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## Beyond the Bandit: Dispossession and Recovery in Paulo Morelli's City of Men

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# The *Word Hoard*

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## Beyond the Bandit: Dispossession and Recovery in Paulo Morelli's *City of Men*

Kate Lawless\*

Let's begin with a maxim: *Changes in material conditions produce changes in human perception.* Clearly materialist in its influence, such a maxim derives in large part from the work of Walter Benjamin, whose insights on the history of technology continue to influence the dialectic of politics and aesthetics today. In 1936, illustrating changes in perception that accompanied the inventions of film and photography, in what would become his most oft-cited essay,<sup>1</sup> Benjamin wrote: "*Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception.* The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history" (emphasis in original, 23). What becomes increasingly clear in this and later works is not only that the modes of human

perception and social organization change over time, but that these changes are historical, meaning they are inextricably linked to shifts in the material circumstances of production. Benjamin describes this tendency more explicitly in his exposition of modernity via Baudelaire (1939): further elaborating tensions between subjectivity and mediation, Benjamin describes the historical shift in perception he names "the shock experience" and its relationship to changes in social organization that emerged at the apex of modernity. I quote at length a passage that elucidates the transition from one technological formation, one social formation, to another:

Baudelaire speaks of a man who plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy. Circumscribing the experience of the shock, he calls this man 'a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness.' Whereas Poe's

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passers-by cast glances in all directions seemingly without cause, today's pedestrians are obliged to look about them so that they can be aware of traffic signals. Thus, technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met with film. In a film, perception conditioned by shock was established as a formal principle. What determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the same thing that underlies the rhythm of reception in film. (175)

Here, Benjamin not only demonstrates the ways in which human perception and subjectivity shifted with the new forms of social organization that accompanied rapid urbanization; he also reveals the ways in which such an experience is formalized in the aesthetic production of a given historical moment. The crowd, the traffic signal, and film are all part of the same formalization of shock that characterizes the overwhelming experience of modernity under the industrial mode of production. More importantly, all three are technologies that subject the human sensorium to a complex kind of training that produces a particular historical subject.

While Benjamin sought to elucidate the *politics* of mass media—film in

particular—and its effects on human perception in the age of industrial production (especially in terms of the sharp rise of Fascism he witnessed in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), aligned with insights by Foucault, Agamben, and Hardt and Negri, contemporary media theorists have replaced Benjamin's *politics* with *biopolitics* in order to imagine the ways in which visual economies participate in the biopolitical imperative to preserve life—in Foucault's words, to “to make live and let die” (*Society* 241). In this regard, Allan Meek argues that “[b]iopolitical theories require us to think about media beyond its uses, its social impact, its representations, its ownership and control, or its technological development and to consider how media record, monitor, analyze, classify and harness life as biopower” (2). More specifically, drawing on Benjamin's adaptation of Freud's “protective shield,” Meek maintains that “[m]edia form part of an apparatus of immunity that promises to insulate us from actual destruction” (2). Pasi Valiaho takes a slightly different tack. Extending Benjamin's materialist rather than Freudian leanings, Valiaho emphasizes the ways in which the function of screen media has shifted with historical changes in the mode of production. “If the visual economy of cinema in the early twentieth century corresponded with modes of Fordist production and sensibility,” he argues, “one could say that postcinematic images correspond with post-Fordist

production, neoliberal ideologies, and contemporary biopolitical ways of taking charge of the life of individuals and populations” (8). Focusing more narrowly on the biopolitics of film in particular, Nitzan Lebovic is concerned not with the apparatus of immunity but rather with the emancipatory potential of biopolitical film. In particular, he identifies the ways in which biopolitical film not only “seems to focus on the urgent need to expose and undermine the fallacy of centrism and consensus” but also demonstrates “how thinking through catastrophe can be an emancipatory power for the reconsideration of norms, whether political, political-theological, or aesthetic” (n.p.). Despite their varying approaches, all three suggest that film and media are not only viable sites for theorising the biopolitical but also central vehicles for the production and reproduction of biopolitical life.

Offering an account of the varied ways in which the visual economy intersects with the order of biopolitics in a world shaped by information networks and financial speculation, these recent interventions suggest that instead of simply applying biopolitical theory to the object of analysis, we should consider the ways in which the object—for example, the 2007 film *City of Men*—engages in the maintenance of the current biopolitical order. Such an approach complicates Stephen Cruikshank’s essay “Bandits and Biopolitics,” which proposes a straightforward application of Agamben’s

theory of *homo sacer* to that cinematic text and which reads the figure of the favelado as a manifestation of banditry that exemplifies bare life.<sup>2</sup> This kind of analysis conceives of the text as a direct reflection of reality (though if this is the case we really have no need for the film in our analysis of the favelado); more importantly, however, it overlooks the ways in which the text is rather a carefully constructed and complex system of signification that emerges dialectically within a given social, political, and economic order. In contrast to Cruikshank’s claim that *City of Men* provides an “effective medium to advertise the biopolitical event of the favelados” and “urban resistance” (Cruikshank 8), we should ask how the favela film engages in the production and reproduction of a biopolitical subject in the age of information and digital media. Melanie Gilligan opens this line of inquiry when she asks: “Is representation the answer to ‘social exclusion’ or one of the mechanisms of its reproduction?” (n.p.). In biopolitical terms, the question becomes: Does the favela film work to counter the effects of social and economic exploitation, or does it reinforce an existing order in which images not only reproduce but also capture and direct the “potentials of life” (Valiaho 7)?

In keeping with our original maxim, and building on the insights of Meek, Valiaho, and other biopolitical media theorists, we should begin by examining how

the formal and narrative structures of the favela film in general, and *City of Men* in particular, reflect, register, and facilitate the transition from industrial to financial, or perhaps cognitive, capital.<sup>3</sup> If we agree with Benjamin's claim that "[f]ilm serves to train human beings in those new apperceptions and reactions demanded by interaction with an apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily" (26), then it serves to reason that the favela film must contribute to the training of human beings in those new apperceptions and reactions demanded by the *biopolitical* apparatus. Benjamin names the complex form of training invoked by film in the age of industrial production "reception in distraction," a process by which, instead of being absorbed by the work, the "distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves" (40). Writing around the same time, often in dialogue with Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer saw this "cult of distraction" as a potential source of emancipation in which the speed and disjointedness of distraction would serve as a critique of bourgeois individualism and alienation by "aim[ing] radically toward a kind of distraction that exposes [social] disintegration rather than masking it" (328). While the modernist films of Kracauer's and Benjamin's era mediated the shock and alienation of industrial production, the biopolitical films of our contemporary moment provide a seemingly transparent window onto the catastrophes and traumas

of globalization. Accordingly, the complex form of training that emerges in the age of biopolitics is *reception in recovery*, wherein a fantasy of redemption merges with *history from below* to conceal the ongoing material conditions of exploitation.

In the favela film, the history of dispossession and alienation that accompanies global crises of housing and labour are re-written as narratives of personal struggle that participate in what I have elsewhere called the preservationist aesthetic—that is, the principle of preservation at the heart of new practices of cultural resistance and new forms of enclosure and assimilation worldwide.<sup>4</sup> Marx famously defined the process of enclosure or primitive accumulation as the separation of the worker from the means of production, using the land enclosures of 16<sup>th</sup> century England as a prime example. However, contemporary thinkers have argued that this process is not so much historical (in that it marked the inception of capitalism) as continuous: that is, the original violence of accumulation must be repeated forever anew.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, as the mode of production changes, so too must the means of separation. In the age of industrial production, the separation of the worker from the means of subsistence was primarily material or land-based; in the age of information, however, image-based or cognitive dispossession becomes the dominant mode of expropriation through which

material dispossessions are rewritten as moral flaws.

Despite this shift in emphasis, the process of enclosure has, since the beginning, contained both material and epistemological dimensions. Silvia Federici emphasizes this dual aspect in her rewriting of the history of primitive accumulation from the perspective of the European witch craze when she states: “Saving this historical memory [of the expropriation of women’s bodies] is crucial if we are to find an alternative to capitalism” (10). By placing Early-Modern witch hunts at the center of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Federici reveals not only the androcentric nature of traditional theories of primitive accumulation but also the enclosures of memory and knowledge through which teleological narratives of history, including Marx’s claim that capitalism is a necessary step toward full communism, foreclose or exclude the narratives of marginal and subordinate populations.<sup>6</sup> Attempts to make these stories visible emerge alongside equally strident attempts to preserve traditional histories. At the same time, images of struggle operate as secondary modes of enclosure through the mediation of the material remains by which the original violence is covered over by a new narrative of redemption and recovery.

Given the prominent tensions between preservation and exclusion within the existing biopolitical order, we would be

wise to consider the ways in which these tensions are reflected in and reproduced by new technological advances, as well as new cinematic genres and forms. Accordingly, we might ask: How does the dialectic of enclosure and emancipation that underwrites the preservationist aesthetic, and mirrors the fundamental paradox of biopolitics (killing in the name of preservation), operate within the economy of images? What mode of perception does the favela film, a subset of biopolitical film conditioned by the logic of enclosure, produce? Using *City of Men* as an example, I argue that the favela film participates in the production and reproduction of the current biopolitical order in two primary ways: 1) it naturalizes the violence of enclosure through the alchemical reversal of nature and history, and 2) it facilitates reception in recovery through the revitalization of a neorealist aesthetic and the narrative of loss and redemption.

*City of Men* opens with a grainy, washed out close-up of two young boys viewed through a water-dappled pane of glass. We then fade into a nostalgic scene of the boys walking arms over shoulders—a leitmotif that continues throughout and signifies a kind of brotherly love or loyal comradeship. The boys age as the credits roll and eventually the camera pans from a faded blue sky to a bird’s eye view that lands on Dead End Hill, the eventual site of a bloody gang shoot-out and the coveted property of Midnight, the current leader of

the ruling gang. The gang sits idle on the hilltop, oppressed by the unrelenting heat, discussing the question of what to do, while an apparently unrelated domestic scene unfolds below—Acerola (“Ace”), the reluctant teen father, is awoken by his partner, Christiane, who reminds him that he must care for their son Clayton while she works. The two scenes converge when Laranjinha (“Wallace”) arrives on his motorcycle and Ace, against his better judgment, accompanies him to the beach with Clayton in tow.

While Paulo Morelli’s use of heat in this opening scene necessarily appears fleeting and incidental, it not only plays a significant role in framing and mobilizing the narrative but also performs an ideological sleight of hand that both naturalizes the violence of enclosure from the outset and incorporates an aesthetic of nostalgia that places the spectator in the position of witness and moral ally. The metaphorization of heat draws implicitly on the naturalist aesthetics of early twentieth-century American literature, in which it overdetermines the role of environment in characters’ actions and dispositions.<sup>7</sup> In *City of Men*, the oppressive temperature both foreshadows and provides motivation for the ensuing violence. However, it also enacts what Max Pensky in his analysis of the natural history of capitalism calls a “reverse polarity,” by returning the product of capitalism—in this case the “excluded,” the “ban-

dit,” the “collateral damage” of primitive accumulation—to its so-called historical origins. In the natural history of enclosure, in which the exploited are transformed (if not by the film itself then by its biopolitical interpretation) into bare life, “nature, developed to the point of its most extreme significance, appears as the saturation of time—that is, as fully timely, hence historical being—where humanity as a historical phenomenon in turn appears under the sign of the historical repetition of catastrophe, and therefore as mythically recursive and static, that is, as nature” (66). The oppressive heat, as historical subject, motivates the leader’s decision to go to the beach despite the fact that, as Wallace exclaims, “Midnight hasn’t left the hill in three years!” In this way the metaphor naturalizes the eventual struggle for the hilltop, effacing the role of the state in the history of enclosure through its reification in the figure of “heat.” And just as heat passes over from nature into “fully timely, historical being,” the figure of the favelado-bandit as a historical phenomenon appears as “mythically recursive and static, that is, as nature,” (Pensky 66) or “bare life.”

The alchemical reversal initiated by the metaphorization of heat and the personification of bare life in the figure of the favelado-bandit is further reinforced by the coupling of neorealist aesthetics with a personal narrative of loss and redemption.

According to Lebovic, biopolitical film has largely returned to a 1920s German aesthetic that derives from a “growing suspicion of democratic politics,” “a fascination with biological catastrophes and cultural crisis,” and “a renewed interest in... radical experiments in aesthetics, philosophy, and politics” (n.p.). Similarly, New Brazilian Cinema, a movement that laid the foundation for the favela film, draws more predominantly on the techniques and innovations of 1940s Italian neo-realism, including “nonprofessional actors, location shooting, handheld camerawork, and a limited script” (Villarejo 125). These stylistic techniques produce a sense of authenticity and transparency that are also elements of documentary. Aline Frey points out that in addition to these particular stylistic choices, New Brazilian Cinema perpetuates a narrative that not only reduces class conflict to personal strife but also proposes migration or escape as “a romantic solution to poverty” (59). Gilligan draws a similar link among the favela film’s “style of fast cutting, abbreviated exposition, tinted colour palettes and perpetually moving handheld photography,” its “restag[ing of] class conflicts as a series of personal narratives” and the “passing over [of] primordial act[s] of state violence” (n.p.). State violence is overshadowed, sealed off into the past, concealed by the romantic narrative of redemption and escape to which

the nostalgic revitalization of neorealism lends authenticity.<sup>8</sup>

Eclipsing the role of state violence in the production of the favelado-bandit, *City of Men* reframes the story of historical violence in the favela as a story of lost fatherhood, resulting in a moral chaos and gang warfare that moves towards a Hobbesian state of nature. Despite the fact that the history of “banditry” in Rio’s favelas only emerged with the rocky transition away from military rule towards full democracy, the figure of the fallen father looms large from the outset and is, in fact, a metonym for the state and the implicit cause of internal social breakdown.<sup>9</sup> Its first instantiation appears in the initial beach scene where, in a sudden feverish quest to help locate Wallace’s father before his impending eighteenth birthday, Ace accidentally abandons his three-year-old son, who runs wailing along the shoreline with a pacifier dangling precariously from his mouth. The figure of the fallen father is doubled as Ace inadvertently mirrors the gestures of Wallace’s absent father. Ace’s mistake materializes explicitly in Wallace’s grandmother’s vitriol toward the absent father. The two boys rush back to the beach only to find that Clayton has disappeared, and is, unbeknownst to them, safely (or not) in the hands of Midnight’s gang.

The problem of fallen fatherhood in the favela intensifies over the course of



the film as Wallace not only finds his father, who reluctantly embraces him (less as a son than as a potential comrade), but also discovers his father's responsibility for the questionable and untimely death of Ace's father in a botched robbery. Wallace eventually watches as his father is apprehended by police and tossed in the trunk of a car on the way back from the innocent act of buying a package of cigarettes. As Ace, through a series of inauspicious events not of his own making, becomes increasingly enveloped by Midnight's gang, Wallace and Ace are forced to decide whether or not they will repeat the fateful demise of their fathers' friendship or forge a new path that resists the inheritance of fallen fatherhood (and, with it, fallen brotherhood). The film ends with the three boys—Wallace and Ace, each hand-in-hand with Clayton—walking along the beach, toward a new life beyond the borders of the favela. As they head to Wallace's father's now-empty apartment, Ace assures Clayton that he is going to teach him everything he knows, beginning with the lesson of looking both ways before he crosses the street. Escape from the favela and the transmission of knowledge in this final scene is represented as an individual choice devoid of socio-economic realities. And, despite Wallace's parting letter to Camilla, in which he recognizes the favela as a kind of home, the favela is represented as a space of corruption and violence in which the possibility for legitimate

(bourgeois) fatherhood is foreclosed. The redemption of the favelado-bandit through the restoration of the father as the guardian of the moral order of knowledge transmission not only effaces the socio-political and economic realities of favela life but also reinforces an ideology of bourgeois individualism that constitutes the favelado-bandit as a threat to liberal democracy rather than a product of exploitation and dispossession.

Given Agamben's indebtedness to Benjamin and his multiple forays into media theory,<sup>10</sup> I would like to close by re-reading one of Cruikshank's claims—that *City of Men* reveals the bare life of the favelado-bandit—against Agamben's theory of "gestural cinema" in order to demonstrate the ways in which these humanist theories themselves participate in the same cult of recovery and production of the biopolitical order as the favela film. Benjamin Noys summarizes Agamben's theory as cinema's desperate attempt to recover the massive loss of gesture experienced by the Western bourgeoisie at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Reflecting elements of Benjamin's dialectical image as much as Deleuze's movement-image, gestural cinema reveals "the image as a force field that holds together two opposing forces. The first is that the image reifies and obliterates the gesture, fixing it into the static image. The second is that the image also preserves the dynamic force of the gesture, linking the gesture to a whole" (Noys n.p.). Furthermore,

affirming Agamben's claim that "[c]inema leads images back to the homeland of gesture" ("Notes" 55), Noys argues that the power of cinema lies in its capacity to "reveal the potential of the image, and release what has been frozen in [it]" (Noys n.p.). However, a careful reading of "Notes on Gesture" reveals that Agamben's theory comes not so much from an attempt to "release what has been hidden" but from a desire to recover true humanity through the redemption of the gesture, pure unmediated human experience, a form of experience that was lost with the advent of modern media.

Despite belonging to different philosophical schema, Agamben's theories of gesture and bare life derive from a unified aspiration: to recover humanity. Meek highlights the commodifying function of media in this context: "What Agamben sees as the commodification of human experience in the media image resonates with his account of biopolitics as reducing individuals to a state of bare life" (10). Adapting the concept of bare life from Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," Agamben not only defines bare life as "that which may be killed but not sacrificed," but also uses it as a synonym for *zoe*,<sup>11</sup> (*Homo Sacer* 4) or "natural life" (*Homo Sacer* 6). It is, in Arne De Boever's words, "a life that is neither human nor animal, but rather an inhuman kind of life that exists at the limits of ethical and political categories," "a life stripped of

its form of life" (30). Bare life is absolutely subject to the state, "human life that is completely exhausted in its status as the correlate of sovereign action" (Ross 2). Bare life is the negation of all human gesture, and gesture is what recovers the form of life to life itself: "Without gesture, life is bare life 'ready for the massacre'—no strings attached" (Birmingham 132). For Agamben, bare life is the universal condition facilitated by the commodifying effects of mass media, which stripped humanity of the only thing that distinguishes life from bare life: gestures.

A biopolitical reading of *City of Men* that focuses on the figure of the favelado-bandit as the embodiment of bare life, a personification of social exclusion, ultimately fails to account for the ways in which this figure emerges as material remains, the collateral damage of capitalist accumulation. Agamben's theory of gesture posits cinema as a mode of resistance to the production of bare life through the recovery of gesture. But his theory participates in the very cult of recovery in which preservation of life at the level of representation not only covers over the material conditions of exploitation but necessarily appears as the humanist morality of the bourgeois order—an order that re-writes, for instance, the history of dispossession as the story of fallen fatherhood. Only by recognizing the bandit for what it is, a reification of the material conditions of dispossession, can we truly

begin to imagine the transformative possibilities of biopolitical film.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” is the second version of his most widely cited essay, which was originally published as “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

<sup>2</sup> Please see pages 8 – 9 of Stephen Cruikshank’s “Bandits and Biopolitics” for a discussion of favelas/the favelado.

<sup>3</sup> I use these designations reluctantly given the ongoing controversy among Marxist theorists as to the usefulness and/or correctness of such phrases. Briefly, “Cognitive capitalism” is generally understood as the current stage of capitalism following the earlier stages of mercantile and industrial capitalism in which accumulation takes an immaterial rather than material form. However, some historical materialists are critical of this term, and its claim that labour has become increasingly immaterial, due to its alleged misinterpretation of value theory (i.e., Hessang Jeon’s “Cognitive Capitalism or Cognition in Capitalism?” *Spectrum: Journal of Global Studies* 2.3 [2014]: n.p.). Others argue that cognitive capitalism is in fact an advanced stage of capitalism beyond the third stage of financial capitalism (i.e., Yann Moulier-Boutang’s *Cognitive Capitalism*. Oxford: Polity, 2012. Print.).

<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth analysis of new forms of

enclosure, see Midnight Notes. *The New Enclosures* 10 (1990): n.p.

<sup>5</sup> See Mezzadra, Sandro. “The Topicality of Prehistory: A New Reading of Marx’s Analysis of ‘So-Called Primitive Accumulation.’” *Rethinking Marxism*. Trans. Arianna Bove 23.3 (2011): 302-21; Massimiliano Tomba’s “Historical Temporalities of Capital: An Anti-Historicist Perspective.” *Historical Materialism* 17 (2009): 44-65; Tony C. Brown’s “The Time of Globalization: Rethinking Primitive Accumulation.” *Rethinking Marxism* 21.4 (2009): 571-84; and Werner Bonefeld’s “The Permanence of Primitive Accumulation: Commodity Fetishism and Social Constitution.” *The Commoner* (2001): 1-15.

<sup>6</sup> In her counter-history of the inception of capitalism, Federici offers feminist rejoinders to both Marx and Foucault. If Marx had placed women at the center of his analysis, she argues, capitalism could never lead to liberation. And if Foucault had done the same, the promotion of life forces that accompanies the transition from sovereign power to biopower would have appeared not as mysterious but as the harnessing of women’s reproductive capacities for the controlled reproduction of the labour force.

<sup>7</sup> See, as prime examples, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. New York: Scribner, 1995; Nella Larson’s *Passing*. 1929. New York: Penguin Books, 2003; and Zora Neale Hurston’s short story “Sweat.” 1926. *Literature and Its Writers: An Intro-*

*duction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. Ed. Ann Charters and Samuel Charters. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001. 351-360. Print.

<sup>8</sup> In his analysis of the time of globalization, Tony C. Brown describes two models of presentation in Marx's theory of primitive accumulation: entombment and prefigural. The first corresponds to the time of representation, which seals the violence of primitive accumulation or enclosure off into the past. He notes that for Marx this tendency to "stress a temporality of historical violence that...seal[s] primitive accumulation off into the past" (578) is precisely why an act of historical recovery in the sense of describing the "marks of capitalist accumulation historically" is not enough. The "tomb" in this model is a metaphor for the remains of historical violence; it is that which in representing them simultaneously conceals them. Interestingly, Millicent Marcus uses the metaphor of the tomb in her discussion of the "memorial impulse" of neorealist film, stating: "Rossellini's first neo-realist films may be considered epitaphs, 'writing on tombs'" (82).

<sup>9</sup> Favelas in Rio de Janeiro were originally squatter settlements that housed itinerant workers for which the state refused to extend public services. During the 1940s the state began to develop temporary public housing projects as an alternative to the growing problem of urban slums. In response to the failure of such projects, the

state then transported inner city slums to the periphery through programs of forced relocation. However, this process of removal and relocation ultimately failed to address the material conditions of Rio's housing shortage, as well as favelados' consistent resistance to "integration." As a result, favela populations continued to grow over the next three decades or so.

<sup>10</sup> Not only is *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* an attempt to complete Benjamin's response to Schmitt, which argues that the state of emergency is the rule rather than the exception, but in many ways "Notes on Gesture" appears to provide a phenomenological account of Benjamin's theory of reception in distraction.

<sup>11</sup> In his theory of bare life, Agamben draws on Aristotle's distinction (via Hannah Arendt) between *zoe*, pure biological existence (life), and *bios*, a qualified or political existence that Arendt links with speech and action (the good life). For more on Arendt's definitions, see *The Human Condition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

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