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The Unrecyclable Ontology of Nihilism: Tiqqun’s “Annihilation of Nothingness,” Georges Bataille’s Conception of Death, and David McNally’s Living-Dead

Alden Wood
San Francisco State University, aldenwood1984@gmail.com

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For the Marxist cultural critic David McNally, the proliferation of cultural forms utilizing the character-trope of the zombie points to a deep-seated social anxiety about the catastrophism undergirding the dominance of late-capitalism. He argues that the figure of the zombie, or the living dead, aesthetically mirrors the death-like alienation from one’s own existential experience of living within late-capitalism. Thus, the prolongation of “life” beyond death is complicit in the pervasive proliferation of late-capitalist power dynamics, but it also paradoxically acts as the very ontological transformation that precludes the dissolution of such domination. The French philosopher Georges Bataille treats the notion of death as the fundamental reality that acts as a delimiting force exerting itself upon life. For Bataille, death is inherently restorative as it dissipates the existential interruption he posits is caused by life. The French autonomist-Marxist journal *Tiqqun* argues that the only recourse to the totalizing domination of late-capitalism is to embrace the latent nihilism inherent in late-capitalist power dynamics as a way to negate these very forces. In their essay “Silence and Beyond,” Tiqqun argues that since late-capitalism is already a social space which is inhabited by the living dead, the only position of attack left to anticapitalists is one which paradoxically attempts to negate the very nihilism inherent within late-capitalism itself. By situating such an argument against McNally’s analysis of the living dead, and tempered by Bataille’s treatment of death, Tiqqun’s position here begins to appear as one that eschews prescriptive affirmations of non-capitalist alterities (arguing that there is no ontological or political outside to the dominance of late-capitalism) and instead argues that only the affirmative negativity of late-capitalism’s complete nihilistic destruction can usher in the very prerequisites for its transcendence.

According to both McNally and Tiqqun, a definitive logic of nihilistic catastrophism has begun to emerge within the sociopolitical space of late-capitalism. It is a space in which capitalist commodity exchange relations have effectively created a rhizomatic network of dominance
across the entirety of the world in the twenty-first century; so much so, that as Tiqqun claims, it is now the era of the “authoritarian commodity” or the completion of capitalism’s quest for “real subsumption.” For Marx, “real subsumption,” as opposed to “formal subsumption,” constituted the historical moment in which there were no longer any pre-capitalist forms of production to be forcibly integrated into the capitalist schema.¹ For Tiqqun, the era of the “authoritarian commodity” is that in which the commodity-fetish, that metaphysical obfuscation of exchange relations taking the place of authentic social relations, becomes normalized and totalized. It is within this sociopolitical space of catastrophism that the horizon of death ominously looms as the only possible outcome of the destructive impulses of late-capitalism. Paradoxically, death itself becomes the final ontological obstacle, which late-capitalism attempts to overcome through the complete codification, delineation, and dominance of this last “othered” existential space. Thus, implicit within the rhetoric surrounding discourses of catastrophism is the coalescence of the two supposedly distinct spheres of life and death. This coalescence reveals that life within late-capitalism’s era of the “authoritarian commodity” is death itself, and the individuals experiencing this existence as the “living dead” qualitatively lack any traces of authentic life.

In his essay, “Land of the Living Dead: Capitalism and the Catastrophes of Everyday Life,” McNally argues that the “earliest modern images of the zombie are tied to figures of mindless labor” (114). He goes on to claim that “this image carried a latent but powerful social criticism: the idea that in capitalist society the majority become nothing but bearers of undifferentiated life energies, dispensed in units of abstract time. The raison d’être of zombies is the labor they perform” (116). It is precisely this reduction of lived-experience to abstract labour potential, which informs the figurative death of such individuals within late-capitalism. They are dead in so much as their living is qualitatively devoid of meaning beyond the production of exchange value, which is already metaphysically removed from use value.

McNally describes two dominant representations of the zombie that are explicitly tied to the development of neoliberalism—those of “crazed consumers and lifeless laborers” (117). He argues that the older representations of the zombie, specifically those that trace their lineage from Haitian lore by way of the Western Congo, did not involve the characteristics of cannibalism that have become all but ubiquitous in Western representations of the zombie. McNally traces this development to the rise of consumer-culture in the 1960s, specifically in the United States, and argues that it is not until this historical context that zombies begin to mindlessly crave the flesh of the “living.” There is something inherently self-negating in the ever increasing lust for the consumption of living flesh as embodied by the cannibalistic zombie trope of American/European cultural production, as consumption and scarcity differentiates it from the “colonial” form of the “lifeless laborer” zom-
McNally argues is still prevalent in African cultural forms. The cannibalistic “consumer” zombie encounters problems of scarcity, for it ostensibly ceases to exist itself if it cannot consume living flesh. This problem of scarcity seems to mirror the ecological concerns of resource allocation, procurement, and sustainability so prevalent in late-capitalist discourses of catastrophe. Thus, in the same way that the logic of late-capitalism creates an irreconcilable schism between the realities of consumption in a finite physical world and the theoretical impulses which underlie late-capitalism’s quest for profit accumulation, so too does the cannibalistic “consumer” zombie embody the contradiction of its need to consume more living-flesh and the scarcity which begins to manifest as the direct result of such consumption.

McNally hints at the inherent possibility within such cultural renderings of the zombie as a figure that evokes catastrophic anxieties. He argues that “the clash of the manic flesh-eater and the laboring-drone also hints at another startling zombie capacity: rebellion” (123). While his analysis of the emergence of the two types of zombie cultural forms, the cannibalistic consumer zombie of “developed” countries and the mindless-labourer slave zombie of “developing” countries is compelling, his depiction of “the truly subversive image of the zombie revolt” is prosaically emblematic of past utopian visions. He uses the image of zombie rebellion as a metaphor for the “everyday work of resistance,” arguing that “revolution grows out of ordinary, prosaic acts of organizing and resistance whose coalescence produces mass upheaval” (123). In critiquing the catastrophic opposition to his prescriptive perspective on the manifestation of revolutionary politics, McNally argues that the other “apocalyptic scenario, in which a complete collapse of social organization ushers in a tumultuous upheaval, is ultimately a mystical rather than political one” (124). This dismissal of the mystical, of the messianic, in favour of a purely political rendering of revolt falls into the reductive trap of positing an affirmative counter-logic to capitalism within a social space which is already completely contained, delineated, and dominated by late-capitalism as a space which has no ontological outside.

McNally fails to acknowledge that in the figurative-representational space of the zombie, the only act that can negate the cyclical violence of the zombie’s consumption (and by extension the logic of late-capitalism) is the self-negation of the zombie by its own nihilistic consumption, which inevitably leads to absolute scarcity and the impossibility of its own continued sustenance. McNally’s approach is clearly concerned with the earlier stages of the zombie’s historicocultural development. Thus, his dichotomized and relatively undifferentiated conception of the zombie as a cultural form overlooks the way in which many zombie representations are currently being depicted across many contemporary cross-cultural genres. The zombie is undergoing a transition in which it is seemingly synthesizing its folkloric incarnation’s ability to exist indefinitely without the consumption of flesh with the popular Western incarnation’s insatiable desire for the living. The result is a new zombie form that no longer needs to consume...
flesh to sustain itself, yet it continues in its attempts to consume the living. This problematizes both McNally’s scarcity-consumption argument and his calling for a “conscious” uprising of the living dead. McNally misconstrues Marx when he argues that “just as, to paraphrase Marx, the working class must negate its own alienated condition if it is to emancipate itself, so zombie rebels must de-zombify themselves and acquire consciousness and identity in the process of overturning their degraded state” (126). The form of the consumer-zombie already contains within itself the inevitability of its own destruction, and further, its own transcendence. It possesses this internal potentiality for self-negation precisely because it encounters the very limits of scarcity and causes its own destruction through the mindless act of sustaining itself— the death of the already-dead. Thus, taking this cultural form and transposing it onto the dispossessed subjects of late-capitalist domination, it is not a question of how to “acquire consciousness and identity” but rather an anti-political, mystical embracing of the nothingness that is latent within the nihilistic contradictions at the core of late-capitalism. This destruction of the nihilism undergirding the contradictions of late-capitalist logic through the adoption of nihilism itself as an ethical position is precisely the course that Tiqqun argues for in their essay “Silence and Beyond.”

Tiqqun essentially agrees with McNally in the catastrophic analysis of late-capitalism, yet their respective recourses to such a bleak future could not be more divergent. Whereas McNally argues that the zombie/disenfranchised/proletariat subject of late-capitalism must “acquire consciousness and identity,” Tiqqun argues that this logic fits precisely within the confines of the biopolitical fabric of late-capitalist domination. Borrowing from Foucault’s work on biopower, Tiqqun argues that with the historical development of capitalism, the disciplinary practices of sovereign power where the “tyrannical enemy . . . draws its power from its ability to shut people up” have given way to a form of power (biopower) which expresses “its aptitude to make them talk [ . . . and as a result] has moved its center of gravity from its mastery of the world itself to its seizure of the world’s mode of disclosure” (70). Thus, McNally’s claim that in order to effectively challenge late-capitalism all one has to do is analyze its “mystified social relations [ . . . as a means to] disclose what they tell us about the genuinely monstrous, deadening, and zombifying processes to which wage-laborers are subjected in modern society” (127) fails to acknowledge that such modes of disclosure are already codified according to the very logic of late-capitalism itself. Tiqqun argues that through the domination of biopower as the delimiting power dynamic concomitant with the rise of post-industrial late-capitalism, all attempts to speak to or disclose “truth” within it merely function to serve late-capitalism’s primacy.

Tiqqun is writing from the temporal position of Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history,” a position contextualized by the failures of so-
cial-democratic reform, the communist state, and the new left—all impotently opposed to the supposed totalizing triumph of capitalism. It is within this quasi-fatalism that Tiqqun argues that “even contestation [against capitalism] proves daily how incapable it has been of supporting itself on that modernization’s uninterrupted avalanche of defeats” (70). Tiqqun argues that such antagonistic contestations have failed precisely because anticapitalists have attempted to engage late-capitalism using its own modes of disclosure and recognition. They claim that the hypermediated discourse of late-capitalism “only recognizes as a truly existent opposition the opposition that is willing to speak; that is, to speak its language, and hence to subscribe to the alienation of the Common” (71). Here contestation takes on a meta-linguistic component, in that through biopower’s coercive institutional apparatuses, any attempts to contest without the language of political demands have been relegated to the impractical, insane, and anarchic. Yet, what Tiqqun elucidates at this theoretical juncture is the need to confront the metaphysical nothingness underneath the veneer of “real” late-capitalist social relations with a negating form of nothingness that is conscious of itself as such. For as they claim:

the real hostility, the metaphysical hostility, which allows neither language nor the moment it will express itself to be controlled, and which moreover prefers silence to any speech, has been pushed back into the shadows of what does not appear and hence does not exist. (71)

Thus, according to Tiqqun, the project for the antagonist aligned against capitalism becomes one that must simply be affirmative negation, without any prescriptive qualifiers positively arguing for something to replace capitalism (such as state socialism, alter-globalization, green or sustainable social-democratic welfare states, etc).

It becomes apparent then that Tiqqun believes “all ‘social struggles’ are ridiculous” (72), because “they are merely serving what they think they’re challenging” (71). Within such a perspective, a conscious and active nihilism begins to align itself as, to borrow from Engels, the negation of the negation. Here, an active nihilism conscious of its own potentiality to bring about the destruction of the passive nihilism latent within late-capitalism’s own contradictory nature begins to manifest. The formal distinction between active and passive nihilism is merely a question of intentionality. According to this argument, capitalism produces a passive nihilism within the forms it subsumes, as its very logic of control and domination is one that seemingly negates all potentiality for alternatives to capitalism. Active nihilism is therefore first the recognition of this passive nihilism latent within capitalism and the impossibility of escape, followed by an enacting of the program-less destruction of this very negation. Tiqqun writes: “Capitalism produces the conditions for its transcendence, not that transcendence itself” (70). Thus paradoxically, Tiqqun at once embraces and eschews the collapsist rhetoric of late-capitalist catastrophism. Inherent within the late-capitalist contradiction
between the theoretical impulse to maximize profit amidst the reality of finite resource scarcity is the production of the “conditions” for capitalism’s “transcendence.” Yet Tiqqun seems to be articulating that if such conditions are not met with a conscious ethical force aware of its potential to hasten the destruction of capitalist relations, then the passive nihilism within late-capitalism will have run its course—resulting in something akin to a series of ecological, social, and political collapses. It is in this way then that Tiqqun claims that “among those we encounter, we appreciate nothing more than such cold resolution to ruining this world” (70).

Tiqquun’s assumption of an active form of nihilism within “Silence and Beyond” is paradoxically both an unwilled reaction to the totalizing encroachment of late-capitalist social relations as well as an ethical position which is consciously possessed. Because of this schizoid-like occupation of such an anti-political position, Tiqqun’s active negation of the metaphysical nature underlying late-capitalism as “the way for crossing the line, the way towards the exit from nihilism [. . . and the way] beyond it” (74) proves to be a position that takes on an inherently ontological and existential dimension akin to Georges Bataille’s conception of death.

For Georges Bataille, there is a certain existential wholeness that exists outside of the limits that death imposes on life. Bataille scholar Michael Richardson claims that

Bataille’s sensibility is essentially tragic: he refused to accept any possibility of an escape from the human condition. In the end we are condemned to death, and to the annihilation of our being. Indeed, far from striving against this condition, he believed we should accept it. Tragic it may be, but it remained the only truth of our existence. (202)

At face value this essentially pessimistic view of life seems in stark opposition to the potentiality of transcendence that Tiqqun posits, yet upon closer juxtaposition both Bataille and Tiqqun are speaking to the way in which being must ultimately negate itself.

For Bataille, the ontological whole that exists apart from life, in death, is quite similar to Tiqqun’s messianic conception of the communism, which manifests in the active negation of capitalism in its entirety. For Tiqqun, communism is irreducibly rooted in the becoming-of-negation, the communality that emerges when the predicative identities, individual subjects, values, and moralities all beholden to the simulacra of late-capitalism are stripped away—leaving “only a total, existential hostility” (75). This destruction of predicative, simulated ontologies, “by removing them from their temporal element, strips nude the truth of our times” (Tiqquun 73). This destruction, the active nihilism aligned against late-capitalist domination (passive nihilism), informs the journal’s very namesake, as they claim: “In the Sabbatean tradition the moment of the general destruction of things was given the name Tiqqun. In that instant, each thing is repaired and removed from the long chain of suffering it underwent in this world” (77). This is very similar to the way that Bataille views the emergence of cognizant life as a finite interruption from the
pure continuity of infinite existence. Thus, death acts as both the moment of repairing the separation of life from death by reintegrating dead-life back into the infinite totality of death and as the totality of death itself. For Bataille, death is at once a singular moment (an act) and a complete and infinite totality (state of being). In the same way then, Tiqqun's advocacy for the active destruction of late-capitalism is the singular moment (the act) that repairs and reintegrates forms-of-life into the complete and infinite totality of communism (state of being). This is a destruction of the vestiges of the self en masse, done in a communal process of becoming-nothing-together.

In “Silence and Beyond” Tiqqun uses Bataille's work to elucidate what they deem as the importance of destroying the present state of things. They quote Bataille from *Theory of Religion*: “All the subsistence existence and toil that permitted me to get there were suddenly destroyed, they emptied out infinitely like a river into the ocean of that one infinitesimal moment” (Tiqquin 77). Thus death, as the moment of the existential destruction of the self as well as the moment of reintegration with that which is beyond the narrow confines of human life, is a messianic bearer of truth—a tenuous position to hold in the midst of postmodernity. Bataille argues that “death actually discloses the imposition of reality, not only in that the absence of duration gives the lie to it, but above all because death is the great affirmer, the wonder-struck of life . . . Death reveals life in its plenitude and dissolves the real order” (*TOR* 46-47). This dissolution of “the real order” through death finds its parallel in Tiqqun's contention that “whoever has never experienced one of those hours of joyous or melancholic negativity cannot tell how close to destruction the infinite is” (77). Thus the act of destruction, of an active nihilism, hints at the possibility of transcending the falsity of the temporal present and the reintegration with the infinite.

For Tiqqun late-capitalism and all of the affects bound up within its own displays of simulacra and biopower must be destroyed to be overcome, much in the same way that death for Bataille forms the basis of the reconnection with the existentially infinite. Bataille writes in *Inner Experience* that “it is by dying, without possible evasion, that I will perceive the rupture which constitutes my nature and in which I have transcended ‘what exists’ . . . Death is in one sense the common inevitable, but in another sense profound, inaccessible” (71-72). Thus, life for Bataille is a “rupture” which separates and isolates, while death is a “rupture” which joins and repairs. Similarly for Tiqqun, freedom first comes from the death-like finitude presupposed by existing within the confines of late-capitalist power dynamics and, secondly, from attempting to destroy such an ontology. They claim that there are indeed those who are “applying nihilism to nihilism itself,” yet “they still retain, from their prior state, the feeling that they are living as if they were already dead; but from this state of indifference concerning the raw fact of

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being alive, they draw the formula for the greatest possible sovereignty, a freedom which is incapable of trembling in the face of anything anymore” (76). It is thus in this way that Tiqqun’s program is precisely the abandonment of the very idea of such positive programs, in favour of a revolt or insurrection that is fundamentally negative, without demands, silent, and invisible. It is a conception of struggle firmly rooted in the metaphysical negation of everything in “this enemy world” (77).

Through articulating such a highly contentious theoretical position, Tiqqun acknowledges that such beliefs warrant placing “a high importance on the form of the manifestations of negativity that invent a new active grammar of contestation” (72). Central to this “new active grammar” of negativity is an evasion of language’s imposition of meaning. Tiqqun argues that all previous social movements aligned against late-capitalism mistakenly attempted to speak to late-capitalist domination on its own terms, entering a discourse in which all of the language is already effectively controlled. They contend that “the greatest possible demands don’t allow themselves to be formulated” (76), and in so doing they create an antagonistic position which, through its own inarticulation, evades the propensity of late-capitalist power dynamics to impose meaning and subsequently exert control over that which is being signified. Tiqqun claims that between the passive nihilism inherent in the contradictions of capitalism as first outlined by Marx himself and the active nihilism which seeks to destroy all that exists within the late-capitalist ontology is “the line. And that line is the unspeakable, which imposes silence” (76). This “line,” the demarcation between real/simulacra, life/death, capitalism/communism, must be shrouded in silence, for that which actively negates all that exists must necessarily be complete and total absence, existence’s lack, the void that threatens to assert itself and thus rejoins the interruption of life, in Bataille’s terms, to the infinite nature of death. Thus, the lack of language and the signification or imposition of meaning that accompanies it manifests itself as a negative ethical hostility, which is existentially “the unspeakable” (Tiqqun 75).

Tiqqun’s argument for silence, a radical negation of all that exists without the prescriptive expression of utopian fantasies, proves to be markedly different than the silence/voicelessness that typifies the cultural trope of the zombie. David McNally’s zombies are reduced to the living dead; they are stripped from both language and existence. They are the mirrored metaphor of an ontology under late-capitalism which embodies the complete expenditure of human labour-power entirely for the production of exchange values. Ironically, the only creature capable of existing purely as limitless human labour-power is precisely the figure of the non-human. Transposing his metaphor of the zombie as the dispossessed worker/consumer of late-capitalism, McNally argues the zombie’s voicelessness and lack of language is an expression of its innate oppression. Thus for McNally, the zombie and, by figurative
extension, the late-capitalist proletariat merely needs an “awakening to consciousness” to turn “the world upside down” (123).

Tiqqun’s position is radically opposed to this view of silence, as they revel in the conscious silence of a nihilism aligned against late-capitalist domination. They argue that silence is an offensive position that does not allow “struggle” or “resistance” to enter into the very language and logic of late-capitalism. By consciously disavowing the propensity of resistance to late-capitalism to articulate its political, social, or economic demands, Tiqqun’s silent antagonism evades the trap of language and the imposition of meaning that accompanies it. It is precisely in this way that the rejection of demands and the resulting conscious silence appears very similar to Georges Bataille’s theoretical conception of death. For Bataille death acts as the transcendent moment in which the interruption of life is finally reintegrated with the infinite. This parallels Tiqqun’s own communist transcendence, as they claim that only a conscious nihilism can transcend the totality of late-capitalist relations. They write that “we cannot transcend nihilism without realizing it, nor realize it without transcending it. Crossing the line means the general destruction of things as such, or in other words the annihilation of nothingness” (77). Therefore, any sociopolitical model that exists alongside capitalism posturing as an “alternative” to it is still within capitalism’s totalizing realm of being. Only capitalism’s complete destruction can foment the beginnings of a post-capitalist alterity. To annihilate the nothingness is the realization of a metaphysical negation of a negation, and according to Tiqqun it is only through such an act of Bataillean “death” that communism can be realized.

San Francisco State University

References

1 Refer to Section II of “Results of the Immediate Process of Production” included as an appendix in Marx’s Capital: Volume 1.


3 See Fukuyama’s The End of History and the Last Man.

4 See Engels’s Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science.
Works Cited


