

The Agonism of Utopia: Dialectics at a Standstill

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In this essay I discuss utopias as places in time, bold panoramas of the future that are necessarily incomplete. My concern is with utopias of the new millennium, specifically the utopia of development. Unlike the “stark utopia” of the free market, which dominated late-twentieth-century ideology, millennial utopias are haunted by the specter of poverty. However, poverty functions as both the primitive other and primal history of millennial capitalism. The new visibilities of poverty depict economies of need as those of entrepreneurialism, ingenuity and creativity. To uncover the agonism of this utopia it is necessary to trace the dialectics of power through which the modern economy is constituted, to transform poverty from an object of primitive alterity into what, following Walter Benjamin, can be understood as a “profane illumination.”

Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image therefore dream image.

— *Walter Benjamin*¹

In a 2004 photographic exhibition titled “Standing Still,” Malaysian artist Simryn Gill presented images of “ambitious development projects . . . abandoned before completion.” These are the “shells of what would have become large shopping centers or apartment blocks or private mansions or even mini towns,” Gill wrote of the images (FIG. 1). Devoid of human figures, the photographs provided a powerful articulation of space and time, of what Gill called a “place in time”: “A place in time, where, one might say, the past lies in ruins, unkempt and untended, and the future also somehow has been abandoned and has started to crumble. No way forward, no way back.”²

Taken between 2000 and 2003 in Malaysia, Gill’s photographs interrupted the fantastic teleology that is the East Asian miracle. Against the soaring heights of the phantasmagoria of the postcolonial city, this abandonment of the future is what, follow-

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FIGURE 1. *Standing Still, 2000–2003; photograph from a series of 116. Courtesy of Simryn Gill and Tracy Williams Limited.*

ing Walter Benjamin, can be understood as a dialectical image — the site at which the dream image comes undone, the monuments of the bourgeoisie in ruins even before they have crumbled. As Susan Buck-Morss explained, “Because these decaying structures no longer hold sway over the collective imagination, it is possible to recognize them as the illusory dream images they always were.”³

It is useful to read Gill’s stark photographs in the context of what is today the making of the Asian “world-class” city.⁴ Ambitious projects of postcolonial aspiration, cities across the wide swath of territory that is loosely designated as “Asia” are implicated in the making of economic futures. Imagined as an Asian century, this time of rapid urban growth is envisioned as a time of prosperity. Transformed from geography into history, it is Asia itself that has become utopia.

Take, for example, the city of Shenzhen, China’s most famous Special Economic Zone. Located at the heart of the bustling Pearl River Delta, Shenzhen has emerged as a symbol of Chinese entrepreneurialism, global ingenuity, and market reform. Shenzhen is the “world’s workshop”; on its assembly lines are produced much of the world’s electronic gadgets, those that fuel cosmopolitan lifestyles across the globe. But Shenzhen is also the stage for what, in Lefebvrian fashion, can be understood as an urban revolution, for what is being produced in Shenzhen today is space, urban space. Massive urban development projects have become the venue for state-led spatial restructuring. Everywhere there is construction; everywhere the new becomes old; everywhere factories and

paddy fields give way to condominiums and malls; everywhere fast-speed infrastructure inhabits the city. Shenzhen is also a remarking of the future — or rather a bold assertion that the future lies on the horizons of Asia. In a city that has grown from about 25,000 people in 1980 to nearly 14 million in 2010, the theme of speed permeates all discourse. Widely prevalent is a temporal imagination, that of “Shenzhen speed.” As Carolyn Cartier has noted, the use of this phrase to connote a rapidity of economic growth suggests that “no other place or time has experienced the transformations that have characterized this city.”⁵

In previous work, I have argued that “places in time” like Shenzhen have to be understood not only as panoramas of an ascendant Asian hegemony, but also as bold experiments with urban futures.⁶ They are the utopias of the new millennium. As Paul Virilio has noted, “no politics is possible at the scale of the speed of light”⁷; this, in turn, can be rephrased to suggest that no politics is possible in utopia. Gill’s photographs of “standing still” present a powerful interruption of such utopia. They refuse the certainty of progress.

Following Walter Benjamin, I interpret Gill’s photographs as an instance of the “law of dialectics at a standstill.”⁸ In his 1935 essay “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” Benjamin wrote: “Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image therefore dream image.” And as Jennifer Robinson has noted, the methodology of a “dialectics at a standstill” makes possible an understanding of the phantasmagoria (of urban life) “as a site which potentially exposes the range of alternative future and past possibilities for organizing social life.”⁹

I am interested in how attention to the time of utopia, to its standstill, reveals how the political constitutes utopia. If no politics is possible at the scale of the speed of light, then dialectics at a standstill renews the possibility of politics. There are many possible conceptions of the political that can attend an understanding of utopia. Following Chantal Mouffe, however, I am interested in the “agonism” of utopia: of how utopia is constituted through power, and how such founding acts of exclusion are fundamental to the making of the social world. Where there is “stifling consensus,” there Mouffe has drawn attention to a surplus of meaning, to a multiplicity of conflict and struggle.¹⁰ To use Mouffe to read the historical object that is utopia means to uncover the alterity that cannot be domesticated, the antagonism that cannot be absorbed by fantasies of harmony — for, after all, utopias, as ideal “places in time,” must suppress, or at least manage, alterity and antagonism.

There are two aspects to Mouffe’s concept of agonism that I consider to be of particular use in making sense of the constitutive character of utopia. The first is a surplus that cannot be contained within the panorama of utopia. Mouffe has drawn upon the writings of Jacques Derrida to designate this surplus as undecidability — a haunting, a ghostliness.

According to Derrida, “The undecidable remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost — but an essential ghost — in every decision, in every event of decision. Its ghostliness deconstructs from within any assurance of presence.”¹¹ It is in this sense that all utopias are necessarily incomplete; that as *eu-topias*, or “good places,” they are also “no places,” or *u-topos*.

Second, Mouffe is concerned with “agonism,” rather than “antagonism.” She defines the latter as a struggle between enemies, the former as a struggle between mutually dependent adversaries. It is this relational ontology that I want to bring to bear on the discussion of utopia, for I hope it will allow something more than to trace the inevitable and often violent exclusions through which utopias are constituted. In the event of decision that is utopia, who or what is the adversary that must be conjured, confronted and concealed? If we consider one particular type of utopia — development, or the making of economic futures — then such a utopia is constituted through the exclusion of that which is marked as backward or primitive. Development as the sign of the market always exists in agonism (rather than antagonism) with the sphere of tradition. Indeed, it is only through the designation of tradition as the primitive past of the market that development can proceed. As Timothy Mitchell has noted, what is at stake here is the making of a specific object: the modern economy, as “self-contained, internally dynamic, and statistically measurable sphere of social action, scientific analysis, and political regulation.” The birth of the economy, he has argued, made possible “new forms of value, new kinds of equivalence, new practices of calculation, new relations between human agency and the nonhuman, and new distinctions between what was real and the forms of its representation.”¹² Development as utopia relies on this most natural and obvious object, the modern economy, the market. But it also relies on a founding act of exclusion: of the sociality that is tradition, of the history that is primitive. As a place in time, development, then, exists in this fraught relationship with past and future. This is the ghost lodged in utopia.

THE MILLENNIAL AND THE PRIMITIVE

The start of the new millennium has witnessed the renewal of development. If Mitchell, following Polanyi and Foucault, charts the birth of the modern economy (and its unique character of calculability) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then today the economy is imagined and constructed as an all-encompassing global process. Instantiated at sites such as Shenzhen, this utopia of development is audacious. And in its audacity it is closely related to earlier utopian imaginations of the economy.

In 1989, at the height of free-market ideology and practice, Francis Fukuyama published an essay titled “The End of History and the Last Man.” In it, he argued that “what we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War . . . but

the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”¹³ Fukuyama also went on to argue that “liberal principles in economics — the ‘free market’ have spread,” producing “unprecedented levels of material prosperity” around the world.¹⁴ Although Fukuyama himself was later to cast doubt on the “end of history” thesis, at the time the paradigm signified the audacious utopia of free-market, global capitalism.

Yet, by the start of the new millennium, this seemingly unshakeable utopianism had given way to a grave and widespread awareness of global suffering. Writing against Fukuyama, Derrida, in *Specters of Marx*, drew attention to worldwide poverty, the “obvious macroscopic fact” that “never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth.”¹⁵ If the free market can be understood as a “stark utopia” — Karl Polanyi’s term — then now it was haunted by the specter of poverty.¹⁶ A ghost had been lodged in utopia.

But this millennial concern with poverty is also utopian in its audacity and euphoria. If Fukuyama had proclaimed the end of history, interlocutors of millennial development now proclaim the end of poverty.¹⁷ In previous work I have charted the remarkable emergence of this collective will to end poverty.¹⁸ An unprecedented mobilization of global conscience, this millennial utopia has been fueled by the global social movements of the 1990s — in the villages of Chiapas, on the streets of Seattle, at the barricades of Cancun, at the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre. It has involved a remaking of the global institutions of development, from the launch of the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations to the incorporation of poverty alleviation as a key part of the mission of the World Bank. Organized against the stark utopia of the free market, this millennial utopia envisions a world where poverty will exist only in museums — a phrase often used by Muhammad Yunus, the 2006 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

If millennialism rejects the free market as an organizing paradigm — indeed, the language of market failure dominates millennial development — then what animates this new utopia? The answer to this question lies in the new visibilities of poverty. Of course, concern for poverty is not new. At various historical moments, poverty has emerged as a public issue. At each of these moments, a distinctive visibility has attended the public character of poverty debates. For example, in the late nineteenth century, amidst the flurry of urban modernization, poverty became suddenly visible. From Baudelaire’s prose poetry to the photographs of Jacob Riis, fin-de-siècle culture was necessarily constituted through the “eyes of the poor,” through that encounter with “how the other half lives.” The visibility of poverty was enabled by new social technologies, including the survey. Maps of poverty — for example, those produced by social reformer Charles Booth in London — were at once a statistical and a

moral order, cataloging the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. Osborne and Rose rightly noted that Booth’s surveys of poverty should be seen as one of the great inventions of the social sciences, its role akin to that of the telescope in the natural sciences.¹⁹

In the new millennium, poverty is once again visible, and new social technologies, from Internet portals to celebrity campaigns to an industry of volunteerism, mediate its visibility. Particularly significant is that poverty has become visible as a global issue, as an urgent problem that transcends national borders and economies, and that can be taken up by global citizens. How, then, do we uncover the agonism of this millennial utopia? For this, it is necessary to return to Walter Benjamin.

In his examinations of modernity, Benjamin drew attention to how the modern constantly re-cites the past. If Guy Debord was to later analyze the spectacle of capitalism by pointing to its fog of amnesia, Benjamin’s critique was quite different.²⁰ Interested in the enchantment that is modernity, Benjamin drew attention to how the making of modern spaces and forms involves at once the relentless pursuit of novelty as well as the constant re-citation of the past. It is through such citationary practices that the past is reconstituted as mythic time, as primal history. In her reading of Benjamin, Robinson sought to “establish the important role of the primitive in producing a certain phantasmagoria of urban life,” the relationship between modernity and its “others.”²¹ As she noted, for Benjamin, “the relationship between ‘antiquity,’ or ‘tradition’ and the modern, was not one of progression, one following the other in ‘homogenous, empty time,’ but rather dynamic and potentially transformative.” Indeed, by excavating mythic time, primal history, Benjamin was able to transform the enchantments of modernity into “profane illuminations,” a “now of recognition.”²² This, of course, is the dialectical image, or dialectics at a standstill.

It is possible to argue, then, that what is distinctive about the utopia that is millennial development is not only the new visibilities of poverty, but also how poverty functions as both the primitive other and primal history of millennial capitalism. This iteration of the modern economy is in fact obsessed with the shadow economies of the poor, seeking to convert them into new frontiers of capital accumulation. It is this absorption of the primitive that makes possible the millennial utopia of global prosperity. Take, for example, the case of new imaginaries about Africa.

Fukuyama’s stark utopia of the end of history required a geographical imagination of a flat world. The latter, a phrase coined by the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, suggests a “level playing-field” of economic competition where old geographical separations and historical divisions are irrelevant — one where Bangalore, India, can compete neck to neck with Silicon Valley, California.²³ This world, as imagined by Friedman, is one of mobile entrepreneurs, the instantaneous flows of capital and innovation, and an unpre-

cedented time-space compression enabled by new technologies of information and transportation. But the millennial utopia of the end of poverty is concerned with market failure. It cannot imagine a flat world. Instead, it imagines a world full of spaces of underdevelopment and backwardness; and yet such primitivism is transformed into primal history, mythic time. Africa, once understood only in the language of crisis, as the heart of darkness, is now what James Ferguson has called a place-in-the-world.²⁴

I turn here to images from popular culture, for they are illustrative, I think, of this new millennial imagination and its circulations. For example, a Louis Vuitton advertisement features the rock star and poverty warrior Bono as the explorer of Africa (FIG. 2). Titled “Every Journey Begins in Africa,” the advertisement is part of a much broader effort by Bono to reframe Africa as a “mesmerizing, entrepreneurial, dynamic continent.”²⁵ This theme of entrepreneurialism is front and center in other scripts of Africa. Take, for example, a recent Benetton “global communication campaign.” Featuring Senegalese singer Youssou N’Dour, it highlights a microcredit program in Senegal supported by Benetton. In it, N’Dour proudly states that “Africa doesn’t want charity,” only microfinance.²⁶ His declaration echoes a new set of “African” voices that seek to set Africa “free” — free from Western aid and state bureaucracies. This was the theme of George Ayittey’s *Africa Unchained*: Africa is poor because it is not free.²⁷ The Benetton campaign’s striking images promise freedom — economic freedom — transforming figures of African poverty into microentrepreneurs (FIG. 3). They are the new “united colors of Benetton,” a reconfigured global chic. But they are also, in the words of Alessandro Benetton, the “new face of Africa.”²⁸ They embody the truth that is the Benetton campaign slogan: that “Africa Works.”

In his important 2001 book *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe noted that “Africa still constitutes one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image”; Africa is that which is defined as “radically *other*, as all that the West is not.”²⁹ But what is at stake in millennial utopias is how ontologies of difference come to be absorbed and assimilated into a master narrative of development. In the Louis Vuitton advertisement, the untamed landscapes of Africa are the site of exploration. In the Benetton advertisement, symbols of Africa’s informal economy become symbols of global entrepreneurialism. Poverty, as economic primitivism, once again becomes primal history.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the popular sentiment that underpins many of the global poverty campaigns — that we are all Africans. For example, the July 2007 issue of *Vanity Fair* was dedicated to Africa and guest-edited by Bono. In it, readers were introduced to Africa not so much via Africans as through American celebrities who care about Africa: Oprah, George Clooney, Madonna, Bill Gates — each photographed in stunning fashion by Annie Leibovitz. Par-



FIGURE 2. *Every Journey Begins in Africa*, advertisement for LVMH, 2010. Source: <http://www.louisvuittonjourneys.com/africa/>.

ticularly striking was the theme that ran through the entire issue. It echoed an earlier media campaign of the U.S.-based charity Keep a Child Alive — “*I am African*” — that featured celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Richard Gere in an effort to draw attention to the ravages of HIV/AIDS on the continent.³⁰ In the *Vanity Fair* issue, DNA samples taken from the editors and celebrities were used to chart “individual ancestral paths from their starting point in East Africa.” As editor Graydon Carter wrote: “It is quite moving to see that every person on the planet is linked to this African tribe, and that, as the saying goes, we are all African.”³¹

POVERTY: “INSPIRED, DUCT-TAPED INGENUITY”

Earlier this year the Center for Architecture in New York hosted an exhibition titled “Jugaad Urbanism: Resourceful Strategies for Indian Cities.” Curated by Kanu Agrawal, the collection of models, photographs, and video installations sought to highlight the “inspired, duct-taped ingenuity” of communities of poverty (FIGS. 4, 5, 6). From tin-can canopies to frugal latrines (FIGS. 7, 8), the exhibition was meant to capture how the poor “make do,” and how such forms of making-do are a new idiom of urban ingenuity and entrepreneurialism:

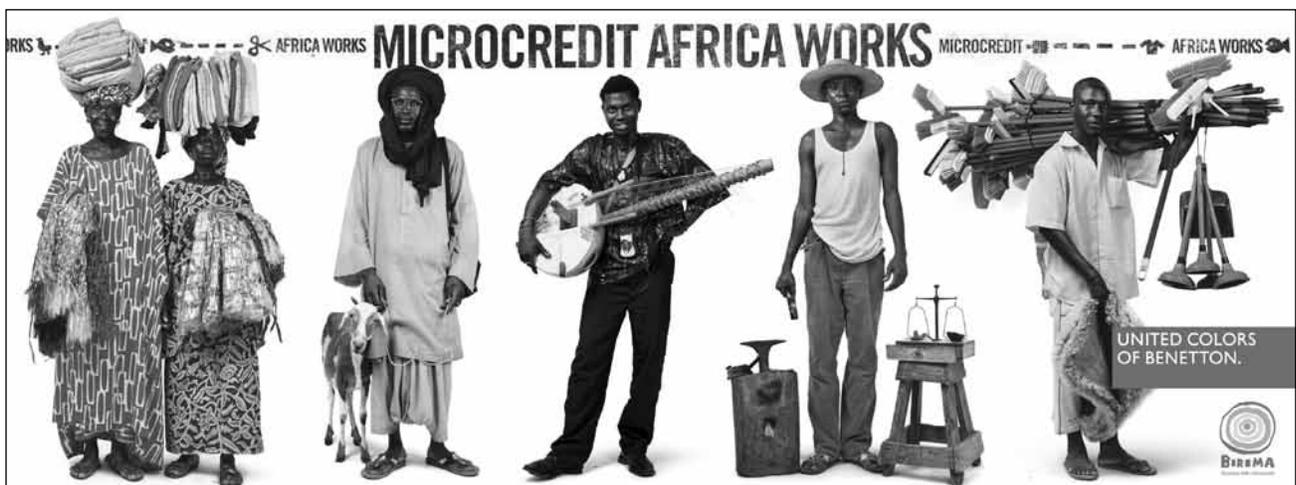


FIGURE 3. *Africa Works*, United Colors of Benetton, 2009. Source: <http://www.benetton.com/africaworks-press/en/index.html>.



FIGURE 4. *Jugaad Urbanism*, Center for Architecture, New York, 2011. Photograph by author.



FIGURE 5. *Jugaad Urbanism*, Center for Architecture, New York, 2011. Photograph by author.

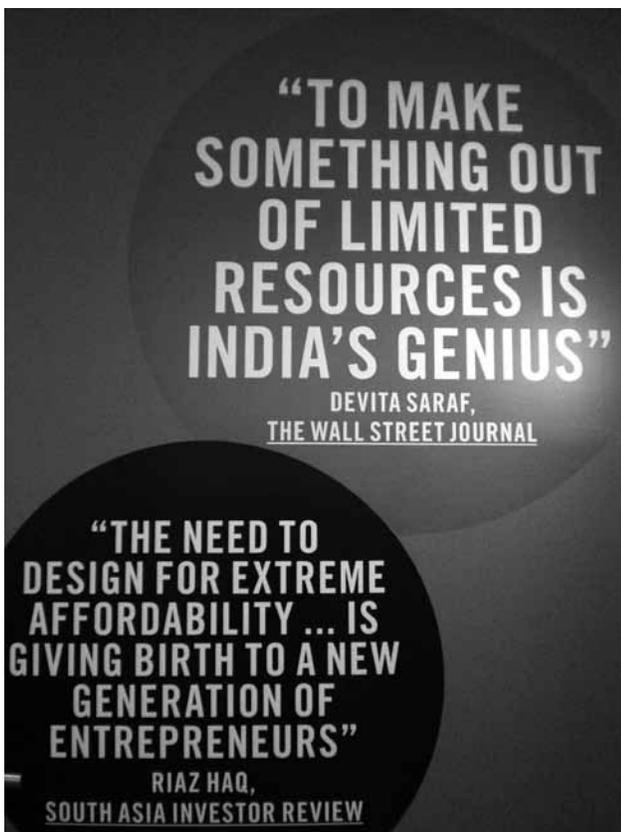


FIGURE 6. *Jugaad Urbanism*, Center for Architecture, New York, 2011. Photograph by author.

Set in the radically uneven urban landscapes of Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Pune, India, *Jugaad Urbanism* explores how the energy of citizens “making-do” is translated by architects, urban planners, and governmental and nongovernmental entities into efficient and inventive strategies for sustainable urban growth. From energy generating spinning wheels to the extensive skywalks of Mumbai — the exhibition highlights how “jugaad” interventions (a term in Hindi used to describe an innovative, resourceful approach) are challenging traditional spatial hierarchies and mechanistic planning principles.³²

The *Jugaad Urbanism* exhibition is an example of a new global imaginary about poverty, which views the economies of the poor as economies of entrepreneurship and dynamic informality. Such, too, is the message of the Benetton campaign “Africa Works,” discussed in the previous section. In this, as in the *Jugaad Urbanism* exhibition, strategies of improvisation devised under conditions of deprivation and vulnerability are reinterpreted as strategies of ingenuity — “inspired, duct-taped ingenuity.” Writing shortly after the release of the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, India’s leading journalist, Barkha Dutt, thus made note of “the energy, entrepreneurship and imagination of the slum kids.” She likened this to “the *jugaadu* spirit that is so typical of India.”

Jugaadu . . . was originally the word for a marvellous invention — a hybrid automotive that welds the body of a jeep with the engine of a water pump and looks like a tractor. Today it has come to be our shorthand for spunkiness — a, we-will-get-the-job-done attitude no matter how bad the odds are.³³



FIGURE 7 (ABOVE). *Jugaad Urbanism*, Center for Architecture, New York, 2011. Photograph by author.

FIGURE 8 (LEFT). *Jugaad Urbanism*, Center for Architecture, New York, 2011.



In my previous work I have argued that such valorizations of economies of poverty are now commonplace. Take, for example, the global architect Rem Koolhaas, whose work has been discussed at length in this journal.³⁴ Koolhaas has interpreted the urbanism of Lagos as a “culture of make-do.”³⁵ In his encounter with Lagos, part of Harvard’s Project on the City, Koolhaas was taken with the inventiveness of its residents as they survive the travails of the megacity. He saw such experimental responses as generating “ingenious, critical alternative systems,” a type of “self-organization” creating “intense emancipatory zones.”³⁶ It is not surprising, then, that Koolhaas drew the following conclusion: “Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos.”

In this way, the seemingly “alien and distant” megacity becomes the platform for a “neo-organicist” analysis of urbanism.³⁷ As Matthew Gandy has noted, such imaginations turn on the premise of “ontological difference,” the African megacity situated outside the currents of world history.³⁸ There is a lot that can be said about the personage of the star architect and the project of the Third World megacity. But what is of interest here is the emphasis on self-organizing economies of entrepreneurialism and how this may lead to an understanding of poverty as ingenuity. Such “inspired, duct-taped ingenuity,” I am suggesting, is the new millennial utopia.

Perhaps the most influential articulation of such a paradigm comes in the work of the policy guru Hernando de Soto. Against apocalyptic renderings such as those of Mike Davis of a “planet of slums” where a “surplus humanity” is warehoused in spaces of despair, de Soto presents the Third World slum as the place of “heroic entrepreneurs.”³⁹ As he wrote: “Marx would probably be shocked to find how in developing countries much of the teeming mass does not consist of oppressed legal proletarians but of oppressed extralegal small entrepreneurs with a sizeable amount of assets.” What is important about de Soto’s ideas is that he is not just providing a new global imaginary about poverty; this imaginary also makes possible the conversion of economies of poverty into frontiers of capital accumulation. De Soto has argued such

economies are rich in assets, albeit in the defective form of dead capital. The “mystery of capital” is how such dormant and defective assets can be transformed into liquid capital.

It is necessary to uncover how such millennial utopias produce consensus. For example, De Soto’s authoritative narrative rests on a particular understanding of capital, one that conceptualizes capital not as the social relations of production but as a “representational process.”

In the West . . . every parcel of land, every building, every piece of equipment, or store of inventories is represented in a property document that is the visible sign of a vast hidden process that connects all these assets to the rest of the economy . . . [and] can be used as collateral for credit. . . . Third World and former communist nations do not have this representational process. As a result, most of them are undercapitalized. . . . The enterprises of the poor are very much like corporations that cannot issue shares or bonds to obtain new investment and finance. Without representations, their assets are dead capital. . . . The poor inhabitants of these nations — five-sixths of humanity — do have things, but they lack the process to represent their property and create capital. . . . This is the mystery of capital.⁴⁰

In my work on millennial development I have designated these efforts to convert economies of poverty into frontiers of capital accumulation as poverty capitalism.⁴¹ In particular, I have drawn upon the case of microfinance to illustrate this process. Microfinance, the provision of financial services to the poor, is a highly popular poverty-alleviation tool, widely discussed and applied. As a global phenomenon, microfinance can be traced to the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh. Founded by Muhammad Yunus in 1983, it pioneered a simple model of credit whereby small groups of poor women were able to secure small loans at reasonable rates of interest. The model was meant to serve as an alternative to both formal systems of banking that demanded collateral, thereby excluding the poor, and informal systems of finance that preyed on the poor. Premised on the idea that the poor are inherently entrepreneurial, the Grameen Bank bet on the generation of income and the smooth repayment of such loans. Women were seen as particularly important conduits of microfinance loans, with their altruistic propensity to utilize income for social development through such avenues as the schooling of children, improved household nutrition, or investment in a home. Today microfinance is a global poverty panacea, deployed by countless organizations and campaigns that seek to combat poverty. In recognition of such efforts, Yunus and the Grameen Bank were awarded the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize. The prize committee credited them with the creation of “economic and social development from below.” “Lasting peace,” the committee noted, “cannot be achieved unless large population groups find ways in which to break out of poverty. Micro-credit is one such means.”⁴²

But microfinance is also an instance of “bottom billion capitalism,” a set of dispersed but coherent efforts to construct, and make productive, a global economy where the world’s bottom billion — the billion or so people living under conditions of poverty — are integrated into circuits of capital accumulation. This is what Bill Gates has called “creative capitalism”: “an attempt to stretch the reach of market forces so that more companies can benefit from doing work that makes more people better off. We need new ways to bring far more people into the system — capitalism — that has done so much good in the world.”⁴³ Gates’s millennial utopia is striking and seductive, for he is able to position poverty not only as the primitive other (and primal history) of the modern economy but also as its future. “There are markets all over the world that businesses have missed,” he has asserted, and the poor constitute a particularly important and lucrative market, a “billion bootstraps.”⁴⁴

I am interested in the making of millennial capitalism through such conversions of poverty into profit, or poverty capital. Microfinance is an especially intriguing case because it is a peculiar type of poverty capital; the commodity that is being produced, traded and valued is debt. The practices of calculation at work in microfinance are less a valuation of the labor of the poor or of the assets of the poor and more an assessment of the capacity to enact repayment. Not surprisingly, the microfinance mantra is that “the poor always pay back.”⁴⁵ This is the speculative arbitrage that underlies microfinance: a calculation about the social habits of the poor and how they can be capitalized through the practices of financial discipline imposed by microfinance institutions. De Soto is thus wrong, for what is at stake here is not a valuation of the assets of the poor but instead the inscription of value to an essence, to a primitive essence.

At a World Bank-sponsored microfinance training workshop, one economist described microfinance as “the mystical and transcendental practice of monetizing the promise of a poor woman who has never before touched money.” In another account, a microfinance consultant noted that microfinance can function “in places where Americans are scared to drink the water.” Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff have thus argued that millennial capitalism is “magical” because it seems to have the capacity to yield wealth “purely through exchange . . . as if entirely independent of human manufacture.”⁴⁶ Key to such exchange is how the primitive and the primal are transformed into the phantasmagoria that is the future — that is utopia. Microfinance, then, is not the primitive past of modern finance capital; rather, it is the face of the future. Finance capital itself needs the tricks and techniques of microfinance — the “mystical and transcendental practice of monetizing the promise of a poor woman who has never before touched money,” “in places where Americans are scared to drink the water.”

FUTURES

I started this essay with Benjamin's methodology of dialectics at a standstill. I argued that standstill disrupts and interrupts utopias of global prosperity; that such "places in time" serve as the ghost lodged in the events of utopia. I have focused my attention on millennial utopias for they seem to defy such disruption. Appropriating and assimilating economic primitivism, such utopias transform primal history into futures of speculation and accumulation. How then can we uncover the agonism of these utopias? This, I believe, is the task before us: to deconstruct the striking and seductive global imaginaries of creative capitalism and *jugaad* urbanism. To do so requires, as this journal has been doing for many years, a re-

conceptualization of tradition. Neither primitive essence nor primal history, tradition must be understood as alterity, the constructed "other" of modernity. In the context of the utopia that is millennial development, tradition is many things: the latent entrepreneurship of the slum; the inspired, duct-taped *jugaad* ingenuity of the poor; the cultural habits of the poor that ensure that they repay microfinance loans. Tradition has thus become the process through which the modern economy comes to be enchanted. Tradition is the magicality of millennial capitalism. It is necessary then to render tradition political, to reinscribe the slum, the improvisation, the informality, the domesticity — and indeed Africa — as acts of power and expropriation. This is the agonism of utopia. Only then can alternative futures be imagined and undertaken.

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