

Chapter 5

Improvement and Preservation

Or, Usufruct and Use

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o.

“The idea that modernity is, properly speaking, the globalization of Europe” is what the African philosopher Tsenay Serequeberhan calls the pre-text of the European Enlightenment, that “metaphysical belief that European existence is qualitatively superior to other forms of human life.” The condition of possibility of this metaphysical belief is the very idea of Europe as geographical and geopolitical embodiment and exception. The European exception itself has itself certainly been well diagnosed. Critics of colonialism such as Sylvia Wynter have noted that one cannot produce the self-owning, earth-owning individual without producing the figure of man, whose essential inhumanity is evident in his restless theorization and endless practice of race. Indeed, how could a self-owning, earth-owning man *not* belong to a self-owning group instantiated in and on a self-owning world that is, at once, an absolute and expansive locale? This is how and why this self-owning, earth-owning group sets itself apart from other groups—particularly, fundamentally, in violent speciation, from groups that do not own (either self or earth). This speciation comes at the price of those to whom the ones who would be one say they belong, as a matter of blood and soil; the ones who fail to (want to) be exceptional, the sub- or pre-Europeans who have historically taken the form of a (southern or eastern or Islamic or immigrant or counter-imperial) problem/question. What does it mean to imagine one has become (exceptional)? Someone would have had to place the Europeans in the world, to give them the world as their own local, exceptional, but expansive place. Moreover someone would have had to give time to Europe, to grant it world as both the time and place of exception. Someone would have had to except Europe, to allow the constantly emergent state of its exception, to sacralize its politico-theological ground and atmosphere. It is by way, and not in spite, of all this that we speak, in echo of Frantz Fanon, of “that same Europe where they are never done talking of Man” as “an avalanche of murders,” a bloody history of colonialism and slavery that suggests the exception is always insufficiently granted and unwillingly accepted, that it is the impossible object of an empty will’s incapacity for self-imposition.

Exception is a categorization one grants oneself only at the price of imagining that it has been granted by an Other. To declare one's exceptionalism is not a matter of exempting, or excluding, or excusing oneself, all of which are transitive. Exceptionalism imagines the intransitive and attributes action to Others and, more importantly, an originary kind of power to someone else. And it is here that we see how the pre-text Serequeberhan identifies is in fact pre-given in a double sense—it must be given but in order to be given it must also have been granted. There is no dialectic here. Rather, we might say it is only the European who has ever been both master and slave. This is his drama, held in the body, and enacted in the world, he has to have. The exception will have been a power given by an Other to selves who, in taking it and its accompanying knowledge on, are supposed to have been provided, in this give and take, their own confirmation. But the pre-text is never truly grounded, never truly granted, never truly given. Europe is constantly disestablished by what it seeks to envelop, which, in and out of turn, envelops it. What surrounds the European even in his midst is the native informant Gayatri Spivak identifies as a creation text for a world of exception, against, but nonetheless within, the general antagonism of earthly anarrhythmia and displacement. The paradox of the pre-text is thus that being exceptional can no more be taken than it can be given and can no more be claimed than it can be granted. This simultaneity of being-master and being-slave is sovereignty's static, omniscient decline. This is what it is to be chained to the struggle for freedom, a "rational" instrument run amok in place, as man's perpetually stilled motion.

1.

What does it mean to stand for improvement? Or worse, to stand for what business calls a "commitment to continuous improvement"? It means to stand for the brutal speciation of all. To take a stand for speciation is the beginning of a diabolical usufruct. Improvement comes to us by way of an innovation in land tenure, where individuated ownership, derived from increasing the land's productivity, is given in the perpetual, and thus arrested, becoming of exception's miniature. This is to say that from the outset, the ability to own—and that ability's first derivative, self-possession—is entwined with the ability to make more productive. In order to be improved, to be rendered more productive, land must be violently reduced to its productivity, which is the regulatory diminishment and management of earthly generativity. Speciation is this general reduction of the earth to productivity and submission of the earth to techniques of domination that isolate and enforce particular increases in and accelerations of productivity. In this regard, (necessarily European) man, in and as the exception, imposes speciation upon himself, in an operation that extracts and excepts himself from the earth in order to confirm his supposed dominion over it. And just as the earth must be forcefully speciated to be possessed, man must forcefully speciate himself in

order to enact this kind of possession. This is to say that racialization is present in the very idea of dominion over the earth; in the very idea and enactment of the exception; in the very nuts and bolts of possession-by-improvement. Forms of racialization that both Michel Foucault and, especially and most vividly, Cedric Robinson identify in medieval Europe become *usufructed* with modern possession through improvement. Speciated humans are endlessly improved through the endless work they do on their endless way to becoming Man. This is the usufruct of man. In early modern England, establishing title to land by making it more productive meant eliminating biodiversity and isolating and breeding a species—barley or rye or pigs. Localized ecosystems were aggressively transformed so that monocultural productivity smothers anacultural generativity. The emergent relation between speciation and racialization is the very conception and conceptualization of the settler. Maintenance of that relation is his vigil and his eve. For the encloser, possession is established through improvement—this is true for the possession of land and for the possession of self. The Enlightenment is the universalization/globalization of the imperative to possess and its corollary, the imperative to improve. However, this productivity must always confront its contradictory impoverishment: the destruction of its biosphere and its estrangement in, if not from, entanglement, both of which combine to ensure the liquidation of the human differential that is already present in the very idea of man, the exception. To stand for such improvement is to invoke policy, which attributes depletion to the difference, which is to say the wealth, whose simultaneous destruction and accumulation policy is meant to operationalize. This attribution of a supposedly essential lack, an inevitable and supposedly natural diminution, is achieved alongside the imposition of possession-by-improvement. To make policy is to impose speciation upon everybody and everything, to inflict impoverishment in the name of improvement, to invoke the universal law of the usufruct of man. In this context, continuous improvement, as it emerged with decolonization and particularly with the defeat of national capitalism in the 1970s, is the continuous crisis of speciation in the surround of the general antagonism. This is the contradiction Robinson constantly invoked and analyzed with the kind of profound and solemn optimism that comes from being with, and being of service to, your friends.

2.

At the end of the movie *Devil in a Blue Dress*, which is based on the Walter Mosley novel of the same name, and which Robinson delighted in teaching us how to read and see, what comes sharply into relief is the persistent life—which survives under the rule of speciation; which surrounds the speciation that would envelop it; which violates the speciation by which it is infused; which anticipates the speciation that would be its end—of a neighborhood of neat lawns, small family houses, and the Black people who live in them. The movie's last line

simultaneously belies and acknowledges speciation's permanent crisis. Is it wrong to be friends with someone you know has done bad things? asks the movie's protagonist, Easy Rawlins. All you got is your friends, replies Deacon Odell. That's right. That's all. Tomorrow the cops could come back, or the bank, bringing the violence of speciation, against which there is just this constant and general economy of friendship—not the improvement that will have been given in one-to-one relation but the militant preservation of what you (understood as we) got, in common dispossession, which is the only possible form of possession, of having in excess of anyone who has. Neither the globalization of possession-by-improvement nor the achievement of being exceptional is possible. We live (in) the brutality of their failure, which is a failure in and as derivation. Moreover, the sovereign declension (given, in a variation of Denise Ferreira da Silva's grammar as God: Patriarch—Possessive Individual—Citizen) is a derivative—a rigid, reified, securitized understanding of difference. Meanwhile, in the scene it constantly sets on Easy's porch, in Joppy's bar, at John's Place (the illegal speakeasy above a grocery store), *Devil in a Blue Dress* keeps reminding us that the task at hand is, as Manolo Callahan would say, to renew our habits of assembly, which implies a turn, a step away from the derivative. We ain't studying the failure, just like Easy ain't studying no job. We ain't trying to enter the declension that instigates what it implies: the (necessarily failed) separation, speciation, and racialization—the enclosure and settlement—of the earth. The play, as Callahan and Nahum Chandler teach us, is to desediment, to exfoliate, to renew the earthly and inseparable assembly, the habitual jam, by way of and in the differentiation of what will be neither regulated nor understood. All we got is us in this continual giving away of all. And, as Robinson also took great care to teach us in his critical admiration of Easy's friend Mouse, who is always about to blow somebody's nose off, all depends upon our readiness to defend it.

3.

Here is the famous passage on slavery in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* where the “not yet”—its phase as mere “natural human existence”—of the universal appears as a tainted and unnecessary remedy:

If we hold firmly to the view that the human being in and for himself is free, we thereby condemn slavery. But if someone is a slave, his own will is responsible, just as the responsibility lies with the will of a people if that people is subjugated . . . Slavery occurs in the transitional phase between natural human existence and the truly ethical condition; it occurs in a world where a wrong is still right. Here, the wrong *is valid*, so that the position it occupies is a necessary one.¹

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 88. Emphasis in original.

This “not yet” of the universal, of global history, is subsequently reinforced when Hegel says, “The same determination [absolute right] entitles civilized nations to regard and treat as barbarians other nations which are less advanced than they are in the substantial moments of the state.”² But before then, Hegel immediately turns from the first passage and towards the subject of “taking possession” and the “use of the thing.” This “natural entity”—the thing—exists only for its owner “since this realized externality is the use or employment to which I subject it, it follows that *the whole use* or employment of it is *the thing in its entirety*.”³ But then Hegel reaches a problem, just after paradoxically asserting the necessary rectitude of the necessary wrong of slavery in progressive history.

If the whole extent of the use of a thing were mine, but the abstract ownership were supposed to be someone else’s, the thing as mine would be wholly penetrated by my will . . . while it would at the same time contain something impenetrable by me, i.e. the will, in fact the empty will, of someone else.⁴

He calls this a relationship of “absolute contradiction” and then introduces the Roman idea of “*usufructus*.”⁵ In theory, Hegel is addressing feudal property rights, with their shared ownership. But it is he in “natural human existence,” who has failed, as Hegel says in his previous consideration of slavery, to take “possession of himself and become his own property.” Usufruct demands this natural entity be “subordinated to its useful aspect.” Hegel speaks of Roman and feudal property but his concern is world history, this (necessarily European) world where a wrong is still right. His concern is with how to become one’s own property and with the usufruct that initiates and confounds this project. Improvement is granted and haunted by an illusory and impenetrably empty will.

4.

The moment you say it is mine because I worked it and improved it, or you say that I am me because I worked on myself and improved myself, you start a war. And by misattributing the initiation of this war to nature, you then codify this war as the (anti)social contract.

It is said that the (anti)social contract and the public sphere it creates is a reaction to feudalism and absolutism. But this is only half the story, and an inaccurate half at that. Perhaps it’s better to think of the (anti)social contract as emerging, as Angela Mitropoulos says, not in opposition to absolutism but as

2 Ibid., 376.

3 Ibid., 90. Emphasis in original.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 91.

the democratization of sovereignty. Even that might have had an inadvertently anarchic quality, as every man considered himself a king. But the (anti)social contract not only reacts to, while also reflecting, absolutism, making every home/castle/hovel a hall of mirrors, it also emerges as a way to explain and justify the violence of European man. Everyone from Adam Ferguson to Kant tries to explain why the Africans, Asians, and indigenous people being exterminated and enslaved are so much less warlike than Europeans. The Crusades misled Europeans into believing their brutality was part of humanity rather than an exception, even as religious war gave them a taste for blood that they could not ignore. So the (anti)social contract emerges less to confront absolutism than to contain the obvious historical exceptionalism of European savagery. Clearly the world could not be ordered around good and evil without some dire consequences for Europe. Those who conceive of the (anti)social contract mistake the wars it instigates: wars of sovereigns against contractors, and of contractors against each other, and of contractors against those whom Bryan Wagner describes as “being subject to exchange without being a party to exchange,” the ones not quite accurately called third parties in a formulation that is misleading not only because they are not parties to what passes for exchange but also because they are innumerable and un(ac)countable even in having been accumulated, even in having been financialized. Perhaps, in this regard, it would be even better to think of the (anti)social contract as emerging against a history of revolt: the peasant revolts that buried European feudalism, and which Robinson understands as “the socialist exchange” comprising Marxism’s anthropological (under)ground is the revolt of nature, prosecuted by those who are made to stand in for nature, having been philosophically relegated to some essentially paradoxical state of nature, by the ones who seek to engineer nature’s subordination to and within the socioecological disaster of improvement.

This is to say, again, that the political half of the story, in which the social contract is understood as improvement rather than its ge(n)ocidal imposition, is wrong and incomplete. The (anti)social contract is not only a political theory but also an economic practice: the practice of the juridical regulation and anti-socialization of exchange in the imposition of improvement. In particular, the social contract specified the individuation of its parties. Individuals now must be formed in order to enter into contract. And the economic contract emerges not in exchange but from the idea that ownership derives from improvement. As a result it is not simply the individual, but rather the individual capable of self-improvement who must and can enter into the contract. The self-improving individual can also be thought of as the self-accumulating individual: not possessive (this is stasis without movement), not acquiring (this still bears the trace of anarchic exchange), but self-accumulating—that is, property-gathering in order to put property to work, including and most especially the properties of the self that can be deployed and improved while being posited as eternal and

absolute. “Properties of the self” is not a pun here. Properties that can be accumulated and put to work include race, religion, and gender but also class, standing, trust, thrift, reliability, and punctuality. These can all be used to improve where to improve is to own, and own more, and thus set in motion further accumulation of self, others, and nature that all might be put to work.

Maybe it can be stated this way: ownership emerges in Europe as usufruct, in the improvement of land that grants and justifies it. It is extended and diffused throughout the regime the social contract defines in the self-ownership that will have taken its completed form in the individual—that brutal, brittle crystallization of an always and necessarily incomplete melding of subject and object. Ceaselessly at work in the task of making everything, including himself, subject to being put to work, the European is the usufruct of man. Man’s endless improvement, in which necessity is enforced as an absolute contingency, is fixed in European thought as the vicious grasping of its objects, including itself. The historical unfolding of this fixation on fixing, the murderous interplay of capture and improvement, is given in and as *self-improvement-in-self-accumulation’s* violence towards whatever shows up at the rendezvous of differentiation, incompleteness, and affection. The constantly changing activity of what appears to what appears as the self as the continual undoing of the very idea of the self and its eternally prospective completion-in-improvement can only be met, from the self’s myopic and impossible perspective, with a nasty combination of regulation and accumulation. The one who accumulates does so at the expense of what it takes to be its others—women, slaves, peasants, beasts, the earth itself. Thus the social contract, as a contract between the improving and accumulating ones, is inscribed upon the flesh of those who cannot be, and in any case refuse to be, a party to antisocial exchange under the terms of the (anti)social contract. Meanwhile, as much as the contractors are united in a strategy to subject to usufruct whatever cannot or will not be a (numerable, individuated) party to antisocial exchange, they are also dedicated to killing each other, to war in and as their beloved public carried out in the name of the improvement of that public and its problems—that is, its denizens. The self-accumulating individual’s war, his total mobilization against the innumerable and against his fellows under the sign of ownership as improvement, carried out in order to prevent the recrudescence of the natural, renders irredeemable the very premise of the (anti)social contract.

And every subcontract within the (anti)social contract must result in improvement. It’s not a matter of both parties being satisfied with what they have exchanged. Such a contract was not just badly made but at odds with the desired identity of the contractors. And here we can put it the other way around: the social contract is conceived by the political theorist also as a contract amongst those capable of self-improvement, or what they called progress, and this is why it was essentially destructive of the notions of exchange encountered amongst feudal rebels (Robinson’s *Anthropology of Marxism* is instructive here)

or of exchange encountered amongst Africans who would rather move elsewhere than enter into conflict to gain improvement (Robinson's *Black Marxism* is instructive here). Ferguson and Kant both say war is about improvement of the European race. And Robinson teaches us that this is carried out as a violent intra-European racialization of difference, a continually barbaric festival in which incursion and the instantiation of improvement as militarily enforced externalities produce Europe, and then the globe, as dead and deadly bodies politic, monsters whose mechanized, drone-like simulations of spirit regulate the social with the kind of latex affability and latent menace commonly associated with police commissioners and university provosts. Antisocial sociability is the basis of the social contract. In the end, improvement is war, which is why the public sphere is war, and why the private—in its anti- and ante-individual impurity, as refuge even under constant pressure—is a porch.

The (anti)social contract is haunted by the economic contract, which is not a contract of exchange like one might find in friendship, but a contract based on the claim to ownership of oneself, others, and nature that is always tied to what more one can make of, which is to say accumulate in and through, oneself, others, and nature. In other words, the expanding universe of ownership took a contractual form that was not limited, as is sometimes supposed, to free individuals—that is, to the European subject imagined by the European theorist; it is a contractual form, rather, that requires broad-spectrum contact as the material ground of its exclusive and exclusionary network. What makes it truly dangerous is that it could never get free of that from which it wished to distinguish itself; what is truly dangerous to it is that what is forced to grant its exception can refuse the contract to which it is a third (or an innumerable or a non) party. Exchange, on the other hand, is a practice that prevents accumulation at, and as the elimination of, its source—the self-improving individual. Instead, exchange, given in and as the differential and differentiating entanglement of social life, even under the most powerful forms of constraint and regulation, is about a social optimum.

5.

George Clinton teaches us this:

I'm always waiting to see what dance they're gonna do, because dance is always changing. But I trust the fact that funk affects the booty. So when I see somebody doing some type of dance, I always try to figure out what groove does it take to make the booty move like that? I'm really a bootyologist. I don't just look at it cause it looks good, but how can I make sure with my music, the booty is at its optimum?⁶

6 Conversation with Jeff Mao at the Red Bull Music Academy, quoted in Matthew Trammell, "How to Stay Cool as Fuck Forever, According to George Clinton," *The Fader* (May 14, 2015), available at thefader.com.

And Jacques Derrida teaches us to ask:

When will we be ready for an experience of freedom and equality that is capable of respectfully experiencing that friendship, which would at last be just, just beyond the law, and measured up against its measurelessness?⁷

It's just that we could only learn these lessons from them in having learned first from Cedric Robinson that the social optimum derives from social wealth, stepping out only to step back in all good, optimally, even under absolute duress, as the preservation in friendship of the socio-ontological totality. Like him, we look forward to getting back to the optimum we never left.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 306.

