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REIFIED LIFE: SPECULATIVE CAPITAL AND THE AHUMAN CONDITION (2018) BY PAUL J. NARKUNAS

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The past decade has seen the rise of populist movements across the world, a widening gap between the rich and poor even as the Great Recession has slowly wound down, and an uncertainty informing human civilization to a degree that once seemed long-since past. J. Paul Narkunas makes the case that the problem of the twenty-first century is economic inequality, much in the same fashion that W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) proclaimed “the problem of the twentieth century is the color-line” (19). It is an issue that impacts all strata of society, with its greatest weight upon those at the bottom. Their approach is couched in contemporary concerns; Donald Trump looms large throughout, more as a symptom than a cause of the larger problems of human capital. Narkunas locates these present-day economic inequalities within a system that commodifies the human element with reliance on algorithms and speculation, to the detriment of the value of humanity at large (not to mention the looming threat of financial collapse). Their approach is interdisciplinary, exploring the concepts through the lens of a variety of thinkers – ranging from Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci to Michel Foucault and Gilbert Simondon – and the argument itself encompasses threads of economic, political, and philosophical theory. They begin with a deeper exploration of the Americanist tradition, positing the practices of Henry Ford and Fredrick Winslow Taylor as the start of our modern condition. The centrepiece of the book are its explorations of speculative fiction, with chapters devoted to examining work by Gary Shteyngart, Margaret Atwood, and Kazuo Ishiguro. Of particular note is Narkunas’ exploration of the concept of *homo oeconomicus*, which are humans reconfigured as capital as part of the larger entrepreneurial system the overlays the modern neoliberal system. This is not an in-depth historical exploration of how this system arose, but rather an effort to comprehend how these forces combined in this moment to create such a condition.

Much of the writing echoes other philosophers of the twenty-first century condition. The most obvious antecedent for Narkunas’ text is Francis Fukuyama’s *Our Posthuman Future* (2002), which similarly approaches contemporary culture through a post-modern perspective. Where Fukuyama finds the problem in the potential of genetic engineering, Narkunas posits capitalism and its instruments (particularly algorithm-driven high-frequency trading) as the cause of the inequality that is bringing harm to humanity at large and driving a deeper wedge between the strata of society. The idea of a quiet apocalypse, in which humanity is undone not through robotic uprising or oil

shortages, has become more commonplace within present-day speculative non-fiction, much in the same fashion that atomic fears influenced Science Fiction authors of the mid-century. Crucial to the process is dehumanisation: Fukuyama posits a future in which a small class of society are more human than human beings (essentially permanently entrenching economic classes through genetic engineering); while Narkunas considers the possibility that humanity will be reduced to strings of numbers, and eventually rendered obsolete by the process. Both have an undercurrent of pessimism throughout (though neither are alarmist) and the focus is on pondering actions to set right what has gone wrong.

Their discussion of utilitarianism breaks new ground, exploring the dichotomy between the ideals of doing “the most good for the most people,” and the modern practice of redefining “good” and “people.” Narkunas argues that the original visions of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill has shifted in the modern moment, although reckons that Marx offered a warning about the philosophy in *Das Kapital* (1867). They frame the problem as one of economy, that the modern capitalist system has evolved in such a way that human worth is charted by generating sufficient market value: “conceiving human life ontologically through utilitarian mechanisms of usefulness and by maximizing happiness for market humans” (Narkunas 82). Utility is shifted to suit the needs of the base human, which naturally means those with a degree of economic and cultural power, away from traditional utilitarian theory, which emphasises maximising overall good within society. This locates the way that capitalism warps traditional philosophical theory to suit the needs of economic producers; what is best for the upper echelons becomes what is best for society at large. Narkunas continues on to explain that “while commodities were once objects of utility deployed by humans, now human practices and traditions offer a similar scale of use for humans as commodities (both as subjects and objects) to ‘sustain development’” (83). The greatest “good,” in their estimation of the modern era, increasingly becomes the larger economic system, with happiness quantified as capital. This further creates cultural divisions; dominant cultures (namely, nation-states) assert themselves in ways that protect their human resources. Narkunas further explores the issues through the United Nations, specifically the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), wherein certain cultures and expressions thereof are considered significant, as well as the work of Samuel Huntington, particularly *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) and *Who Are We?* (2004). The Western-centric perspective of both UNESCO and Huntington is a key element of the problem of utilitarianism presented here: the gravity of this perspective frames human endeavour as a resource to be exploited. A key point of relation is Huntington’s Davos Man, outlined in their article “Dead Souls: The Decolonization of the American Elite” (2004): a post-nationalist elite, owing no fealty to any particular country of origin. Narkunas uses this framework to build their conception of *homo oeconomicus* as the next step of evolution for this figure, one who embodies a post-human elite.

This issue is explored deeper within an examination of human rights worldwide. Narkunas surmises that our understanding of “human rights” reflects Western culture and Judeo-Christian beliefs that are often at odds with the cultures of colonised nations. Human rights become another commodity: “rights are a floating signifier that gets fixed by those able to exercise power and control [...] human rights become, for example, the way to establish how some particularist

humans connected to power exercise more rights than others" (128). This framework allows non-governmental organisations, often at least notionally serving the greater social good, to extract value from human populations in much the same fashion that multinational corporations do. Furthermore, it exacerbates problems with intellectual property, favouring the entrenched interests over the needs of the many, resulting in a situation wherein "the rights of things trump the rights of workers who make them, regardless of the extension of the human rights system" (134). They locate frictions between libertarian economics and traditional forms of nationalistic politics, with the (re)creation of the concept of "Fortress Europe," now translated into "Fortress America," as embodied by the policies of Donald Trump. It is a firm indictment of modernism and the capitalist system, in the same vein as Thomas Friedman or Thomas Piketty, albeit one utilising a wide-ranging interdisciplinary framework.

Reified Life (2018) stands out from other similar texts when it engages with popular culture. Narkunas selects three texts as case studies for exploring their theories on the page: Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), Margret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy (2003, 2009, 2013), and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Each allows a deeper, more nuanced exploration of theories outlined throughout the first half of the book, as well as making the overall work more accessible to a less academically-minded audience. Narkunas's reading of Shteyngart's work explores the inherent disconnect between humanity that occurs within the capitalistic setting, despite society becoming more "connected." Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy is used to explore the larger thrusts of Narkunas's arguments: its criticism of the Kurzweilian singularity and exploration of the definitions of life loom large, and the work reinvigorates debates over humanism. Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* allows Narkunas to examine the dehumanising aspects outlined in the earlier chapters in greater detail, particularly the effects of economic stratification endemic to capitalist systems.

These works become compelling echoes within Narkunas's larger framework, and explore the possible outcomes for the current course of human civilization; Narkunas explains that "the authors I engage with are enunciating realities that coexist in inchoate form right now, but which remain marginal or latent within the consensual reality of financial and economics instrumentality" (183). This approach to popular culture allows them to better illustrate their arguments, and explore ideas in a space that might be otherwise off-limits; in this manner, it recalls work like Joel Garreau's *Radical Evolution* (2005) or Henry Jenkins's *Spreadable Media* (2013). One imagines that *Reified Life* might be paired with one or more of the novels discussed in a classroom setting. Narkunas goes further still, making the case for the use of popular texts within their framework. They explain "speculative literatures exhibit modes of existence, tendencies, and capacities that may or may not emerge, but which nevertheless proliferate figurative, analogical images that enable us to think of processes as they emerge" (184). By relating these speculative fiction texts to their larger process, Narkunas paints a fuller picture of the long-term consequences of the modern Western capitalist economic system. The choice to not only utilise these texts within the book itself but to devote considerable space to exploring each is noteworthy, and unconventional, and they take pains to defend the decision throughout. This choice echoes a larger, key point:

both speculative fictions and speculative capital project material formations through connections of often disparate and contradictory variables. Yet the derivatives are algorithms considered more real or more truthful than the fictional musing of novelists, due to the economic organization of social power (203).

Narkunas makes a case of the exploration of popular culture at large, framing it as akin to the same processes that they spent their earlier chapters exploring. In this respect, they extoll the value of art, not just simply as a creative pursuit, but as a framework for comprehending human existence, as valuable as (and perhaps more so than) the financial trades that drive the modern economy. The arguments build outward, each point connects to a larger theme, each is woven into the larger examination of the current state of humans and the humanities, while charting potential courses forward.

Narkunas concludes with a consideration of the current political moment and the possibilities offered within it. They offer a degree of hope, of creating a future that avoids the pitfalls located in the speculative fiction they discuss, considering whether dystopia might be avoided. The book is at points dense and theoretical, particularly in the early chapters, and it develops these ideas into an interpretative framework for exploring some of the most complex aspects of modern life. There is a great deal of interest here for the academic; this volume fits clearly in the canon of posthuman theory, along with Fukuyama, Garreau, and others. There is value for the non-academic as well, particularly his reading of speculative fiction texts and his engagement with the contemporary political environment. Narkunas's ideas are couched in action to reclaim those aspects of humanity lost or traded away. Although their approach remains largely theoretical, *Reified Life* is an ambitious effort, and they largely achieve their goals. This is a valiant defence of the humanities at large, of the study of popular culture, of the future of humanity itself.

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BIONOTE

Peter Cullen Bryan received his PhD in American Studies at Penn State University, USA. His areas of study include transnational American Studies, International Communications, and twenty-first century American culture, with a focus in comic art and digital communities. His Master's thesis considers Windsor McCay's role in the genesis of comics as a genre, and his dissertation focuses on the cultural impact of Donald Duck comics in Germany, emphasizing Erika Fuchs' translations and digital fan communities that arose in response. He hopes to one day trace the journeys of Scrooge McDuck himself, and see how reality stacks up to the legend.