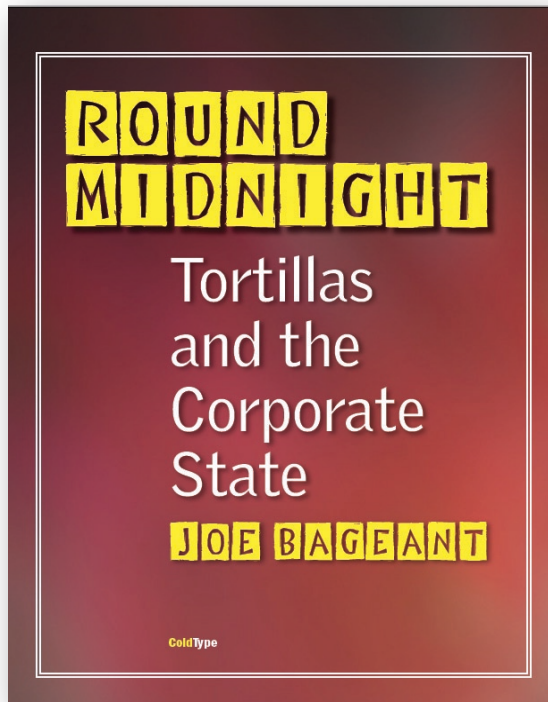


ROUND

MIDNIGHT

Tortillas
and the
Corporate
State

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ROUND MIDNIGHT

Tortillas and the Corporate State

Near midnight and I am making tortillas on an iron skillet over a gas flame. Some three thousand miles to the north, my wife and dog nestle in sleep in the wake of a 34-inch snowstorm, while the dogs of Ajijic are barking at the witching hour and roosters crow all too early for the dawn. Yet here I am awake and patting out tortillas, haunted by the empire that I have called home most of my life.

I like to think that, for the most part, I no longer live up there in the U.S., but southward of its ticking social, political and economic bombs. Because the US debt bomb has not yet gone off, Social Security still exists, and the occasional royalty check or book advance still comes in, allowing me to remain here. And so long as America's perverse commodities economy keeps stumbling along and making lifelike noises, so long as the American people accept permanent debt subjugation – I can drink, think and burn tortillas. Believe me, I take no smugness in this irony.

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nomie monolith, in the way that it provides for us, feeds on us and keeps us as its both its lavish pets and slaves. The commodity economy long ago enslaved Americans and other “developed” capitalist societies, especially Americans. The most profound slavery must be that in which the slaves can conceive of no other possible or better world than their bondage. Inescapable, global, all permeating, the commodities economy rules so thoroughly most cannot imagine any other possible kind of economy.

It comes down to owning stuff, and that the stuff we own also owns us (as anyone paying rent in a storage locker can attest). Transmogrified by industrial materialism, we have become what we own. More specifically, what we are observed by the rest of our society as owning. In the commodified society of industrial materialism, owning is being. So much so, that politicians bandy the term “ownership society” about, not only without causing the public to gag, but to cheers. Even liberals who claim to dislike the term don't want to be in a “We don't own shit society.”

Early modern capitalism was more or

less understandable, if not always pleasant. One can see why a preindustrial world that had owned less would embrace owning a bit more. Who gave a damn if it came from Adam Smith's "unseen hand," the hand that was taking care of the already rich, who in turn managed the order of the world as seen through the lens of aristocratic and bourgeoisie English commerce. "If we work our guts out Nellie, we can buy a pork knuckle every Sunday. And a featherbed, if you get my drift. Woo Hoo!"

Enter the reign of the bourgeoisie, self appointed and self-interested middlemen to anything and everything. The sheer complexity of the industrial revolution and associated finance was a dog that could fatten many fleas.

When the bourgeoisie did not get what it felt was a good cut of the action from the monarchies, it raised hell, sometimes enough to cause revolutions. If they won, as they did in America, they took credit for establishing democracy. If they lost, they fobbed it off as a "people's revolution," leaving the working slobs, the actual producers of wealth, to face the king's hangmen.

Even when "the people" occasionally win one of those "people's revolutions", we never really win. Not in the end. For instance, here in Mexico, contrary to what we've seen in Zapata movies, there has never been a successful people's revolution in terms of lasting and real egalitarian reform. Just armed struggle, and many promises of reform, always to be abandoned after the revolution. They were subsequently wiped out by the politically potent urban middle class, in league with traditional elites, such as the hacendados and corporatists. The bourgeoisie never gives up its profitable connections to the elites. Same as in America. The bourgeois-



The people own their revolution only in death. Just as in the U.S., the elites here and the business classes get everything else and rent it back to us as mortgages or whatever

sie lives at the pleasure of the elites.

However, in the people's revolutions it was mainly "the people" who got killed. So they get naming rights. The people own their revolution only in death. Just as in the U.S., the elites here and the business classes get everything else and rent it back to us as mortgages or whatever.

You can argue that people have always screwed other people for a buck, or a drachma or a shekel. You will win with that argument every time. However, the real issue is about how many people got screwed and how hard by how few. Under 250 years of capitalism, the rising take from the ongoing screw job has grown astronomical. Enough to buy every political tub-thumper in Washington and a Supreme Court. Enough that if the elite cartels on Wall Street rip 300 million Americans for trillions, leaving them squinting at the fine print on their eviction notices, they cannot do jack about it. Except pay the next ransom demand for their credit. On their credit cards. Then sign their children into future debt slavery.

We are all Mexicans now

Thanks to the autonomous commodities economy, Mexico literally cannot keep itself in tortillas. No longer food self-sufficient, Mexico, where corn was first bred and developed into a staple, buys corn on the world market. The price of tortillas in the tiendas along my street is up 40% and climbing at ten times the rate of Mexico's minimum wage.

Mexico was food self-sufficient in 1982. Minimum daily wage then was the equivalent of 8.2 kilos of eggs, or 23 liters of milk, or 33 kilos of tortillas. Eighty-five percent of the people had access to government medical care and the country was fifth worldwide in GNP growth. Now, thanks

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to international financial pirates, Mexico cannot even keep itself in tortillas.

This has happened repeatedly to Mexico, each time due to a different pirate gang, the French, the English, the Germans... But most often, it is the Americans and their institutions and policies, the IMF, GATT and NAFTA. Mexico is continually robbed from within and without. Within lives the tapeworm of government-business corruption feeding on money passing through the nation's economic bowel. From without come the assaults of American and global corporate financialism.

Loathe as Americans are to believe it, the Mexican people and the American people are in the same situation of being mugged. However, they are robbed at a different rate and from different positions in the global pecking order. We rob the Mexicans and global capitalism robs us. Fortunately we can still afford to buy our national food staple from Dominoes. Which makes us a superior people.

Humping the Big Lie

Meanwhile, somebody has to hump The Big Lie, maintain the appearance to the rest of the world that American cowboy capitalism is stable. Also keep Americans sold on The Big Lie's flip side, the number two tune: "We are the richest and most blessed people on earth because of capitalism (but currently "going through a rough patch"). Proof is offered: "Step right up and see for yourselves! Just look at the spectacular services and goods that bury us in wonderment! So go buy a PT Cruiser."

Decades ago, the spectacle of commodity capitalism, the sheer variety of possible stuff to own, ways to be, possible appearances of being, came to constitute a commodity in itself – enchantment as a



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product, product as enchantment. Materialistic enchantment as commodity was so powerful in scale and scope, and so thorough in mind saturation that it came to colonize our consciousness in what Guy Debord aptly deemed "the society of the spectacle."

No ordinary person could ever have withstood such a colonization of human consciousness as the American people have seen. Consciousness being simply awareness, there was no surviving the onslaught. The tsunami of false possibilities and pseudo choices constituted entire constellations in the psyche, of goods, and images of goods large and small: hair dryers, iPods, anti-bacterial wipes, cable television, ammunition, plastic siding, gourmet foods, this HP notebook computer in my lap, the Prius and the Porsche, even words such as Google, Microsoft, China Mobile, Vodafone, Marlboro... They all have psychological and social meaning in our commoditized consciousness, that battlefield where each commodity vies for preeminence with every other commodity in the shifting exposition of stuff we are permitted to labor to pay for.

It can now be honestly stated that mere goods and services express the citizenry and the American culture in its entirety. Citizenship in a consumer society is consumership. Consumer culture consumes all rival cultures, replacing them with "pop culture," which is simply deeming the marketplace as culture. Hip Hop is a good example. So is the modern cinema, and all of the music and book publishing industry. Corporate industry and its products are not culture, despite all the new definitions of culture bourgeois academia and the marketplace come up with on behalf of the corporations that fund both of them.

Freedom and personal identity ex-

ists as freedom to choose identity from among the commodities, and particularly the entertainments, offered. The Mac person as opposed to the Windows person. The Mariah Carey or Rihanna Fenty fan as opposed to the Eric Clapton fan. Each is convinced he or she is different because of their chosen commodity. Yet at the root of this, they all purchased a computer or a CD from a faceless corporation grounded in the toxic wastelands and sweatshops of Asia and elsewhere. Those who, in a fit of defiance, choose Indy music choose a product originating in and listened to through digital equipment produced in the bowels of monolithic corporate commodities generators.

We may gaze at the hologram and dream of living larger, or conversely, living the uncorrupted “simple life” on that little organic farm in Vermont. In the end though, most of us, all those people out there in anonymous Terra Condominia, out there in the sprawling suburban nether land, must be content with a flat screen television. Watching the commercials for the Super Bowl commercials, delivered to us breathlessly as “news,” The News is the liturgy of the commodity economy – whose scope and omniscience no man can grasp, but only consume as manna. We are feasters at the table of goods and services, most of which are not only unnecessary, distractive and mind killing, but earth destroying in both their manufacture and their use. This matters not a bit in an illusionary world of appearances. The commodity economy in its bounty, also offers us a chance to “buy green.” To text a link to the Earth First website.

It ain't fascism, it's practicality

If our national and individual minds have been colonized, occupied, then we



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necessarily live in an occupied nation. We have arrived at the destination where the trajectory of material consumer capitalism was always headed, toward an occupied (and preoccupied) totalitarian society. Rational, practical, productive and autonomous.

Cliché as the word is, you would have to call it overshoot. In judging the arc and trajectory of that technical rationality Western society so prides itself upon, we reduced the Enlightenment, the original launching pad of ration, to the merely practical, material and economic. The practical is scripture now. Without it material production and profit, the only concerns of capitalism, do not exist. All power rests in the practical.

What is most practical is hierarchy and specialization. Technical Specialization – within engineering specialization – within scientific specialization. All contained within the economic specializations of the state sanctioned economy and ideology governing the conditions of our daily existence. By definition, this is totalitarian.

Totalitarianism calls ideology philosophy. It salutes itself in every medium and every product, material, legal, political. And we salute it in return through meaningless work and consumption.

In all likelihood, you the reader are younger than I. Possibly less cynical and surely less tired. You may believe yet that violent overthrow of such a monstrous system is still possible.

A year or so ago, I still believed that. Events in the world and at home have since convinced me otherwise. Maybe the system could have been changed from within forty years ago. If it could have been and was not, then that most certainly is the greatest failure of my generation. The Sixties were a critical point at which important choices were offered us as a

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people. At the time, a minority realized revolution was still possible and warranted. Violent revolution, if necessary. But as a generation, we were no better at acting in unselfish concert than yours.

As Chris Hedges recently pointed out, violence today only assures the survival of the most violent, criminals of one sort or another, petty or international. Beyond that, the state now has the technological capability to inflict the most violence in every case, and therefore win. Realistic thinkers say aloud that what is so far advanced can no longer be stopped or turned around by revolution, violent or otherwise. Most other thinkers on the subject secretly suspect the same.

Mr. Popularity and the marmot

The rest of the country is oblivious, lost in the anxious clamor for an economic “recovery.” The voice of the state defines recovery for them as a return to former levels of the unsustainable superheated capitalism, and increased indebtedness of the populace. “Oh when oh when will the bankers ‘loosen the credit markets’ so we can again buy things?” As if their debt slavery were a great gift! The banksters simply do not issue more credit to people they know are dead broke – because they broke ‘em, They will continue to make more money by letting the people wail, and taking the people’s money directly from the state as bailouts. Stretched out over the coming years, we will see more of them. It should give us chills.

President Obama at some point must have asked himself if bailouts for those who caused the collapse will truly result in an end to the “current crisis” (a term calculated to make our slow inevitable collapse look temporary). Asked himself “How does getting the masses to accept



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more debt add up to anything but worse crisis later?” Obama is a smart fellow, smarter than George Bush, which is what got him elected, right? (Of course a marmot could have run on the “smarter than Bush” ticket and looked good). Obama must have asked that.

But like any highly educated (indocctrinated) American politician who has interiorized the capitalist system--you do not become a presidential candidate without interiorizing capitalism lock stock and barrel – his first reflex was: “The system must be saved at all costs!” Members of Congress, whose butts arrived in the Washington through the same processes as Obama’s, agreed. That cost us all plenty.

Obama is himself a commodity, the most telegenic political commodity since Kennedy. One that suits American style capitalism best in this particular historical political moment. He is a useful illusion, the same as George W. Bush was a useful illusion. What is the difference between George Bush managing the country through media performances and Obama doing the same? Both are telegenic, which is everything today, but in different ways. One was stupid but radiated virility and manly appearance; the other is attractive for his intelligence and so smart he’s stupid. Both lives are absorbed in “appearing to be” in the Great American Hologram of appearances. We are a nation following the appearance of leadership.

It is cold comfort that we are not alone in this ultimate folly. Globally, it is estimated that the economic crisis has seen at least \$50 trillion in financial assets--approximately equal to the value of the entire global GDP--wiped out. Given the bullshit “science” that is economics, and that economists serve the purposes of

the money masters of their particular age, and that money is always in motion, it is very doubtful that anyone really knows the global GDP. But the illusion that someone does is necessary in preserving and controlling perceptions of the present system. Otherwise the concept of money itself would have to be reexamined and changed to fit the world reality. Better to proclaim a “crisis” and scare the shit out of the peasantry, than give them an opportunity to question the new feudalism of credit cards, mortgages, car loans, educational loans and general debt servitude. The word crisis scares people, flogs them into anxious submission, lest some fucking socialist come along and ask, Why don’t you take charge of your own lives and destiny? Do you really need these people?

The “crisis” was set in motion by institutions lending each other non-existent money none of them can pay back. Consequently, the masses are once again expected to produce enough material value in the world to make the funny money real, and shore up the system one more time. To “raise the money” to do this will require generations of future productivity shoveled into the furnace of corporate capitalist banking. There was nothing left to steal, so extorting the future was the only option left. Assuming the skimmers and the scammers manage to extract enough public monies to pump up corporations one more time, there will be another and bigger disaster not far down the road. We don’t need the Oracle of Delphi to predict this. Capitalism is unstable as hell, like an unbalanced dreidel that keeps tilting ever more wildly off center until it eventually hits the wall. We can now see the wall from here: Massive ecological collapse and species extinction. “Economic downturn,” even “crisis,” does not



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quite describe that approaching wall. All of America hopes we will miss the wall at least one more time.

Americans are hope fiends. We always see hope somewhere down every road, chiefly because honestly looking at the present situation would destroy just about everything we hold as reality. Personally, as I often state and catch readership hell for, I do not like hope. When Obama ran it up the flagpole for us to salute, and so many saluted, my blood chilled. It made me feel that we were all in deeper shit than I had supposed (Nevertheless, I reluctantly voted for Obama. At the time it seemed It was either Obama, or continuing war, debt, and diminishing civil liberties. Ha!) Hope is magic thinking, believing that somehow, some larger unknown force is in motion to set things right. Hope is political pabulum for an infantilized nation.

The world is what it is, and its injustices are set right by grown up peoples in nations morally intact enough to challenge its malevolent forces.

Getting shot at

On those rare occasions when I do see nations take concrete steps toward liberation, the heart is cheered at having at least some basis for reality based optimism. After more than a century of taking in up the shorts from autonomous capitalism, Latin America is moving toward alternatives to the free trade cowboyism that has so long raped them.

One step is ALBA (Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América). ALBA is aimed solely at meeting human need instead of profit. Bartering and mutual economic and material aid outside of so-called free trade agreements. Out of the reach of global banking. For example,

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Venezuela gives Cuba over 100,000 barrels of oil daily at production cost. In exchange Cuba has sent 20,000 state-employed doctors and medical staffers. And if Venezuelans' medical problems require higher medical specialism, they may travel to Cuba for specialized care free of charge. No profits allowed. Take it or leave it.

The takers are lining up. Venezuela, Ecuador, Cuba, Saint Vincent, the Grenadines, Dominica, Honduras, Antigua and Barbuda, Nicaragua and Bolivia. ALBA nations are in the process of introducing a new regional currency, the SUCRE. (Sistema Único de Compensación Regional, or Single Regional Payment Compensation System) to replace the U.S. dollar. Now a common virtual currency, it is scheduled to become a hard currency.

Countries such as Argentina are experimenting with an economy based on worker self-management and balanced job complexes. Venezuela is developing community owned and directed banks. A common goal is to develop an economy not dependant, as is capitalism, on limitless growth, but on consuming fewer resources, operating without debt, and using less or none of the global banking system's money. When the IMF and the world's banksters dubbed these nations "developing countries" (a fine example of Newspeak, that both renamed miserable poverty, and suggested that the international bankers' robbery was benefitting those countries), this is not the kind of development they had in mind. This is pure wide-open socialism based on the universal socialist and democratic socialist vision. The stuff of capitalist nightmares.

The traditional response to such challengers to autonomous capitalism has been simple. Kill 'em. And we do our best. The U.S. has always had its provocative agents and hit squads working in those



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counties. Castro has survived or foiled some 638 assassination attempts, one every few weeks of his long presidency. Attempts on Chavez are so common the Venezuelan press no longer bothers to report them. After all, besides being old hat, they don't seem to be working anyway. Which means we will be forced to bomb the piss out of Venezuela and Cuba at some point. But they will have to get in line behind Iran.

By the way, a Latin American country does not have to be socialistic to get hammered by capitalist interests. Even Mexico, governed by corrupt capitalist and business overlords of the first order, men who have consistently sold their country out to foreign capitalist interests both before and since its revolution, is a target for covert action and sabotage – from Israel of all places. In October 2001, a month after 9/11, two Israelis, MOSSAD agent Salvador Guersson Smecke and another Israeli who slipped into the country covertly, were arrested inside the halls of the Mexican congress, while posing as rather lumpy looking photographers. The lumps turned out to be nine hand grenades, a dozen sticks of dynamite, detonators and detonator wiring and two Glock 9mm automatics. Immediately following the arrest, Ariel Sharon sent a top envoy, who sprang them, following strong pressure from Israeli government. They were whisked off, leaving Mexicans to wonder, "What in the hell was THAT all about?" One neighbor here in Mexico says wryly, "That must have cost the Israelis millions in bribes."

Born with the disease?

It would be nice if we could neatly lay all the blame on the nasty monolith of autonomous capitalism as an outside malignant force of its own. A systemic patho-

gen that somehow infected a decent and unsuspecting America. Looks like I just did, in fact.

Nevertheless, America and its national character were founded on the purest greed. From the beginning the people who came here wanted more of the material world. Sure, there were some religious dissenters (of which too much has been made for propaganda purposes). But the English and Dutch stock companies that established the first colonies came looking for profits. And the common people who came here were looking for “a better life,” which to them was, above all else, becoming as wealthy as possible. America was its own self-selecting process.

Read Tocqueville’s description of earlier Americans’ relentless buying and selling fever. Everything and everyone was always up for sale from the start. Read about the greed and stinginess of the “refugees from religious persecution,” such as slave owning Quakers, Presbyterians and Methodists. Read about how the founding fathers ripped off the Revolutionary War veterans for the IOU script they so patiently held for many years in payment for fighting, buying it up for pennies on the dollar, then passing legislation to pay themselves full value on the script. Or how not only the business class, but also the supposedly bucolic and wise heartland American farmers cheered as the government troops shot down hungry striking miners, and burned out their families, lest they disturb the order of the Republic of commerce.

There were the exploited working masses then, just as there are now. And there was always the petty bourgeoisie, more than happy to do the dirty work of the most elite owning class, in hopes of currying its favor. Always happy to sanction the “wet jobs” on the Italian, Polish,



An awareness of class makes clear who is fucking whom. That’s why American capitalism’s official line is that we are a “classless society”

Chinese and Irish immigrant laborer. You could then, and you can now, depend on the true middle class, that 15% or so, capitalism’s commissars, to crush the working class. They will do anything to remain in a more privileged zone of consumption, the boundaries of which are maintained by agreement of state authorities. From their petty perches, they have deemed themselves “the middle class.” In reality they are the mitigating class, the petty anointed whose job it is to obscure class awareness in America.

An awareness of class makes clear who is fucking whom. That’s why American capitalism’s official line is that we are a “classless society.” Denying the existence of class, deeming all Americans (excepting a few too-obvious-to-be denied cases, such as inner city blacks and the poorest of immigrants), “middle class” was one of American capitalism’s great strokes of genius. It blurred the line between workers and capitalism’s middle class commissariat – the petty business, mid-management, teaching and owning class managing the rest of us for the elites.

And just in case that line was not blurred enough, the bourgeoisie, particularly the academic institutions, successfully wrote the labor and the working masses out of American political history as taught in the public schools. We workers now have no continuous organic chain of memory and experience from which to draw.

The owning/business class has always been institutionalized as the state and the custodians of the entire American social and political process. History as we learn it in school is the owning class’ version. Despite what we were taught, America’s Constitution is mainly a property rights document, and those with the most property are naturally ascendant at all times in this country. Generation after genera-

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tion of this ascent was bound to lead to what we see now. The ultimate triumph of property and money. A Supreme Court that, without the slightest hesitation, declares that money is speech and as such, will do most of the talking from here on out. The autonomous economy now has a tongue.

We can well imagine its future admonishments, its smug edicts, proclamations of terror afoot, more need for surveillance camera eyes, oil pipelines for its circulatory system... The autonomous economy not only has the bullhorn of the national media, it has a voice capable of drowning out what little of the people's voice remained, replacing our small national dialogue with a monolithic soulless monologue. The bourgeoisie will listen closely



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though, for opportunity, a buck to be made in Kevlar, or perhaps the next new antidepressant for a demoralized, passive and discouraged republic.

In all honesty, I am sick of thinking about it, tired of burning up unrecoverable hours at the end of my 63-year old candle writing about it. So are many of my colleagues in cybernetic left-space.

Distance and solitude seem the only refuge. Which is why I am "aging Mexican," and almost monastically absorbed in the small daily rituals of sustenance these days. I do not kid myself that it is permanent or a real solution to the unbearable ugliness of the American condition.

But at the moment, four AM, a cricket chirps in the orange tree by my window, and my tortillas are perfectly lovely.

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