CRISIS CONSCIOUSNESS, UTOPIAN CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

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For many, the George Floyd protests of 2020 seemed like an opening, a watershed moment in the long struggle for racial justice in the United States. Images of multiracial protests and a burning police station seared themselves into the public consciousness as if there could be no turning back. No one could remain unaware that there was something fundamentally unjust in the social order of the United States. Calls for defunding or abolishing the police that entered into the public consciousness seemed to offer the increasingly real possibility that a utopian arrangement of social life was underway. Amid a historic global pandemic and a severe economic downturn, one would be forgiven for assuming that the protests were a moment of extreme combustibility and the social order of the United States would have to give.

Nevertheless, the United States social order proved itself to be quite resistant to any fundamental restructuring. By some measures, the protests were the largest in United States history and crossed racial identities. So why weren't they enough? Should we assume that *nothing* happened in those protests? I believe that answering these questions requires a theory of social transformation that allows us to schematize why possibilities for change emerge and why they are so often thwarted. I will focus on the place of consciousness in social transformation since the George Floyd protests were mostly experienced as a radical reshaping of awareness concerning state violence and racial injustice.

Consciousness seems to have a central, if ambiguous, status in theorizations of social transformation. After all, in the context of hermeneutical injustice we speak of the importance of "consciousness-raising."[1] We point to young people and activists as evidence of a radical consciousness that is aware of injustices to which previous generations are assumed to have been insensitive. We even highlight the importance of changing social consciousness in order to produce more just norms of recognition as it concerns differences in race, gender, sexuality, and ability. On one view, consciousness appears as a site of

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[1] See also Miranda Fricker (2007) and José Medina (2013) on the epistemically liberatory effects of the oppressed collectively cognizing unjust social structures.

agency in theories of historical freedom and thus should be the central object of critical attention.

Nevertheless, consciousness just as often appears to be an obstacle to social transformation. In the Marxist tradition, "false consciousness" prevents agents from understanding the influence of noncognitive motives such as economic constraints in their belief formations (Shelby 2003, 170–72). Alternatively, agents may not know or understand the "implicit" beliefs that they hold in reference to other social groups and thus might not grasp essential features of their subject formation.[2] Furthermore, certain strains of Marxist and psychoanalytic theorizing[3] would object to an overemphasis on the capacity of consciousness to alter its social environment or autonomously form itself, respectively. These theories instead urge us to focus on the role of social forces (of the market or unconscious) that are external to agents and will overdetermine the shape of consciousness.

Unless one subscribes to a strictly functionalist-determinist view of social reality, consciousness, however ambivalent, will have some role to play in theories of social transformation and justice. When we refer to consciousness in the context of theories of social transformation, we might mean the minimal capacity for agents to cognize and become aware of what is around them. I argue that this is too thin for a plausible theory of social transformation. According to what I will call the *awareness model of consciousness,* consciousness tends to be figured as mostly passive or reactive and therefore cannot adequately explain why agents attempt to reshape the social order in which they live. After all, we can assume many agents are aware of the injustices they face within a social order, but rebellion and protest are the exception not the rule. If one subscribes to a version of the awareness model of consciousness, then the explanation for the lack of apparent struggle to change our social order will rest on some idea that agents have been duped by ideology.[4]

[2] See Charles Mills (2017, 49–72) and George Yancy (2017, 17–51). It is not the focus of this article, but it is important to note that serious questions have been raised about the efficacy of scientifically tracking "implicit" biases as opposed to "explicit" biases. For instance, Samuel Reis-Dennis and Vida Yao (2021) contend that the IAT (Implicit Association Test) does not sufficiently control for the hypothesis that it captures explicit beliefs agents hold rather than implicit. This means that our approach to belief formations such as racism need not presume that these beliefs are hidden or unthematized by agents. If this holds, then the contemporary focus on agents needing to excavate beliefs that have hitherto remained beyond the reach of their consciousness may be counterproductive. I will address this question more in-depth in my work in progress, "Do We Need a Social Theory of Knowledge to Understand the Construction of Race?"

[3] See Louis Althusser (2001, 85–127) and especially Étienne Balibar (2007, 46–77) on "commodity fetishism" in Marx.

[4] What I mean by the "awareness model of consciousness" indicates what I take to be the common sense orientation towards how social problems are conceptualized. For instance, Jacob Blumenfeld (2022) makes the following observation in the context of climate change: "There is the common belief that genuine awareness and acceptance of the existence of anthropogenic climate change (as opposed to either ignorance or denial) automatically leads one to develop political and moral positions which advocate for collective human action toward minimizing suffering for all and adapting human societies toward a fossil-free future. This is a mistake. Against the idea that scientific awareness of the facts of climate change is enough to motivate a common ethical project toward a unifying good, I argue that climate change awareness can just as well equally motivate heightened divisions of humanity into anti-egalitarian, xenophobic, class-differentiated zones of competitive survival" (2). I will make a similar argument in Section II of this article.

Critical theory should resist an overemphasis on ignorance as a social explanation and instead as Robin Celikates (2018) argues, "tie in with everyday practices of justification and critique, rather than . . . take the historically rare and empirically implausible extreme of total ideological blindness as a starting point" (7).

In place of the awareness model of consciousness, I argue theories of social transformation should describe consciousness as the agential capacity to establish *horizons of normative expectations*.[5] Agents actively construct predictions and justifications for what ought to happen in the course of their interactions with social environments and delimit what they take to be possible or impossible given what they know of their environment. A normative expectation can range from "If I keep my head down, the police should not bother me" to "Assuming society will always be arranged in this manner, I should do *x* if I am going to bring some stability to my life." Horizons of normative expectation allow agents to form a practical relationship of equilibrium with the objective constraints in their life.[6] When we observe agents' behaviors within certain environments, we should be cautious about attributing specific ideologies or beliefs, explicit or implicit, as explanatory for why someone chooses one option rather than another. Instead we ought to examine the incentive structures of the environment in which they are embedded and they enable or frustrate the attainment of specific needs. My use of horizons of normative expectations will show that diverse agents may hold differing beliefs and yet still be induced to engage in similar behaviors due to a shared understanding of their constraints. In other words, horizons of normative expectations are not solely, or even primarily, reducible to individual beliefs, but constitute a common ground for social practices between multiple agents (Táíwò 2018, 309–14).

It is when these horizons can no longer ground an agent's social practices or their rational justification for engaging in certain practices that we can expect the possibility of social transformation. Social environments that can no longer afford agents with insight into how they can meaningfully arrange their lives, that can no longer provide grounds for coherent social practices, will experience turmoil. Thus, a more robust theory of social transformation should take consciousness as actively producing norms while never being completely ignorant of how those norms relate to the surrounding social environment.

To better understand our agential capacities, I contend that we should have two typologies of consciousness that will be operative in conjunctures where an extant social

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[5] My conception of "horizons of normative expectations" bears some similarity to Kim Sterelny's (2010) claim that a necessary element of for the success of our cognitive processes is that we can intervene on and engineer our environments to support our projects (466). My focus, however, will consider that our environments are not solely up to us as individuals and thus constrains our activities and expectations. See Valerie Soon (2020): "Expectations shape our cognitive processes, which in turn lead us to respond in certain ways to the environment. Our responses subsequently shape the environment itself, influencing our own expectations as well as those of others" (1866).

[6] Soon (2021) encapsulates my claim here in relationship to Rational Choice Theory and ideology: "Even if individuals are aware that they are acting in response to perverse incentive structures and disagree with the ideology embodied by these structures, it is not instrumentally rational for them to act otherwise as long as sufficiently strong incentive structures remain . . . Ideology should be understood non-ideationally in terms of conventions, or equilibrium solutions to social coordination problems" (6).

order appears to be on the brink of breakdown. Drawing from the work of Brian Milstein (2015) and Ernst Bloch (1995), I will describe these two forms of consciousness as "crisis consciousness" and "utopian consciousness," respectively. Consciousness comes to play a critical role in social transformation in a two-stage sequence, I will argue. First, when available epistemic and normative resources are no longer able to solve problems or functionally predict how to accomplish projects within a social order, a crisis consciousness will form. Second, in the context of a crisis, if it is possible to grasp the social causes of dysfunction and develop insight into the real possibilities in the situation that would allow for the development of an alternative social order that would displace the causes of dysfunction, then a utopian consciousness will take shape. By understanding consciousness as the activity of justification and prediction rather than awareness and cognition, we will be able to develop a more plausible account of social transformation that takes seriously structural constraints of social orders and the necessity for political capacities that can overcome those constraints.

In what follows, I will outline what I take to be a central problematic concerning the relationship between consciousness and social order: if a social order places constraints on consciousness, how can the latter fundamentally reshape the former? By reference to some arguments from the conservative neoliberal philosopher F. A. Hayek, I will demonstrate that the awareness model of consciousness is ill-equipped to answer the preceding question. I will then argue that a phenomenology of crisis consciousness offers a more plausible account of how agents come to challenge the constraints of their social order. However, I will conclude that crisis consciousness is not sufficient, and we require recourse to utopian consciousness if we are to adequately explain how a social order can be structurally altered. I then conclude with an assessment of the current struggle for racial justice in the United States.

ON THE LIMITS OF THE AWARENESS MODEL OF CONSCIOUSNESS

A "social order" is here defined as the relatively stable configuration of economic structures, political institutions, and interpretive frameworks that allow agents to make predictions about what actions stand the best chance of satisfying their needs and desires.[7] If we start with this conception of social order, then we can see that taking consciousness to be primarily an organ of awareness and cognition does not take us very far in explaining why agents do what they do and how they come to participate effectively in social transformation. Living within a social order is not only a matter of recognizing its substantive reality. First and foremost, an agent must justify their actions to themselves in light of their prediction that, given the current configuration of the social order, this action will meet with success.

Certain argumentative strategies and pedagogical approaches take the obstacle of agents' consciousnesses to social transformation to be premised on false beliefs they hold

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[7] See Jon Elster (1995, 97–152) for an elaboration of how social norms coordinate behavior through the distribution of shame and expectation.

about the substantive reality of the social order (Mills 2015; 2017; Alcoff 2007). The idea is that the distorted beliefs agents hold can offer a causal explanation for the actions they take and the persistence of social orders. Charles Mills (2015) argues that "[t]he political economy of racial domination *required* corresponding cognitive economy that would systematically darken the light of factual and normative inquiry" (217; emphasis added).[8] Mills is most definitely correct in his contention that racial domination often attends assumption about the innate characteristics of dominated populations. However, taking cognitive distortions as a requirement would suggest that the rectification of our awareness would remove a necessary condition for the continuation of racial domination. For instance, on this view we could reasonably interpret the George Floyd protests of 2020 and their multiracial composition as striking a blow against the cognitive distortions of a broad swath of white people. In the euphoria of this awakening, whites seemed primed to learn and raise their awareness as evidenced by the proliferation of reading lists on race, politicians in Kente scarves, and Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* rocketing up the *New York Times* bestseller list. Truly, you could hear Sam Cooke singing "a change is gonna come."

What I have been describing as the awareness model of consciousness pervades common sense diagnoses of ongoing racial injustice. These diagnoses implicitly assume that "at the heart of these patterns of racial injustice is a structure of social relations that is *ideologically sustained* in spite of legislative, judicial and individual efforts to change it" (Haslanger 2017, 152; emphasis mine). The idea that our "collective epistemic failings" are sufficiently explanatory for why an unjust social order remains in place suggests that what inhibits our coordinating to transform our arrangements is that "individuals in the grip of an ideology fail to appreciate what they are doing or what's wrong with it, and so are unmotivated, if not resistant, to change" (152). Without denying that this does in fact happen, we should still ask what we should expect from agents once they are no longer in the grip of ideology. Do they feel differently? Think differently? Speak to others differently? Or act differently? One can imagine an agent thinking differently and still engaging in similar behaviors as before. I may be aware that air travel contributes to climate change, but that does not mean that I will hop on a bus to visit my mother who lives two thousand miles away.

It is for the following reason that I find the awareness model of consciousness limited: it would have to explain why it seems possible for a social order to remain in place even as the doxastic beliefs of agents within said order have shifted markedly. One explanation that could be offered is that extracognitive interests in the maintenance of the status quo tend to overwhelm moral awareness and thus we have a problem of *akrasia* or weakness of the will. Another explanation might suggest that the cognitive awareness was not thoroughgoing enough and so did not produce a "true" conversion of consciousness. Either explanation risks admitting that awareness is not a very effective lever for transforming a social order and

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[8] Mills (2015) goes on to say later that "'whiteness' must be operative in the right way in producing, at least tendentially, a particular cognitive orientation to the world, an aprioristic inclination to get certain kinds of things wrong" (218). Interestingly, Mills is more circumspect here where he claims that there is a *tendency* to get salient normative and empirical facts about the world wrong in a world dominated by the practices of racial domination.

therefore raises the question of why to make it central to a theory of social transformation.[9]

The deeper problem of the awareness model of consciousness in a social order is that it does not sufficiently distinguish a quotidian lack of awareness concerning the complexity of a social order from the lack of awareness that frustrates social transformation. When I go to the grocery store and see that the price of milk has gone up relative to last week, I most likely do not have an awareness of all the macro and micro interactions that went into presenting this number before me. Instead, I may be frustrated at how this upsets the budget I had planned for myself. But let's say an economist sits me down with an assortment of graphs and the capacity to translate their expertise to me so that I become aware of what economic mechanisms most likely led to the price increase. I may understand my social world better, but when I return to the grocery store, I still have hard and complex choices to make given the constraints of my social order. In other words, given that I am aware, now what do I do?

In the foregoing example, we can see that the awareness of social facts does not necessarily furnish consciousness with practical knowledge. Instead, these social facts may appear to me as *only* external constraints on my social activity that, however regrettably, I must learn to navigate. What I take to be the limit of conceptualizing awareness as one of the central obstacles to racial justice or social transformation is that this theoretical focus does not generate a convincing account of how agents come to have knowledge of their freedom over and above knowledge of their constraints. In the best case scenario, we are often left with a picture of consciousness torn, alienated from an external social order over which it cannot exert much agency rather than grasping the social order as immanent to one's life and practical activity. There is a real, substantive difference between acquiring knowledge of a moral or social wrong and developing the knowledge of how to address that wrong. Why wouldn't increasing awareness of the depth and complexity of systemic racism, economic exploitation, and rampant environmental degradation lead to the conclusion that one's ideological beliefs matter very little when compared to entrenched incentive structures and practical considerations? Indeed, we can imagine that upon realizing how dependent and intertwined our social practices are with the existing social order, I may come to conclude that there is very little *we* could do. Somewhat surprisingly, the awareness model of consciousness tends to coincide with conservative arguments against the role consciousness can play in social transformation when confronted with the reality that most people do not agitate for the radical transformation of social life.

For instance, F. A. Hayek (2011; 2018) provides a sharp rebuke to conceptions of consciousness that entail the possibility that agents can ever fully cognize the conditions of their social order. For Hayek, consciousness is always nested within a complex set of traditions, institutions, and biological processes that limit what an agent can make explicit about their social world. Nevertheless, Hayek does not think the social order only limits

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[9] The preceding point is made in Joseph Heath (2000) and Kirun Sankaran (2020). They raise the concern that an overemphasis on ideology as sufficiently explanatory for the continuance of unjust social arrangements fails to explain "the causal connection between the critique of ideology and social change" given that "they systematically ignore the role strategic considerations play in driving and preventing social change" (Sankaran 2020, 1449).

the activity of consciousness: a social order provides the tacit and abstract rules that make it possible for consciousness to provide expectations for itself, make predictions about the actions of others, and critically analyze limited regions of one's social life. Hayek (2011) inveighs against the conception of reason that he calls Cartesian, which assumes "an independently and antecedently existing human reason that invented these institutions" in favor of understanding a social order as having "evolved by a process of cumulative growth and that it is only with and within this framework that human reason has grown and can successfully operate" (112). It is important for Hayek that consciousness be put in its proper place. Consciousness can never become fully aware of all the rich complexity of its social order, in so far as that might throw the social order into doubt, because its activity of coming to awareness presupposes the validity of the very social order that is to be critiqued. Hayek finds such wholesale critique to be implausible because it would assume that consciousness can self-generate an order of complexity greater than the social order that made consciousness possible.

Following the insights of Burkean conservatism and the Scottish Enlightenment, Hayek sees social orders as the accretion of generations of spontaneous and experimental activities that for one reason or another survived their environments against other models of social cooperation.[10] He challenges what he takes to be the hubris of individuals who believe they can replace such a complex and unplanned historical process by conscious fiat.[11] Hayek (2011) defends this position by claiming: "[f]ar from assuming that those who created the institutions were wiser than we are, the evolutionary view is based on the insight that the result of the experimentation of many generations may embody more experience than any one man possesses" (122). For Hayek, attempts to replace social orders with conscious planning inevitably court disaster. He inveighs against Marxists and positivists for what he considers the utopianism of their "constructivist" rationality that supposes alternative social orders can be imposed once we have become sufficiently aware. Hayek's epistemological conservatism (to say nothing of his political conservatism) offers an important challenge to the awareness model of consciousness in theories of social transformation because, if he is right, then it is neither possible nor advisable for agents to become wholly aware and thereby critique the foundations of their social order *in toto*. From an ostensibly less conservative direction, Alasdair MacIntyre (1977) chides Descartes's presumption of "radical doubt" because no one can doubt everything in their tradition at once. Instead,

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[10] Bruce Caldwell (2005, 288–323) provides a comprehensive summary of this aspect of Hayek's thought wherein he came to believe that social orders were the slow accumulation of generations long experimentation by individuals and social groups who were simply seeking their own advantage. Hayekian social theory presumes that no amount of knowledge could replace the delicate and complex mechanisms of self-organizing spontaneity and experimentation.

[11] This claim of Hayek's has invited the critique that he has an undue reverence for tradition and ends up in a political quietism. I think there is something to this criticism, but we can understand Hayek to be making the weaker claim that elements of our social order survived because *at one time* it was most advantageous. However, it does not follow that as our environments change this will remain the case. See Gerald Gaus (2006, 232–59). We can always critique *elements* of our social order, but not the social order as a whole.

doubt works by presupposing that some crucial elements of the social order must remain provisionally undoubtable.

Hayekian social theory sets before theories of social transformation a crucial test that we ought not assume we have *a priori* passed. The test is whether we can plausibly explain how and why it is that agents come to demand a structural rearrangement of their social life. I do not think moral or empirical awareness sufficiently answers this question. We can make a number of people aware of injustices that occur within a social order, and we can even make them aware of alternative visions of social life, but awareness is not sufficient to encourage people to upset their practices of justification and prediction as they lead their lives. By Hayek's lights, agents do not enter into crisis voluntarily, but instead seek equilibrium in their social life. Nor should we expect that putting agents into crisis reliably leads to progressive social transformation. More often than not, if the social order can restore some semblance of equilibrium and reliable prediction in agent's social life, radical challenges will dissipate even if the awareness does not.

My aim in turning to Hayek in this section is not to claim that he is wholly correct in his social theory, but to point out how the awareness model of consciousness tends to agree with Hayek in practice. After all, Hayek does not deny that we can make local reforms to our social order. He just insists that that these reforms always remain limited in scope. The awareness model cannot explain why agents would dissolve their links to a social order that allows them to make reliable, local predictions of how to successfully navigate their social life. Because it cannot do so awareness, in practice, often cashes out in acts of token recognition of racial injustice or piecemeal reforms that aim to preserve the extant social order. Undoubtedly, certain piecemeal reforms can make agents lives better, but then we are explaining how a social order conserves itself rather than how it might be transformed.

I think a better explanation of why the George Floyd protests occurred would examine the crisis of the social order brought upon by the pandemic, economic downturn, and the accumulation of reporting on police brutality. This would mean that an objective crisis in the structure of the social order offers a more plausible causal account of why those historic protests emerged than an account that begins from the awareness of moral injustice.[12] A critical mass of citizens found their interpretive frameworks could no longer succeed in predicting how they could successfully live their lives and thus an objective crisis transitioned into a subjective crisis for consciousness. Here we find an important limit to Hayekian social theory insofar as it cannot explain what happens when the social order itself produces the crisis. For this, I now turn to my description of crisis consciousness.

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[12] Allen W. Wood (1972) makes this point clearly when he explains: "A historically potent demand, a genuine and effective *need* for emancipation arises in an oppressed class only under certain conditions. This need does not appear merely as a social ideal . . . it arises, according to Marx's theory, only where there is a disharmony or antagonism between the productive forces and the existing production relations" (279). In other words, when the pandemic and economic slowdown made apparent that social needs could no longer be satisfied under the existing arrangements, new and fervent political activity formed. Rather crudely, we can say that *need* rather than ideals of *justice* provide a more robust explanation for the change in behavior that was witnessed in 2020. Of course, this does not deny that many participants in the protests used the language of injustice to describe what was done to George Floyd.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF CRISIS CONSCIOUSNESS

When we speak of a social system being in "crisis" we are generally designating two phenomena. Seyla Benhabib (1986) distinguishes these two phenomena as "systemic crisis" and "lived crisis" (12). A systemic crisis is the observation of dysfunctionality or breakdown in how a social order distributes wealth, justice, or power. Thus, we may call it "objective." Lived crisis, on the other hand, is the experience for agents of needs, demands, and dissatisfactions generated by the social order in which they live. In this manner it is "subjective." A systemic crisis may be the daily fines, harassment, arrests, and evictions carried about by the police in a poor neighborhood.[13] The lived crisis would be the experience of blocked projects, being unable to reliably predict whether one will have job or housing security, and the moral indignation that one's life ought not be subject to such conditions. Separating out the general notion of crisis into two distinct phenomena allows us to analytically specify the relational structure immanent to crises and ask questions I contend are foreclosed by the awareness model of consciousness.

Schematically, if we accept Benhabib's criteria, we can see the crisis of a social order and crisis consciousness are in a relationship of dependence. For there to be crisis consciousness there must at least be the sense for the agent that this consciousness is the consciousness *of* a breakdown somewhere in their social world. It simply would be incoherent to contend that there is crisis consciousness, yet the agent experiences their world as essentially sound.[14] For this reason, and assuming that agents do not typically invent a sense of crisis, we should suppose that systemic crises or objective crises of a social order have analytic primacy in any social theory of crisis consciousness. However, it is important not to make the mistake in assuming that crisis consciousness is inessential. What we designate as a general crisis is necessarily the objective fact of some dysfunction in the social world *and* a normative demand to resolve the source of dysfunction. As Brian Milstein (2015) puts it: "Crisis belies the traditional distinctions between empirical science and normative philosophy: it

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[13] I flesh out what I take to be the formal criteria necessary for designating a constellation of practices as a "crisis" in this section. But in selecting this example, I hope two ideas become immediately clear. First, "crisis" is already a normatively thick concept that presumes an "ethical-functional understanding of norms of ethical life" (Jaeggi 2018, 128). In other words, through *immanent critique* we should be able to assess whether a nexus of social practices contravenes a social order's putative ethical norms *and* whether these practices produce systemic dysfunction or rather solve social problems. Second, a crisis is *always* a crisis for specific, context-bound agents. Fines and evictions may not appear as crises for police and landlords, but for citizens undergoing them they present real problems for actualizing their freedom according to the constraints of the extant social order. While it exceeds the bounds of this article, I should stipulate that this form of critique assumes that "a historically sensitive formal anthropology" (Ng 2015, 401) is necessary for us to adjudicate how and when capacities for freedom are being systemically blocked by the practices of a social order.

[14] I will not focus on this possibility, but I believe this formulation leaves open the conceptual possibility of *manufactured crises* wherein agents may assume a breakdown exists because of ideological conditioning even though in fact the crisis does not objectively obtain. Examples include moral panics over Critical Race Theory being taught in schools and the United States government justifying its war powers by appeal to ever imminent terrorist attacks. However, I think a complex theory of crisis consciousness would not stop at the conclusion that the agents involved are "dopes" (Celikates 2018, 1–19), but would inquire into whether there are actual dysfunctions in the social order that consciousness has miscast.

is an objective event, but it is one whose urgency demands a normative commitment on the part of those involved in it. It is an inherently *reflexive* concept" (Milstein 2015, 143). While an objective crisis does not depend, in the first instance, on the existence of crisis consciousness, there can be no general crisis without the interiorization by agents that there is a crisis.

The generation of crisis consciousness is crucial because it indicates that agents hold "normative presuppositions and expectations" that a social order systematically violates or obstructs (146). A social order functions or retains some patina of legitimacy insofar as its violations of normative expectations are experienced as local and isolated rather than widespread and systemic. If a social order is experienced as no longer capable or justified in resolving normative problems of social life, then a decision will have to be made by agents as to why this social order should be kept in place. I am not suggesting that this indicates that social transformation is imminent, since there may be relevant objective and subjective constraints to the development of an alternative social order. I will cover these constraints in detail in the following section. My only point is that the social order is put into question within agents' horizon of normative expectations rather than tacitly assumed as the condition of possibility for normative expectations.

What I take to be the central difference between the awareness model of consciousness and crisis consciousness is that the latter generates an alienation from the extant social order whose severity goes far beyond moral indignation. When agents are in crisis, they characterize the social order not only as unjustifiable according to the ethical norms of the social order, but *unlivable* in light of its functional norms. This social arrangement of economic imperatives, political institutions, and moral categories systematically obstruct an agent's normative expectations of how to carry out their life projects. Contrariwise, if we imagine one of the goals of social justice is to make those with privilege aware of injustices, then we must also admit the possibility that these agents may be persuaded that their social order is unjust, though they can still find it quite livable in terms of planning their livelihood and security (Kinney and Bright 2021). It is possible to argue that these agents have a moral duty to address injustices upon becoming aware of them, but that is not the focus of my argument. I am suggesting, more pragmatically, that awareness is not a sufficient causal explanation for social transformation. A higher order condition must be met.

Assuming that horizons of normative expectations are essential for the activity of consciousnesses nested within a social order, we should expect crises to incite agents involved in the situation to resolve the dysfunction. This is often felt as both a functional necessity *and* ethical imperative. We need to solve this problem, but also social life ought not be this way. Awareness or consciousness-raising does not necessarily meet these criteria. My awareness may lead me to conclude that the police ought not treat citizens in a certain manner or that banks should be fairer in how they distribute mortgages to Blacks. However, this type of consciousness can often take for granted that the institutions being critiqued are necessary for the functioning of the social order and the problems occur at the point of distributing rights and goods.

Rahel Jaeggi's (2016) distinction between a moral critique and ethical critique

of capitalism is helpful here. A moral critique or "a *narrow* one of internal distributive justice" tends to assume that the configuration of social life functions well, but second order distortions have accrued to its practices (Jaeggi 2016, 58). There is no necessary disruption of an agent's horizon of normative expectations. Indeed, an agent can coherently argue that what the social order is for them it should be for everyone. In the aftermath of highly publicized police shootings of Black citizens, there are always whites who will write columns detailing how when they were in a similar situation, the police let them off with a warning or a mere fine. The argument appears to be "the police should treat Blacks the way they treat whites." The fact that the police shoot white citizens as well leads one to suspect that there is either a fundamental misunderstanding of the functional role of policing in the current social order or that justice demands having a statistically better chance of having a non-violent encounter with the police.

An ethical critique, according to Jaeggi (2016), addresses "*the rationality and ethical standing of a social order*" (58) as such. It would not assume that problems of racial injustice, for instance, are second-order problems of distribution, but that the constitutive relations of social life are both ethically deficient *and* functionally deleterious to social life as a whole. The experience of such a crisis whereby the very conditions of one's life are taken to be ethically deficient and functionally deleterious is different in kind than the distance of abstract awareness. In crisis consciousness, there is the necessity of either reintegrating one's horizon of normative expectations into the social order or producing a new horizon of normative expectations that would require an alternative social order to make it pragmatic for consciousness.

Both tendencies could be apprehended during the George Floyd protests. The response of politicians, local governments, and corporations involved symbolic recognition, charitable giving, and, in some cases, attempts to pare back police budgets (many of which seem to have been quietly restored in the interim.)[15] These reforms were efforts at reintegrating citizens' horizon of normative expectations with the social order, counterposed to the demands found under the slogan of "defund/abolish the police." The ubiquity of the phrase "systemic racism" should not persuade us that those in power experience the exigency to construct an alternative social order. In fact, systemic racism has come to mean that there is a second-order pattern of unfair distribution internal to our social order and that what blacks need is a *fair shot*. We should note that these attempts to integrate radical critiques of a social order by naturalizing an already existing horizon of normative expectations (à la the "free market") are not further evidence of the cynicism of those in power. Cynical though they may be, I am not interested in relying on a psychological account. Instead, we should see this as the rational action of agents who are functionally secure in the present social order but come to be aware of its dysfunctions. I do not think it is sufficient to claim that these agents did not have *true* moral awareness and conclude that if they did, they would voluntarily transform their horizons of normative expectations. I attest that this shows that the fundamental limitation of the awareness model is that it cannot explain what

[15] See Fola Akinnibi (2021) on the restoring of police budgets.

good reason agents would have to restructure their horizons given the fact that the social order remains reliable for them.[16]

Having said all of that, I do not think it is reasonable to assume that even crisis consciousness is *sufficient* to explain the process of social transformation. I want to avoid the risk of romanticizing crisis and the experience of dysfunction or breakdown. Invariably, the experience of the breakdown of one's social order is distressing and violent irrespective of whether observers removed from the situation think a breakdown will be, in the long run, for the "greater good." We should be wary of taking crises or revolution as quasi-messianic events that move the arc of history forward with no reasonable account of the fact that actual persons underwent these painful transitions. People, generally, do not want crisis and will do what they can to avoid it. But beyond this point, we should affirm that crisis consciousness *has no necessary moral or political content*. The breakdown of one's horizon of normative expectations may lead agents to take any number of actions, some of which we may find regressive, unhelpful, or even repugnant. Analytically, crisis consciousness should be understood as a "negative" moment whose positive resolution in a new horizon of normative expectations requires another element. This element I call "utopian consciousness."

UTOPIAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE "NOT-YET" SOCIAL ORDER

Crisis consciousness is not sufficient to explain how agents come to constitute a new horizon of normative expectations. If a social order can stabilize a crisis and meet some of the demands of the agents in crisis, then we might expect their horizon of normative expectations to be reintegrated into the social order. However, in the period when a gap opens up between agents' horizons and the extant social order it is possible that an alternative set of possibilities for a social order may be grasped alongside new normative criteria by which a social order ought to be judged. Utopian consciousness distinguishes itself from crisis consciousness in that it develops new norms of justification for social practices and experiences *insight* into the "structural possibility" (Wright 2010, 107) of a social order that is not yet. Breakdown and dysfunction appear to be the structural conditions for utopian consciousness, yet they do not exhaust its content.

I emphasize *insight* in order to address an ambivalence that is at the heart of conceptualizations of utopian consciousness. Modern criticism of utopian consciousness,

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[16] My argument allows for the possibility that coming to understand injustice would mean coming to desire to change it. But even still, we would have to ask under what conditions such a desire would cash out in social practices that would directly contravene the reliable reproduction of one's life as they have known it. What insulates this desire from "the famous Hegelian charge of the 'impotence of the moral ought'" (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 121)? In other words, knowledge of injustice does not furnish the thick understanding that the injustice is *immanent* rather than external to a social order. Faced with such knowledge, an agent may just as likely aver that life ought to be different, but, alas, things are the way they are.

and utopia more generally, go as far back as conservative critiques of the French revolution and its enthusiasm. The normative expectation that a social order should produce happiness for all and the hubris of thinking the many could, by fiat, bend life away from hierarchy and tragedy struck many critics as dangerous and lacking any insight into the real strictures of life (Losurdo 2021, 86–108).[17] The concern has been that such desires sidestep the complexities of social life. These desires may even misunderstand the necessary role some form of unhappiness play in securing stability. Hayek, for instance, inherits this tradition, making the argument that a healthy dose of pessimism is necessary for a stable social order. We should restrain our expectations of what reason and consciousness can deliver. But distrust of utopian enthusiasm is not confined to more conservative philosophical traditions. We can find Theodor Adorno (2005) in "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" criticizing student activists in Germany for their voluntarist enthusiasm to transform society that lacks an adequate thematization of the objective blockages to freedom. In other words, they lacked insight into how the world really was.

Much as I want to avoid romanticizing crisis consciousness, I also think it is imperative that we resist romanticizing utopian consciousness as if it immediately follows that all enthusiasm is normatively praiseworthy and functionally successful. However, I register this ambivalence not in order to disavow what I take to be the necessary role of utopian consciousness in social transformation, but to explicate how critics from both the right and the left have painted utopian consciousness with too broad of a brush.[18] What both sets of critics presume is that utopian consciousness and utopias are primarily of the order of the *imagination* and are thus either provide no knowledge at all or, at the very least, a degraded form of knowledge. In "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," Friedrich Engels (1978) juxtaposes utopia that is made up of fantasies and ephemeral desires against science that grasps objective reality. I think this manner of carving up the distinction between utopia and knowledge has held sway for far too long and we would do well to loosen its grip.

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[17] Edmund Burke, for instance, interpreted the French Revolution as a disaster because it overthrew the wisdom of tradition and the participants presumed that they could willfully construct a rational order of happiness. Burke (2003) criticizes the French Revolution by noting:

> The levellers therefore only change and pervert the natural order of things; they load the edifice of society, by setting up in the air what the solidity of the structure requires to be on the ground. The association of tailors and carpenters, of which the republic (of Paris, for instance) is composed, cannot be equal to the situation, into which, by the worst usurpations, an usurpation on the prerogatives of nature, you attempt to force them . . . The occupation of a hair-dresser, or of a working tallow-chandler, cannot be a matter of honour to any person—to say nothing of a number of other more servile employments. Such descriptions of men ought not to suffer oppression from the state; but the state suffers oppression, if such as they, either individually or collectively, are permitted to rule. In this you think you are combatting prejudice, but you are at war with nature. (42)

[18] See Hannah Arendt (1998, 227–230) and Karl Popper (2013, 343–403) for critiques of utopia as totalitarian.

One of the key insights the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1986) offers is that traces of utopian consciousness inflect our everyday social practices in the form of daydreams, wishes, and even the somatic experience of hunger (11). Critics such as Jürgen Habermas (1969) have cited Bloch's reliance on naturalistic interpretations of utopia as evidence that he is a romantic who indulged the imaginary and irrational (Habermas 1969, 323–25). But this is not what he is saying at all. Bloch claims that the phenomenological evidence of daydreams, for example, indicate that an extant social order is not satisfying some desire the agent has.[19] Or to use the language I have been deploying: our horizons of normative expectations are never completely isomorphic with our social order. Bloch contends that these average and everyday yearnings are implicit knowledge of dysfunctions in one's social knowledge.[20]

Bloch's project, at varying levels of success, was to argue that philosophy should thematize this everyday, implicit knowledge and bring it into contact with social scientific analyses of objective conditions rather than allow it to languish ineffectually in the sphere of imagination. Bloch (1986) concludes, "*Philosophy will have conscience of tomorrow, commitment to the future, knowledge of hope, or it will have no more knowledge*" (7). The tendency of social orders and its elites toward inertia and conserving the status quo will often systemically distort the "not-yet" as an essential category of social experience.[21] For Bloch, the "not-yet" was not an abstract future that has not arrived, but bundles of tendencies and capacities that exist within a social order that in everyday situations are suppressed and disciplined. Nevertheless, consciousness grasps them in diffuse, inchoate patterns.

Unfortunately, Bloch's dense and literary style, replete with metaphors, obscures the rather mundane and practical point he wants to make: a social order's norms of justification never entirely convince everyone. Consciousness is never fully satiated and strives to both

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[19] "As long as man is in a bad way, both private and public existence are pervaded by daydreams; dreams of a better life that that which has so far been given him . . . And even where the ground, as so often before, may deceiver us, full of sandbanks one moment, full of chimeras the next, it can only be condemned and possibly cleared up through *combined research* into objective tendency and subjective intention" (Bloch 1986, 5). The important point to take here is that for Bloch daydreams may contain ideological or distorted elements, but they are not *reducible* to mere false consciousness. Research and social theory can distill utopian knowledge from daydreams since they both emerge from the same objective social relations. See Goeghegan (2004, 127–31) for explication and criticism of Bloch's complex usages of ideology.

[20] I compare what Bloch is doing with the work of Michael Polanyi (2009) in *The Tacit Dimension*, where he makes the argument that "*we can know more than we can tell*" (4; emphasis in original). In the series of lectures that make up this book, Polanyi attempts to demonstrate that knowledge cannot be reduced to explicit propositions, but must be subtended by an agent's background familiarity with a form of life that often resists explication. For my purposes, Polanyi offers a generative account of how Bloch's examination of daydreams and wishes are "tacit foreknowledge" (23) of novel and yet to be solved problems. If knowledge were only explicit formulations, then we would have to explain how problems straddle the border between being identifiable even as we do not yet have the knowledge to solve them. This is why Polanyi insists that "to see a problem is to see something that is hidden. It is to have an intimation of the coherence of hitherto not comprehended particulars" (21).

[21] As Bloch (1986) writes: "bourgeois interest would like to draw every other interest opposed to it into its own failure; so, in order to drain the new life, it makes its own agony apparently fundamental, apparently ontological" (4).

understand why and thematize what state of affairs would bring satisfaction. What frustrates projects of social transformation are a social order's systematic attempts to separate utopia from social reality, to render the former imaginary and the latter real. For instance, calls for abolishing prisons or the police are systematically met with the dismissal that these do not deal with actual social problems and are the exercise of imaginary ideals that may *inspire* us, but cannot give us any relevant knowledge of what is really possible. Appeals to polling data that suggest the relative unpopularity of the "slogans" is marshalled as evidence of an objective limit to social transformation. And so, we have the "dreamers" and the "realists." But Bloch (1986) insists that for those of us interested in social transformation it is "a question of *learning* hope" (3; emphasis in original), and this means that hope can be a mode of knowledge production—perhaps the essential mode of knowledge production— for grasping objective tendencies and latent possibilities permeating a social order.

My point is not to delve into complex questions of polling methodology or how polling plays a role in belief formation rather than only measuring the opinion that is out there. Instead, I want question the criteria we, as theorists, use to decide the difference between real possibility and objective impossibility. Bloch insists that no matter how central and essential one takes the objective sciences to be (what he calls the "cold stream" of Marxism), you will never find the "not-yet" social order in that data. The specificity of the "not-yet" will only be found in agents' utopian consciousness at their points of frustration and breakdown. And so, he insists that we must bid "farewell to the closed, static concept of being" so that we can grasp a world that is "full of propensity towards something, tendency towards something, latency of something, and this intended something means fulfilment of the intending" (18). Unless one's theory of social change is completely functionalist, whereby social orders will automatically do what they will do independent of the actions of various agents or accords primacy to technocrats and elites as in the best epistemological position to decide what is really possible, then I think the conclusion that ordinary agents have a central role to play in social transformation is inescapable.

None of this is to suggest that utopian consciousness spontaneously and automatically brings about a better social order. What I claimed for crisis consciousness follows for utopian consciousness as well: it has no necessary moral or political content. In fact, Bloch (1977) was aware of this as well, as shown by his analyses of fascism in Nazi Germany.[22] The danger was that a social order oriented utopian desires back to a nostalgia for a lost homeland that had been humiliated. A more robust account of utopian consciousness would take it to be crucial to the social learning process of what alternative social orders would allow for the establishment of shared horizons of normative expectations and wellbeing. I follow Jaeggi

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[22] Oskar Negt (1976) provides a summary interpretation of this aspect of Bloch thinking concerning utopia. He describes Bloch's philosophy of utopia as navigating "the *tendency towards revolutionary emancipation* of society, borne primarily by the working class and *fascism*, which emerged and grew out of the material nonsynchronous contradictions" (48). What Negt calls "nonsynchronous" (a translation of the German *Ungleichzeitig*) accords with the phenomenological description I gave in the previous section of horizons of normative expectation becoming unmoored from a social order. These crises of temporal and existential experience do not have any automatic or necessary political direction and indeed "in intensified crisis situations, when the solution of the contradictions within the logic of capital is limited," regressive political formations may emerge (48).

(2016) here when she concludes that a "successful form-of-life would be one that has the *feature of not hindering, but facilitating successful collective learning processes*" (65; emphasis in original). A social order that systematically and actively suppresses utopian consciousness deprives itself of *practical knowledge* as well as desiccates the capacity for imagination.

I am insisting that theories of social transformation should take stock of the loss or distortion of knowledge as much as the potential harmful effects that a dysfunctional social order can have on agents' imaginative capacities. Bloch (1986) differentiates between knowledge that distills what has already occurred from prospective knowledge "in the sense of what is becoming . . . decisively contributes to this becoming" (132). Social orders often turn the "not-yet" into disciplinary injunctions to slow down and trust the process since a better order cannot yet emerge. However, for utopian consciousness, the "not-yet" is not a limit, but an epistemic task to understand what tendencies and capacities could establish an alternative social order. In this way, consciousness still does not outstrip the present social order by fleeing into the space of imagination, but instead delves deeper into it and inquires after real possibilities of social life.

Moreover, I think this provides us with a plausible response to the Hayekian quandary of epistemic pessimism. Hayek takes our reliance on implicit or tacit knowledge of our social order as a *limit* to what consciousness can grasp and effectuate. But if Bloch is right that this implicit knowledge also contains a not-yet explicated apprehension of the problems of a social order *and* the immanent resolution to those problems, then we are not resigned to the conservative position as concerns tacit knowledge. By linking tacit knowledge with objective analyses of the social world, we could, hypothetically, establish utopian learning processes from which new forms of problem-solving and social life could emerge. This would allow us to develop a more grounded critical theory that illuminates the complex relays between needs, social environments, and political practice. Indeed, it would require that we incorporate work from the social sciences on how actions become meaningful for us given the environments in which we are embedded.[23]

Crisis consciousness and utopian consciousness should be understood as mutually supportive of the learning process that can crystallize new horizons of normative expectations. Without utopia, crisis consciousness cannot grasp alternative possibilities of normative expectation. Without crisis, utopian consciousness will not understand the breakdowns and dysfunctions that shape social life. These two typologies of consciousness more adequately explain potential processes of social transformation than models that explicitly focus on moral awareness and ignorance. I now turn to contemporary struggles for racial justice and how they can be informed by crisis and utopian consciousness.

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[23] I am here thinking of work on "affordances" as found in Bert H. Hodges and Reuben M. Baron (1992), as well as more recent work by Roy Dings (2021).

CRISES AND UTOPIAS OF RACIAL JUSTICE

In the United States, calls for racial justice and critiques of systemic racism as it concerns policing, prisons, and poverty have only become more urgent in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd protests of 2020. It is not uncommon to hear the language of crisis being used when describing the situation of impoverished Black communities. In fact, it is hard to think of time when talk of race, racism, and the United States's sordid history with non-white peoples was more ubiquitous. For better and for worse, few are unaware of discourses concerning racial justice. One might expect that after the severe challenges to its legitimacy brought on by a mishandled pandemic and nationwide protests, the social order of the United States was on the cusp of transformation. However, the opposite has proven to be the case. The social order of the United States has shown itself to be remarkably durable even as trust in the government reaches historic lows.[24]

Now, this does not imply that the crises and dysfunctions were not real and that the social situation in the United States was in actuality going well. One can point to any number of data points, such as an increased debt held by the young, decreasing life expectancy among whites, and deteriorating democratic mechanisms to suggest that there are real crises within the United States social order. Instead, what follows is that a social order can persist even as there are widening rifts between it and agents' horizons of normative expectations.[25] My hypothesis is that the general crisis facing racial justice is not a crisis of moral ignorance or a lack of knowledge concerning the situation of Blacks, migrants, or other minorities, but to borrow a famous phrase from Antonio Gramsci (1992): "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (276). The increased reliance on what I have called the "awareness model on consciousness" in discourses of racial justice expresses the real lack of political and organizational capacity to resolve the systemic dysfunction of our social order. If we cannot change the world, we can at least change ourselves. Our moment is a moment of breakdown and transition where new horizons are forming, yet old social relations persist. The aim of racial justice needs to be the establishment of a new common ground for meaningful action, or else we will witness the diminishing returns of our struggles in the guise of increased bureaucracies, token representation, and the decay of knowledge of how to organize ourselves.

There is not enough space to give full and specific details of the social causes of our interregnum, so a broad outline will have to suffice. In the social order of the United States, norms of legitimation and allegiance no longer have a rational structure for many citizens, and yet nothing has come to replace those norms that would bind together some minimal life that we could call the common good (Macintyre 1990, 351). The fragmentation of social life is not only due to market pressures that continue to destabilize increasing swaths

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[24] See Pew Research Center (2021) on the development of public trust in government.

[25] I should be clear that I do not think a social order can persist indefinitely in a legitimation crisis (Habermas 1973), but for some time relations of coercion, inertia, and disorganization on the part of agents in crisis will allow a social order to remain in place.

of the general populace with insecurity, but that this social order ideologically takes itself to be "post-racial" despite much empirical evidence to the contrary. I would call this, following Terry Pinkard (2012), a *systemic* form of alienation whereby a form of life "can no longer sustain allegiance because of the incompatible entitlements and commitments such a way of life puts on its members" (148). The increasing absorption of a Black elite and political class attempting to represent and legitimate this social order while presiding over apparatuses of violence and humiliation disproportionately targeting Blacks and other minorities, only heightens a sense of alienation.[26] And so, projects of racial justice find themselves struggling within a social form of life in which fewer people believe, but continue to lack the structural capacity to achieve a new form of life.

However, we do *not* lack vision or imagination in this moment. Activists, philosophers, and even some politicians have been writing and envisioning worlds without police or prisons, ecologically sustainable and just worlds, and worlds without borders or with the right to free movement.[27] It may be difficult to apprehend from within what seems to be a dystopian interregnum, but we are also living through a *utopian renaissance*. Utopias, as I have argued, often attend moments of crisis. These visions are crucial, especially since we can expect regressive visions of utopia to emerge that will demand a "return" to a purer nation-state. These visions ought to be contested. Nevertheless, vision is not enough if we do not grasp the shape of crisis before us.

There is no telling how long interregnums will persist. Given this, if I am right that we are in an interregnum, then racial justice requires both normative critique *and* functional analyses of why it is so difficult in our present moment to establish an alternative social order that accords with our new horizons of normative expectations. Without such analyses the project of racial justice risks becoming an ineffective slogan, or it will be vulnerable to capture by elites (Black or otherwise) who will attempt to mold its horizons according to their interests in the extant social order.[28] The utopian consciousness of racial justice should allow us to specify the difficult terrain and new problems we face in the interest of repairing and nurturing our social learning processes. No doubt this is an immensely

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[26] Cedric Johnson (2007) provides an exemplary history of this shift in the post-civil rights/Black Power era in *Race Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics*. See also James Forman (2017).

[27] I take my project here to be different from those like Robin Kelley (2002) and Alex Zamalin (2019), who in their work elucidate the relationship between political oppression and the aesthetic imagination of utopia found in Black thinkers. I think this is important work, but I want to emphasize that utopia not only gives us visions and imagination, but knowledge and insight into our social capacities and the objective possibility of a restructured form of life.

[28] Olúfẹmi Táíwò (2020) describes this phenomenon as "elite capture," where those who are in position of power within a social structure are able to substitute their concerns and analyses as representative of the concerns of an oppressed group in a manner that reconsolidates the status quo. See also Randolph (1996, 249–50) for an historical example of this phenomenon of capture, where he critiques the contradictions of Black "representation" in the Republican party from the late 19th to early 20th century. Randolph specifies that representation can only be authentic and resist capture if and only if the representative shares the interests of their constituents, belongs to an organization controlled by the constituents, and, finally, is knowledgeable enough to understand their interests. All three conditions rarely obtain in social life as it is arranged presently.

complex endeavor, but if we are to identify real utopian possibilities in our current crisis, we need much more than the awareness of racial injustices.

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