp at work, one in which the future has already come and is still to come, a double future. We can think about ecological predictions that forecast the end of natural resources and how it is already too late to reverse this categorical trend, or we can return to the military realm and consider how posttraumatic stress disorder attacks the soldier in the future for acts committed or witnessed in the present. In both cases there is a looping of time in which the future is spelled out in advance, granting to the meantime an impossible location that is heading somewhere and nowhere at once. But this is not a simple fortune telling, a determination already decided and thus eliminating contingency. This is, rather, a radically different experience and operation of time, one in which categories such as determination and contingency are refunctionalized. Or, even more to the point, this is an experience of time that enables the very shifting of how time works.

The paradigmatic condition illustrating the already dead is that of the medical patient who has been diagnosed with a terminal disease only to live through medical advances that then turn the terminal illness into a chronic one. The disease remains life threatening, still incurable, even though it is managed and controlled, perhaps indefinitely. The patient is now afforded a meantime that functions like a hole in time, an escape route

to somewhere else *and* a trap door to where he began. Freud could only anticipate this double future in 1937 in a letter to Marie Bonaparte, written two years before his death and while he was in great physical and psychological pain (due to oral cancer and Nazi advances in Austria, respectively): "In order to find all of this bearable, one must remind oneself constantly that one really has no right to be living any longer."[2]

Freud's statement is symptomatic of his moment, while something qualitatively different is at work today. Of course, our present shares much in common with the modernity of Freud's time, but to tease out the differences we might want to invert Freud's statement: in order to find the current moment unbearable, we must remind ourselves that we really have the right to die. This is less about euthanasia, masochism, or legalized suicide than a certain relation to time, a relation to the present and the future, as well as the capacity to shape these temporal realities. Whereas Freud's project was to make the unbearable bearable by way of psychoanalytical practice, ours is to make the bearable unbearable by any means possible or, and perhaps more important, by any means impossible—unbearable to the extent that we cannot help but act toward another way of feeling and being, and impossible to the extent that we cannot help but act even in the face of an unavoidable fate.[3]

What is the relation between unbearability and revolution? Or between bearability and the status quo? Or between deadening environments (both social and ecological) and our relationship to death itself? This is where politics, culture, and medicine come together, especially around the concept of the already dead and the problem of time. We have entered a new chronic mode, a mode of time that cares little for terminality or acuteness, but more for an undying present that remains forever sick, without the danger of sudden death. The maintenance of the status quo becomes, if not quite our ultimate goal, what we will settle for, and even fight for. If the system cannot be reformed (the cancer eradicated, the ocean cleaned, the corruption expunged), then the new chronic mode insists on maintaining the system and perpetually managing its constitutive crises, rather than confronting even a hint of the terminal, the system's (the body's, the planet's, capitalism's) own death. In this work, I produce this concept of "the chronic," place it in the context of late capitalism, and track it in the political-economic, cultural, and medical realms. Departing from how changing medical practices (dominated by a new paradigm of targeted

drug therapy and biotechnology) have reconfigured standard notions of "cure," as well as the meanings of "acute," "terminal," "crisis," and "meantime," I explore the radical and reactionary effects of this temporal shift.

Like cure in the medical realm, revolution has become the leper category for politics and culture. Revolution is thought to be old-fashioned, an embarrassing desire, hopelessly utopian, a mistaken objective in need of quick and certain displacement. The phrase "political revolution" sounds only slightly less ridiculous today than its ugly, disreputable cousin, "cultural revolution." The new chronic mode in medicine, in which the utopian desire to cure is displaced by the practical need to manage and stabilize, if not preempt the disease altogether (practiced in fields as varied as oncology, HIV, and psychiatry), is also at work in politics and culture. I am highly skeptical of this mode. At bottom, my argument is that although there is a progressive aspect of this current drive for management and preemption—a drive to transform the terminal into the chronic that is perhaps most obviously exemplified by the use of life-saving medications—there is also a reactionary dimension that effectively colonizes the future by naturalizing and eternalizing the brutal logic of the present. This baleful dimension is most effectively revealed when we analyze how the logic of "chronic time" works today in different cultural-political realms. If the possibility of death is removed, if the terminal cannot be even considered or risked, we effectively rule out certain courses of action in the present whose ends cannot be known in advance (precisely because we cannot know if they will end in death or the death of the present system). To remove the possibility of death and settle for the new chronic is to choose the known limits of the present over the unknown freedom of the future.

This leads me to the concept of the already dead as a means of rethinking the relationship between life and death today. I will argue two seemingly contradictory positions: first, that we remove the distinction between life and death, and second, that we simultaneously retain the relative autonomy of life and death. This removal allows us to engage the most pernicious ideologies of life and death. Their separation, in which death is figured as the great terrorist from beyond, requires and justifies the brutal, here-and-now sacrifice of our planet and species in the opportunistic name of rescuing our planet and species. "Better dead than red" was a Cold War way of exploiting this logic (in which communism was represented in the West as even more deadly than death itself and, therefore, requiring the

sacrifice of all sorts of freedoms). More contemporary examples include the dreadfully high number of civilian casualties in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, wars conducted in the name of protecting humanity and civilization, and the gun-to-the-head corporate bailouts following the financial meltdown of 2008. Such political malfeasance is facilitated by, if not conditioned upon, a relationship to death in which death is radically separated from everyday life, and in which the existential terror of death is exploited by figuring it solely as dystopian fantasy.

Stressing the autonomy of death is essential to the consciousness capable of imagining radical change. Death is the pure form of radical change, and once our deaths are taken away from us in the name of the chronic then so is our capacity to imagine other radical possibilities, such as cure and revolution. Our right to die, perhaps not unlike Freud's right to live, is our right to dream—and live in—a radically different present than the one we now inhabit.

A growing number of people today are compelled to live in what I call the global abyss, a no-man's-land that opens up within global capitalism and forces our institutions and thinking to break down. What splits open this broken space are the convergences and contradictory imperatives of both the nation-state and the global system. Whereas the nation-state demands a certain economic outcome, the global system demands another. Whereas the nation-state demands a certain political affiliation, the global system another. Whereas the nation-state demands a certain cultural consciousness, the global system demands yet another. No doubt, there are key points of convergence in which the demands of both are in perfect coordination (it only takes a quick glance at the People's Republic of China to recognize that a strong nation-state can be in perfect coordination with the global system). And there can be no doubt the world is heading toward greater convergence and supplementarity. But right now we live at a moment when the logics of the nation-state and global system are crashing into each other, not to mention the crashing together of different nation-states and different components within nation-states, all occurring within the context of a transformed global space. These collisions leave in their chaotic wake an ideological formation that functions not unlike the new chronic.

The new chronic extends the present into the future, burying in the process the force of the terminal, making it seem as if the present will never

end. Likewise, the global abyss extends all over the world, obscuring the place where globalization processes might end, making it seem as if this entangled national-global space (this functional crash of various uneven components) will never stop, making it seem as if we will be forever stuck in this meanspace. One cannot imagine a place where the processes of globalization stop. And by "stop" I do not mean those places where these processes have not reached, the so-called undeveloped or underdeveloped nations, but a beyond to globalization where a country like the United States is no longer global. It is as impossible to imagine a post-global United States as it is to imagine a future that is not a chronic extension of the present. If this new radical temporality or spatiality were imagined, it would be done so only on the order of a grand apocalyptic finish—a nightmarish fantasy that functions to limit the imagination. This book explores this new ideological configuration in various cultural-political spaces.

I conclude my analysis by returning to the already dead. It should come as no surprise that questions of life and death have been placed at the forefront of the contemporary intellectual agenda. Culture, politics, and medicine have shifted over the past few decades along with the reconfigurations of global capitalism. With these shifts have come four of the richest concepts of intellectual culture. These are Slavoj Žižek's concept of the "undead," Jean-Luc Nancy's "living dead," Giorgio Agamben's "bare life," and Margaret Lock's "twice dead." And each of these concepts moves laterally to overlap with a series of concepts as varied as Lacanian drive, Derridean *différance*, Marxian revolution, Foucauldian biopower. To differentiate the already dead from these other concepts, I will begin by reading them in terms of the problem I have already established: how to extinguish the division between life and death while at the same time retain the autonomy of the two states. In one form or another, these four concepts and that of the already dead all attempt to resolve this problem by how they theorize death. But death is always and ultimately a problem of time; all theorizations of death are at once theorizations of time. I produce the already dead, therefore, in order to foreground this relation between time and death and to explore the various political possibilities that emerge when we think of them together.

The new chronic and the global abyss are ideological formations special to contemporary capitalism. These formations wholly structure our rela-

tion to reality; they build their assumptions into the way bodies and the environment are managed through the logic of capital. They shape our reality to such an extent that they shape the very categories of time and space. The already dead, however, resists full inscription into these ideological formations and shakes up the possibility for an active political resistance. The already dead is not more real (or less ideological) than that of the new chronic or the global abyss, rather it erupts from inside these ideological formations to change everything. The concept of the already dead suggests a future beyond the temporal constraints of the new chronic and the spatial constraints of the global abyss—a future content beyond its own form. The already dead, therefore, do not constitute a political movement in the traditional sense. Rather, they portend a political consciousness that can inspire and inform political movements. The already dead already inhabits revolution—that is, they inhabit a revolutionary consciousness informed by a certain way of living in time and space, and in relation to an unknown and unrealized future.

The new chronic, the global abyss, and the already dead are concepts inspired by my own experience. I was diagnosed with a certain form of leukemia, which at the time of my diagnosis was understood to be terminal but is now considered chronic by way of a new targeted drug that promises to manage the illness far into the future. Of course (of course!), I am quite relieved about this timely turn of events and my returned future. But I refuse to temper my critique due to such a lucky reversal. The drug I take to manage my leukemia binds itself to certain chromosomes, thus interrupting the mutation that would otherwise lead to my certain death. This drug costs such an absurd amount of money (over $45,000 a year) that the expense caused my application for Canadian permanent residency to be initially rejected. But the drug also performs a crucial ideological function that shapes the way we come to terms with everything from politics and culture to the most banal aspects of our everyday lives. This gets to the heart of my study: the paradigm shift in which the older notion of cure has been replaced by a newer notion of "management" (the supplanting of the more radical dimensions of both cure and death by the dimension of the new chronic). This shift has far-reaching and crucial implications—and not only for medicine. How we understand and believe in cure shapes how we understand and believe in a whole host of nonmedical problems, just as the way we understand and believe in revolution shapes how we under-

stand and believe in nonpolitical problems. The very way we imagine the future and act in the meantime is at stake.

I will not invoke my personal diagnosis and the ensuing immigration battle with the Canadian government until I discuss the global abyss—all the while acutely aware that whenever this space is jumped (from the local to the global, from the individual body to the social one, from the personal to the impersonal, from a singular event to the larger series of events and back again) something gets forced, something gets lost, only to reappear again, in-between everything else. Whatever this something in-between is, it is as supple as hope and as hard-felt as a needle in the arm. But this thing is also another way of describing the new chronic, the global abyss, and the already dead. For although these three conditions do not capture everyone, although they are, for many, a safe distance away in a refugee camp, in a makeshift palliative care tent on the edges of a migrant town, or take the form of an unlikely medical diagnosis, these concepts and conditions come together to represent the paradigmatic space of our present situation—one that envelops us all. Though we fall at different speeds and with differing degrees of recognition, we are freefalling together in the global abyss and living together as the already dead. Where we will land, or if we will ever land, is hard to know, but what is certain is that along the way something will be broken (indeed, something has already been broken) and be revealed as so many possibilities.

This takes us back to the opening anecdote about psychoanalysis and the reinterpretation of crisis. What happens when we push the anecdote to its logical end? Or to its logic of the end? When considering whether to end the analytic sessions, the patient asks the analyst if the present time is right. "Well, how are you feeling?" asks the analyst. "Awful. My life is in a shambles and I have nowhere to turn. I'm in the middle of a real crisis." "In that case," says the analyst, " you'd better stop right away." Or does it go like this: "I feel great. My life is wonderful and my work satisfying. Best of all I understand myself and feel more awake." "Oh in that case," says the analyst, "we better continue." There is something missing in both punch lines, or at least there is something insufficient. Is there a way to hold—at the same time—both possibilities? Is there a way to both continue and break off the analysis? This is what the concept of the already dead wishes to do—to make death continuous with life, while maintaining the break of death. Again, this is not restricted to issues of living and dying, but provides a