

# Coughcophany

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## Thursday

The weather has continued to be very strange. It's not unusual to have a warm day or two in December. We haven't always had White Christmasses here, especially in recent decades. But it is very unusual to have temperatures far above average for weeks on end. It's almost fifty degrees today. And the forecast for this weekend is worrying: we're predicted to have a high of 54 tomorrow, and something like 2 to 3 inches of rain through Saturday night, which may turn into freezing rain. We're under a flood watch.

There's a good chance we'll have a power outage this weekend, and possibly an extended one. It probably won't get cold enough to freeze pipes. Fortunately, our gas stove will function without electricity, and we have a fireplace, lanterns, candles, lots of blankets, and lots of food. But not everyone in the area is as fortunate as we are, and that's a sobering thought.

## Friday

Well, I made it through my first work week of 2020. I can't say it was a great week, because I still have a raw throat and lingering cough, although the fever has faded and I've felt gradually better. My employer signed an agreement to lease more space in our building, and so the first thing I had to do on Monday, despite my dizziness and low-grade fever, was to help move a lot of desks, workbenches, shelves, and boxes, including my own. We're rearranging things because we are expanding both our manufacturing space and engineering space, and that's because this business unit has been doing well, and growing.

I have a new office with a door, and that's cool. If we hire a second programmer of some kind later this year, I'll probably wind up sharing the office, but for the moment it's all mine. Right now most of my things are piled on the floor, but I'll get it sorted out eventually. Just outside my new office, a work crew taped up plastic sheeting and started knocking out old walls and building new ones on Tuesday. So it's been a bit hard to concentrate this week. But I have managed to get some code written in the midst of the chaos.

On the home front, the kids have not had access to TV screens this week. They have still been using Grace's laptop to do things like show Baby Shark videos to the babies. We hoped the kids would be forced to concentrate on their chores a bit more, but it doesn't seem like that has happened.

I realized after I sent out last week's newsletter that the two videos I talked about, *Until the End of the World* and the *Dune* miniseries, both star William Hurt. I guess he was everywhere a few years back. I didn't really think about it much, because in the *Dune* miniseries, although he's the marquee star, he doesn't have a big part. (Here's a spoiler for a book that came out fifty-five years ago: Duke Leto Atreides dies pretty early in the story).

I've got several books on deck, but I've been tired and spaced out, so I haven't gotten much reading done. I read a few pages of Knausgaard's *My Struggle* book six. I've also managed to read a few pages of Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Moon*. Usually when I say "I read a few pages," I mean I read fifty or a hundred pages. But this week, I mean a dozen or fewer.

### ***Economic Science Fictions* edited by William Davies**

My friend Elias sent me an interesting book called *Economic Science Fictions*, a collection of essays edited by William Davies. It looks interesting, but it is quite dense. I can unpack the arguments, but it is slow-going, and I have to make notes. From the foreword by Mark Fisher:

Capitalist realism posits capitalism as a system that is free from the sentimental delusions and the comforting mythologies that governed past societies. Capitalism works with how people actually are; it does not seek to remake humanity in some (idealised) image, but encourages and releases those 'instincts' of competition, self-preservation and enterprise that always re-emerge no matter what attempts are made to repress or contain them. The well-known paradox of neoliberalism, however, was that it required a deliberative political product, prosecuted through the machinery of the state, to reassert this image of the human. Philip Mirowski has argued that neoliberalism can be defined by a double (and somewhat duplicitous) attitude towards the state: on the exoteric level of populist polemic, the state is to be disdained; on the esoteric level of actual strategy, the state is to be occupied and instrumentalised. The scope and ambition of the neoliberal programme to *restore what could never be expunged* was summarised by Margaret Thatcher's infamous remark that the method was economics, the goal was to change the soul — the slogan of market Stalinism. The libidinal metaphysics that underlies neoliberalism might be called *cosmic libertarianism*; beyond and beneath the social, political and economic structures that constrain enterprise is a seething potential waiting to be released. On the face of it, then, the goal of politics, according to neoliberalism's exoteric doctrine, is

essentially negative; it consists in a dismantling of those structures that keep enterprising energies locked down. In actuality, of course, and as Thatcher's remark indicated, neoliberalism was a constructive project: the competitive economic subject was the product of a vast ideological and libidinal engineering product. And, as Jeremy Gilbert, drawing upon Michel Foucault's work, has observed, neoliberalism has in fact been characterised by a supervisory panic; its rhetoric of releasing individual potential obfuscates its suppression and fear of collective agency. Collectivity is always stupid and dangerous; the market is able to work effectively only if it is a decorticated mass of individuals; only then can it give rise to emergent properties.

I was going to try to quote a smaller piece of text to give you a flavor of the book, but that was a whole paragraph and I didn't feel that I could break it into pieces while preserving that flavor. Elias and I are, I think, going to talk about this book extensively at some point, and this is merely the beginning of the introduction, so I'm not going to try to evaluate the whole book, written by many authors, using just this fragment. But it does illustrate a few things, particularly the assumptions the book makes about its audience. It assumes that the reader has the background and vocabulary (that is, that the reader knows the meaning of words such as "exoteric," "polemic," and "decorticated." It assumes that the reader will be comfortable with offhand references to Mirowski, Gilbert, and Foucault. And — this is the biggest assumption — that the reader will find this kind of writing worth the effort required to understand it.

Elias thought of me, I think, because he knew that I was an avid reader of science fiction, and this book is actually about science fiction — specifically, the history of economic ideas as expressed in science fiction. I think that's potentially a topic of enormous interest and with a large potential audience. But the academic style means that the audience will automatically be drastically smaller than, perhaps, it could be.

## Notes

Here are my notes for the paragraph above; my "translation," if you will.

Capitalist realism posits capitalism as a system that is free from the sentimental delusions and the comforting mythologies that governed past societies.

Where does the term "capitalist realism" come from? Who uses it and for what purpose? Do they use it ironically?

Capitalism works with how people actually are; it does not seek to remake humanity in some (idealised) image, but encourages and releases those 'instincts' of competition, self-preservation and enterprise that always re-emerge no matter what attempts are made to repress or contain them.

This sentence is written from the perspective of a so-called “capitalist realist.” It is an unfortunate characteristic of academic writers, including many very well-known writers such as Noam Chomsky, that they will often shift perspective, moving back and forth between an alternate, sarcastic, or ironic perspective with no real indication in the text, assuming the reader will understand this implicit perspective shift. But in the case of Chomsky, unless the reader is a subject matter expert, it can be hard to figure out which lines are expressed from a sarcastic perspective and which are expressed from an earnest perspective. I think this style is likely to turn off readers not accustomed to this sort of trickiness. But I think it is so ingrained in academic culture now that academics write this way reflexively.

The well-known paradox of neoliberalism, however, was that it required a deliberative political product, prosecuted through the machinery of the state, to reassert this image of the human.

I don’t like the lack of paragraph breaks in this text, because it makes it harder to identify the steps of the author’s argument. But with this sentence we now are starting to see the pieces of an argument:

- Capitalist realism is supposedly a more realistic view of society than other views.
- According to capitalist realism, capitalism works with people as they “actually are” and is not an idealistic system of thought. It frees people’s competition, self-preservation, and enterprise. In this view, these things are virtues that emerge naturally unless they are suppressed.
- According to capitalist realism, to make capitalism work, and allow these virtues to emerge, we just have to remove things that suppress it.
- In reality neoliberalism, a world view oriented around creating a greater good by freeing capitalism, can’t be created just by removing things that limit capitalism, but actually requires organized politics and states.

Therefore, we have a contradiction, or at least a conflict and a reason to be suspicious of neoliberalism.

Philip Mirowski has argued that neoliberalism can be defined by a double (and somewhat duplicitous) attitude towards the state: on the exoteric level of populist polemic, the state is to be disdained; on the esoteric level of actual strategy, the state is to be occupied and instrumentalised.

I wrote down definitions of some of the terms as they are used in this context:

- **Duplicitous** — pretending to hold one belief while acting in a way that suggests another. (See also: Strauss, Cheney, PNAC).
- **Exoteric** — an idea or doctrine that is shared openly, as opposed to “esoteric,” an idea or doctrine that is kept secret; see also “hermetic.”

- **Populist** — “that which appeals to the general population,” as opposed to the elite. Associated with historic figures such as Fr. Coughlin (see also “demagogue,”), but also movements such as Progressivism. In recent years, sometimes broken down into “the populist right” (Trump supporters) and “the populist left” (Sanders supporters). To critics of populism, these are two sides of the same tarnished coin. When the term is used by centrist elites, it is a term of generalized disgust and a dog whistle indicating disdain for working-class and lower-class people as well as the races and nationalities of those people.
- **Polemic** — a verbal or written attack, or argument against something; more emotional than rational (think of Fox News commentators describing migrants as bringing dangerous diseases).

And so, it seems that neoliberalism *embodies* this contradiction.

The scope and ambition of the neoliberal programme to *restore what could never be expunged* was summarised by Margaret Thatcher’s infamous remark that the method was economics, the goal was to change the soul — the slogan of market Stalinism.

This is one of those muddled sentences that includes a sarcastic perspective without warning. “to restore what could never be expunged” is on its face something completely unnecessary; if capitalism can never be expunged, why do we need to restore it? It’s not all that obvious remark “summarizes” this contradiction unless we understand what the author is really getting at here — there is no *rational* argument to support the “neoliberal programme.” “To change the soul” means indoctrination, not education. And so the “method” and “goal” here are actually reversed. The goal is economics and the method is indoctrination. “Market Stalinism” seems initially like an oxymoron given Stalin’s history as in icon of Communism, associated in the American mind with centralization, authoritarianism, terrorism, and mass murder. But the combination here suggests that the market can also lead to those horrors as well. This is hardly just “competition, self-preservation and enterprise.” Or perhaps it is, if those ideas are taken to extremes and the aforementioned state is “instrumentalised.” Reading between the lines here, the meaning is much darker than it first appears.

The libidinal metaphysics that underlies neoliberalism might be called *cosmic libertarianism*; beyond and beneath the social, political and economic structures that constrain enterprise is a seething potential waiting to be released.

- **Libidinal** — associated with sexual desire. Imagine Dick Cheney jerking off to the footage of American smart bombs liberating Iraq.

Again, this text is darker than it first appears. “Libertarianism” is easy to understand; it’s the political ideology held by Rand Paul and grade-school children everywhere who insist on taking the toys they want when they want

them; if they can't do that, they tell us, they will take their toys and leave the sandbox and head to Galt's Gulch and leave us without innovation and jobs. The words "seething potential" here are reminiscent of Zero-point Energy, a concept from physics that postulates that even a total vacuum is filled with fluctuating fields and energies. This seems quite appropriate for a book about science fiction. Successful businesses are ready to bust out everywhere! Profit is an emergent property of nature!

On the face of it, then, the goal of politics, according to neoliberalism's exoteric doctrine, is essentially negative; it consists in a dismantling of those structures that keep enterprising energies locked down. In actuality, of course, and as Thatcher's remark indicated, neoliberalism was a constructive project: the competitive economic subject was the product of a vast ideological and libidinal engineering product.

There's that word **libidinal** again. This mostly restates previous sentences, but does not effectively summarize them because it adds some new terminology, the words "competitive economic subject." It also mentions "ideology."

And, as Jeremy Gilbert, drawing upon Michel Foucault's work, has observed, neoliberalism has in fact been characterised by a supervisory panic; its rhetoric of releasing individual potential obfuscates its suppression and fear of collective agency.

The work of Foucault that we're discussing here is, I think, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. I have not read this book, but from Wikipedia:

He believes that the question of the nature of these changes is best asked by assuming that they weren't used to create a more humanitarian penal system, nor to more exactly punish or rehabilitate, but as part of a continuing trajectory of subjection.

And:

Foucault's argument is that discipline creates "docile bodies", ideal for the new economics, politics and warfare of the modern industrial age — bodies that function in factories, ordered military regiments, and school classrooms.

There's a lot more to unpack in Foucault's book, including the rise of the "carceral state" and the modern "panopticon" — now digital. And I like that phrase, "supervisory panic." What is Silicon Valley's disruption of successful, often unionized industries, if not an expression of "supervisory panic?" What is the forced rise of the new "precariat," with gig workers living and dying by smartphone apps that monitor their every move and allow customer ratings to determine if the workers can keep their gigs, if not a form of panopticon?

Collectivity is always stupid and dangerous; the market is able to work effectively only if it is a decorticated mass of individuals; only then can it give rise to emergent properties.

Again, we've shifted to a sarcastic perspective; the text suggests that this is the perspective not of the author, but of the class of people that run our neoliberal institutions.

- **Decorticated** — literally something with its outer covering or shell removed, but in this context “cortex” refers to the higher (outer) levels of the brain (the highly-interconnected cerebral cortex that allows for planning and abstract thought). The word is also used in this context to indicate the destruction of connections that allow individuals to organize into families and larger social units, including unions.

And again, the sarcasm here is deeper than it appears at first glance. How can a de-brained individual produce those “emergent properties” of “competition, self-preservation and enterprise?” (Hint: they can't; but they can be coaxed into believing that they are doing so, apparently even though they lack that “cortex!”)

That's just the first paragraph of the foreword. And so it is taking me a while to get through this book.

I read one of the essays, about Robert Heinlein's novel *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. I don't really like Heinlein very much, now; I consider his view of interpersonal relationships to be extremely sexist and selfish, similar in some ways to that of Ayn Rand, and his tendency towards libertarian ideology not much better. But the essay by Brian Willems, “Automating Economic Revolution: Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*” writes about the story primarily as a story about the role of the moon colony's computer, Mike, which has attained self-consciousness, finds itself bored, and so decides to entertain itself by helping the humans it serves overthrow the economic order.

That's not the novel as I remember it; I remember it mostly as a story about polyandry, the harsh application of capitalism to all material needs, including air, and a story about how the lunar colony discovers that it can achieve independence by threatening to fling asteroids at Earth. And so I may have to read *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* again. It may have become more interesting, and more complex, in the forty years since I've read it.

That last sentence was written from a sarcastic perspective.

## The Weekend

It's Sunday night and I'm at our church while Veronica has her youth group meeting. It has been a difficult weekend.

On Friday evening after work I went to Costco. A week or two ago we received our annual reimbursement for having a “Gold Star Executive” membership. We buy food at Costco almost every week and so we received over \$300 back. The membership fee itself is \$120, so it more than paid for itself.

Usually on Friday nights I pick up some sort of fish or shrimp, but Grace had told me that we already had salmon, so I got a box of pre-made falafel and some refrigerated chapatis. They also had some nice pickles, and we already had hummus on hand. I also picked up four of their bagged salad kits. So Sam assembled the salad, I toasted the chapatis on our cast-iron griddle (which takes forever to come to an even temperature, so the house was full of smoke), and we put together falafel sandwiches with hummus and pickles. They turned out to be quite delicious and even the picky kids ate them. I was reminded of the falafel sandwiches I used to buy for lunch at Jerusalem Garden in downtown Ann Arbor. That was almost thirty years ago. I think it is still there, although it looks much fancier now, which is a shame; I have a deep fondness for that great economic institution, the tiny, cheap, hole-in-the-wall restaurant.

## **Thinking About the Weather**

We were concerned because the weather predictions for the weekend were quite dire; we were supposed to have up to three inches of rain, or maybe even more, and/or snow, and/or freezing rain, and high winds, and possibly major, long-lasting power outages. Parts of Michigan did get severe weather but our little corner the state seemed to miss most of it. We had some moderately heavy rain, and a little bit of freezing rain overnight, and a little bit of snow, but the storm did not live up to its billing in our area. I'm grateful for that, even while I don't like this freakish warm spell we've been having; our temperatures have been well above historic averages every day for weeks and weeks. And apparently we have another chance of terrible weather coming up this week; long-range forecasts are predicting a major storm. If things had gone better over the last couple of years, I probably would have been able to have a permanent outdoor backup generator installed. But they didn't, and I wasn't able to do that. It is still something I'm hoping to do soon.

## **The Choir Concert...**

The rest of the weekend has been, mostly, confusing and busy. The phone rang Saturday morning because three of the kids were supposed to be at a choir concert dress rehearsal and we had forgotten when it was. So there was a mad scramble to get them there, all dressed in their performance clothes. I made bacon and hash browns and tried to get a little rest in the afternoon, because any extra sleep really seems to help me make progress towards defeating this cold. Joy made some great progress cleaning the upstairs bathroom. For dinner we had a soup made from leftover parts of other meals, and some little slices of rye toast to dunk. Joy cooked onions and mushrooms and put it all together and it was delicious. I was commenting on how much I loved the roasted mushrooms, but I was warned not to use the m-word; at least one or two of the kids will happily consume mushrooms as long as no one points out what they are.

After dinner, Grace and I managed to have a money meeting, where we went



through the pile of unpaid bills I carry around in my bag and decide if we can pay any of them. Almost all of these are co-pays and similar bills from various health care providers. I have one of the best insurance plans out there, and it covers everyone, except when it doesn't. Miscellaneous co-pays, uncovered tests and procedures, etc. for nine people add up to a *lot* of small charges. We paid what we could, then sighed and stuffed the rest of the bills back into my bag.

I stopped to check the mail on the way to church and there was another bill.

### **...which I Missed**

Today was the concert. We had planned to get up and out to Mass and then to the concert afterwards. Just about everything we tried to do today didn't work out well. Benjamin wouldn't get out of bed. The kids would not help get Elanor ready. I had planned to start a pot of oatmeal with dates and cashews in the Instant Pot so we would eat it quickly after Mass and before we went back out. But the IP stopped as soon as it started the pressure cooking with the message "burn" on the display. I didn't even know it could do that. So I depressurized it and, sure enough, it had just started to burn on the bottom. So I dumped it all out into a regular pot and decided I would stay home with Elanor and Benjamin. Of course, Benjamin spent the next two hours crying about how he wanted to go to Mass. (I don't think it is because of his great love of the Eucharist; he hasn't had First Communion yet anyway. He wanted to eat the donuts they serve afterwards.)

Complications continued from there; everything happened very late, and Grace got back with the kids just in time to put on their dress clothes and take them back out. so, I had intended to go to the concert, but I stayed home to watch Malachi, Elanor, Benjamin, and Sam. I also took apart the grease traps in the stove hood and deep-cleaned them, so at least I got something useful done.

They are *terribly* designed. You can remove the traps from the hood, easily. They are stainless steel frames holding two panels with angled slots on each side, slightly separated and offset from each other, to allow airflow. The idea is that the steam and vaporized grease will be sucked through the maze of slots and cooled down, and the water and grease will condense on the panels so it doesn't collect on the fan or in the duct. This works pretty well. But they also ought to be easy to take apart, so that it is possible to get in between the layers with hot water and detergent, where the grease has collected. But as far as I've been able to tell, the frames are spot-welded together, and so the whole thing is impossible to take apart. I think this is one of the differences between actual commercial kitchen fixtures, that have to be deep-cleaned regularly to pass inspections, and overpriced stuff for the home, designed only to *look* vaguely professional.

The rest of the family got back from the concert and the reception afterwards, and then it was time for me to leave, to take Veronica to youth group. So here I am, and the weekend is nearly over.

I think I have just enough time to write some notes about the new series of *Doctor Who* and suck a cough drop.

## The New *Who* Review, Coming for You

Last Sunday, as the final planned activity of our Christmas and New Year's festivities, I took the three oldest kids to the theater and coughed my way through a special presentation of the first two episodes of the new series of *Doctor Who* (number 12 of the rebooted show), followed by a live question-and-answer session. The Q&A was fun to watch, but not all that interesting, so I'm not going to talk about it. But I have a few things to say about the first two episodes, which form a two-parter to kick off the new series.

I've written in the past about the new Doctor. Jodie Whitaker is OK. I don't think she's a great actor. No one has really topped David Tennant. But Whitaker does a credible job and brings a lot of energy to the role. Unfortunately, I didn't think that most of the screenplays for series 11 were all that good. Many of them were *pretty* good, but something tended to go wrong — they'd have a completely ineffective ending, or take a weird and unconvincing turn, or become maudlin. And the companions are, well, companionable people, but the two younger folks, played by Tosin Cole and Mandip Gill, have never seemed to me to have much screen presence. The older companion, played by Bradley Walsh, is more engaging to watch, and has great comic timing.

It's especially frustrating because we've been re-watching some of the best episodes, including a terrific Tennant episode called "Blink." There are very few films and screenplays I consider to be perfect, or even nearly perfect, but "Blink" is one of them. The Miyazaki film *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) is another, as is *12 Angry Men* (1957). Of course, this is highly subjective, and I'm sure you have your examples, which I might not agree with, but in my opinion, "Blink" is perfect.

*Doctor Who* has taken a year off to work on the show; there hasn't been a new episode since January 1st, 2019. So, have they made good use of that extra time?

The two-parter is quite a blockbuster, longer than many feature films, with Stephen Fry as a guest, and a lot of action sequences. There's a fight that takes place on a plane, and a motorcycle chase through a vineyard. This is not standard stuff for *Doctor Who*, which usually keeps its chase scenes low-budget by setting them in the corridors of power plants, or quarries, or other industrial sites. In this one, we get a car chase on a crowded freeway! It's very *Mission: Impossible*.

I'm not going to describe the new villain that is revealed, but the revelation is quite entertaining, and he is enormously fun to watch. But, yet, I'm not entirely happy with the episodes.

The Matt Smith Christmas specials were big, complicated affairs, filled with

all kinds of baroque twists and reveals, and edited to maintain a frenetic pace. They rarely slowed down to allow any genuine emotional moments to emerge. They were, in a word, “overstuffed,” taking a sort of “baffle them with bullshit” approach to screenwriting.

### **Tough Enough to Overstuff**

This two-parter is *quite* overstuffed. It’s got some great moments — funny and surprising. I want to give the screenwriters full credit for those moments. There’s some wonderful acting, especially on the part of the new villain. But so many new characters show up that the companions are quite neglected. And the monsters that start out as the threat are over-stuffed, too: over-complicated, over-explained, and yet still over-confusing. And the historic characters pulled in? We get only a whirlwind tour, and it isn’t clear if we are going to see any of them again.

The overstuffing is a little worrying. We had a two-parter — presumably, enough time to present a story that they took extra time to write, edit, shoot, edit, and re-shoot. And it still feels like a big mess. An exuberant mess, and a fun mess, but a mess all the same.

I’ll give the producers bonus points for one thing, though. One of my criticisms of series 11 was that the show introduced, early on, a “prophecy,” something about the “timeless child.” It looked like they were setting something up which would pay off several episodes later, kind of like the Matt Smith episodes introduced the “crack in the universe.” But we watched episode after episode of series 11, and the “timeless child” was never mentioned again. That seemed incredibly sloppy. But it looks like they’re going to get back to it this series. So I’m looking forward to that, and hoping the payoff will be worth the wait.

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