

# Philosophy of Mind for Dystopic Times

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Commentary on the book *The Mind-Body Politic* by Michelle Maiese and Robert Hanna (Palgrave MacMillan 2019); an edited version of this commentary, together with a reply by the authors, will appear on the website *Syndicate Network* <https://syndicate.network/> later in 2020.

If philosophy “is its own time, apprehended in thoughts”, as Hegel said, then

Maiese’s and Hanna’s *The Mind-Body Politic* is doubly philosophical. First, the book is reflective – in both tone and content – of the downward spiral that has befallen the U.S. in the last two or so decades, as the country has been ravaged by neoliberal deregulation, massive inequality, declining middle classes, racial violence, and a general eroding and dismantling of the institutions and mindsets of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century social democratic era. In this key, the book rhymes with works such as George Packer’s *The Unwinding* (2013), Henry Giroux’s *America at War with Itself* (2016), or, on a slightly broader plane, with Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* (2009) and David Graeber’s *Bullshit Jobs* (2018) – to name just a few entries from a growing stack of recent *Untergang* literature. Second, Hegel’s catchphrase resonates through the book even more acutely when one reads it during the long summer of 2020, a time at which the Covid-19 pandemic wreaks havoc across the globe and in the U.S. quite especially. Those who found the authors’ readiness to call many staple institutions of late-liberal Western societies “dystopic” a little exaggerated will no longer think so. In fact, you might find the word too weak given the devastation and dereliction that has befallen large swathes of the land of the free. Uncanny echoes come back from recent magazine articles with titles like “Death at the Dollar Store” or “Back to the

Jungle” (The New Yorker).<sup>1</sup> In view of these texts that read like dispatches from a nearly failed state, *The Mind-Body Politic* feels eminently like a philosophy of our very present moment.

I offer this prelude to convey why I am a staunch advocate of the broader project that Maiese and Hanna pursue in their book. It is high time that philosophy of mind catches up to the madness out there, to the collective political funk that gnaws at our sanity. The classical riddles of the field have paled next to conspiracy theories, populist affect and neo-authoritarian modes of governance. Musing abstractly over “consciousness’ place in nature” in 2020 seems beside the point when consciousness’ place in public life has become most questionable. Ours is a time in which a TV show entitled “BrainDead”, mocking congressional republicans, has inadvertently changed genre from satire to forensic documentary in just a couple of years.<sup>2</sup>

The sad urgency of our current moment contributes to my reasons for cheering on Maiese’s and Hanna’s program of a “political philosophy of mind” and I congratulate them on their convincing elaboration of key components of this endeavor. The book clears a path for others to follow, showing how the philosophical study of mental capacities can catch up with the mind-forming and -deforming powers of the current social and political landscape. But I also have reservations about the authors’ too simplistic and optimistic framing of an alternative to our mind-deforming and soul-crushing status quo. The well-known enlightenment mold to which the authors want us to return in the later chapters of the book – perhaps Hanna a tad more than Maiese – is too much of a piece with what the authors so convincingly criticize. The list of “mandatory readings” they provide towards the end not only

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<sup>1</sup> Alec MacGillis, “Death at the Dollar Store,” *New Yorker*, July 6 & 13, 2020; Jane Mayer, “Back to the Jungle: A Meat-Processing Company Puts its Workers at Risk,” *New Yorker*, July 20, 2020, 28-39.

<sup>2</sup> BrainDead, TV show on CBS, accessed August 11, 2020, <https://www.cbs.com/shows/braindead/>

skews decidedly old, white and male, but also rather canon-confirming. Accordingly, in the second half of this commentary, I provide a different take on the present dialectical situation, one that is more complicated, more critical of enlightenment humanism and less hopeful than the positive narrative Maiese and Hanna leave us with. And, to be sure, I will offer several additions to that reading list, so stay tuned.

The chief merit of *The Mind-Body Politic* is that it powerfully reorients philosophy of mind towards a study of the formative nexus of social institutions and mental capacities. It sheds a lot of light on prevalent political economies of the mind, both in a developmental perspective and with regard to the actualization and expression of mental capacities in various socio-material settings. The book's central concept is that of a mind-shaping institution. This is a purposefully designed social arrangement that exerts massive formative influence on the mental makeup of institutional agents, where "institutional agents" are both, an institution's authorized operatives and the institution's designated addressees or clients, who often have little choice but to enter the institution's mind-molding fray. Drawing competently on more than three decades of work on 4E situated cognition, in particular approaches to the embodied mind and enactivism, on philosophy of emotion and the affective sciences, and on empirical as well as phenomenological work on social interaction, the authors continue and invigorate a legacy begun by authors such as Francisco Varela, Shaun Gallagher and John Protevi to effect a political turn in the study of mind, as they bring all this work into fruitful connection with both old and new studies in social and political theory, Frankfurt school critical theory, including its forerunners in Marx and Kropotkin, and, a bit less centrally, Foucault-inspired studies of power and governmentality and recent works in critical pedagogy.

Among the many analytical forays the book has to offer, two things strike me as particularly convincing. First, the authors chart a fascinating inventory of mental capacities very different from what has been in the center of attention of previous philosophers of mind. This array of capacities and their explication in terms of development and expression is an

excellent first go at a catalogue of subtasks for a political philosophy of mind. The place of context-free qualia and arid debates about intentional states is now taken by the likes of participatory sense-making, situated normativity and “affective framing”. There is ample emphasis on affective resonance at the earliest levels of ontogenetic development, and a lot of detailed engagement with work on social affordances and situated normativity, affective niche construction and institutional “mind hacking”. Philosophy of mind gets showcased in a fresh guise as not only an exciting interdisciplinary endeavor but also as a socio-political battleground. The message is clear: The human mind, in its present iteration and rampaged as it is by a freakishly deformed institutional landscape, needs to be safeguarded and nourished as much as it needs to be understood and theoretically elucidated.

Second, while not explicitly stated in these terms, I think the book drives towards a powerful thesis concerning the fulcrum of the mental, what one might call the “affective core” thesis. This is the claim that a bundle of affective capacities – capacities *to affect and be affected*, in Spinoza’s words – form the backbone of an individual’s self-conscious perspective on the world. Maiese and Hanna suggest the notion of “affective framing”, hinting at the notorious frame problem in classical AI and cognitive science. Affect, they contend, is what effectively precludes a frame problem from arising in the case of sentient animals, as affect always already orients the organism – and the human subject in particular – towards matters of existential significance. Embodied affectivity is the corporeal-cum-mental backdrop through which agents process reality from their unique vantage points. Part of the point is that whatever else you might consider noteworthy among human mental capacities, affective framing is already in place, embedding and enabling all other mental feats. Overlook this dimension, or even only underestimate its importance, and your attempt to understand the human mind is imperiled from the start. By foregrounding the affective core of the politically shaped mind, the authors put their cards on the table: Not only do they consider the mind, and most everything “in” or about it, as essentially affective, but they consider the formative

powers of social arrangements likewise to operate mainly through the mediating and motivating powers of affect.

Drawing in part on my own work on relational affect and affective mind invasion, Maiese and Hanna show how the contemporary mind might be affectively “framed” also in the not so flattering sense of the word. The affective arrangements of institutions lure individuals into modes of attachment, patterns of interaction and mental habits quite detrimental, in the longer run, to the well-being, flourishing and social relatedness of the agents in question. Institutions become affective traps and machines of extraction, hacking the minds of those who dwell in their spaces. Such institutions showcase outward appeal – the thrill of connection, the pleasures of being “on the inside” of an exciting endeavor, a marked sense of belonging – while their arrangements in the longer run both exploit their adherents and habituate them in ways contrary to their own self-avowed purposes and orientations.<sup>3</sup> Such institutional “framing” is so tough to notice and so hard to shake exactly because it works via the affective connectedness to social and material environments that people cannot help but seek out and, at least initially, often enjoy. In virtue of the various affective channels that connect an institutional milieu with the embodied comportment of its target subjects, all sorts of contents and modes of conduct can be “uploaded” into the mindset and habitual demeanor of institutional agents. This is so because embodied affective relatedness originates in earliest ontogenetic stages and thus unfolds at a mostly pre-conscious level that is hard to bring into critical focus. The two authors do an excellent job in conveying how this affective manufacturing of institutional buy-in works in detail. Particularly – and also sadly – convincing in this regard are their two case-studies on the neoliberal University and on the mental health sector in the U.S. respectively.

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<sup>3</sup> See Jan Slaby, “Mind Invasion: Situated Affectivity and the Corporate Life-Hack,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (2016), accessed on August 11, 2020, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00266/full>

Given that these case studies circle in on the ongoing entanglement of institution and mental make-up, I found it a little disappointing that this dimension received relatively short shrift in the last two chapters of the book. There, considerably more space is devoted to the individual mind at the point where affective frames have already been firmly and finally deposited within it. By focusing mostly on individual minds in these outlook chapters, the authors stay on a well-trodden mainstream track in describing mental habits and virtues. Billed as a part about the deliberate design of “constructive, enabling institutions”, chapter 7 in particular devotes little attention to the insidious *entre-deux* between institutional structures and individual minds. While the authors wisely steer clear of the more radical positions in the extended mind spectrum, one would think that what they drive at is more than a developmental view. Their point must be that institutional arrangements make and break minds also in processes of *continued synchronic co-variance and co-activation*. Alleviating interventions accordingly need to happen on the side of the institutional arrangements, including the broader discursive surround in which these institutions are set, whereas the authors work mostly in the mold of classical “protestant” anglophone philosophy with its emphasis on the education or entrainment of individual virtues and traits of character (not to mention the all too bourgeois dance and drama exercises, of all things, among their favored means to do so). The book’s theoretical starting point thus struck me as more forward-looking and radical than its later chapters. But I do not want to dwell on this at length, because this problematic is related to a larger worry that applies at the level of the overall intellectual positioning of *The Mind-Body Politic*.

Convinced as I am by Maiese’s and Hanna’s programmatic and critical interventions, why am I less on board with what they offer as a progressive move forward? The authors’ blueprint for what they call “constructive, enabling institutions” built from “collective wisdom” stems from the classical Enlightenment canon. The central chapter six is a box ticking exercise in Enlightenment feel-good notions such as dignity, autonomy, authenticity,

self-realization and the like, problematically grounded in the authors' confident assertion of a universal list of "true human values". As a philosopher fondly cognizant of an intellectual upbringing in the vicinity of Critical Theory and Post-Marxism, I cannot help to greet much of this with warm fellow-feelings, at least initially. But is this a learning history we can unreservedly be proud of? Foucault, who figures among the authors' sources but fades from attention rather rapidly, should have made us cautious. For him, the figure of the subject and much of enlightenment philosophical discourse are ruses for power to operate and invade the innermost citadel of the modern self. On a more superficial plane, it surely didn't escape the authors' notice that many of the core values from their wish list have long been hijacked by the spin doctors of Post-Fordist capitalism. Self-expression, authenticity, autonomous choice, process-oriented participation instead of coercive top-down governance, organic integration instead of mechanical fragmentation, are fixtures in the neoliberal arsenal of soft power. While we have reason to assume that the authors are aware of this, they inexplicably skate beneath the dialectical bar set by Boltanski and Chiapello in their study on the – by now not so – *New Spirit of Capitalism*.<sup>4</sup>

But these are all just preludes to my central worry. The humanist fray that Maiese and Hanna try to refresh has a problematic legacy that much predates the sense-twisting newspeak of Post-Fordism. One way to bring this out is to probe the notion of the subject in the double sense of locus of accountability ("subject" in the active sense of responsible agent) and entity primed for being governed ("subject" in the passive sense of being subjected to power). The dialectic between subjection to authority, on the one hand, and self-assertive empowerment, on the other, has been construed rather one-sidedly by the enlightenment mainstream. For the bourgeois philosophers of the early modern period this was surely much in evidence. The philosophical elaboration of the autonomous subject coincided with the unprecedented rise of the European bourgeoisie to economic power, moral authority and cultural hegemony. The

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<sup>4</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso 2006).

reservoir of ideas, aesthetic energies and political visions laid down in that period can seem both inescapable and inexhaustible. The picture changes drastically, however, once the dark undertow – literally! – of the European enlightenment is brought adequately into view. From the perspective of the colonized, the violently displaced and enslaved, the modern figuration of the human subject is doubly pernicious, to say the very least: At first, their subject-status was withheld on the grounds of alleged natural inferiority, and later, after that status had been reluctantly granted, it was itself used as an instrument of oppression. Devoid of property and without bearings in the dominant social order, *les damnés*' newly won legal status as “free” agents and autonomous, responsible subjects imposed heavy burdens upon them. Being a subject, for these individuals, became an imposition of responsibility for their own plight. Being “free” for them amounted, in the memorable double sense of the word pointed out by Marx, to being free to sell their labor-power while being free of material resources.<sup>5</sup> Under the guise of the Enlightenment conception of the subject, an objective lack of options could conveniently be read as a habit of poor choices. At any rate, this was the narrative pushed by those who held firm in their possession of propertied privilege. The “burdened individuality of freedom”, to use Saidiya Hartman’s searing phrase, is the flip side to the noble-sounding humanist discourse of the emancipated subject.<sup>6</sup>

I cannot go into the kind of detail required to bring out the full dialectic; what I want to point to here is merely the extent to which the Western humanist idea of “the subject” itself would merit a critical analysis as an institution with pervasive mind-molding powers, and that its legacy is, mildly put, decidedly ambivalent. This is why the full story is much more

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<sup>5</sup> Marx verbatim: “[T]he owner of money must meet in the market with the free labourer, free in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realisation of his labour-power.” (*Capital*, Vol. I, book I, ch. 6 – accessed on August 12, 2020 from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch06.htm>).

<sup>6</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), 115-124.

complicated than the neatly organized positive/negative framing – dystopic vs. enabling institutions – that Maiese and Hanna often fall back upon. The enabling, nourishing, solidarity- and empathy-fostering qualities of social institutions have by no means been distributed equally. The insidious backside, the ruses, the small-printed exclusions in the text of the European enlightenment are well-studied by now. Besides Saidiya Hartman’s pathbreaking work on the continued subjection of the formerly enslaved in the name of freedom, I especially recommend Sylvia Wynter’s genealogical critique of the macro patterns of Western socio-cultural intelligibility.<sup>7</sup> Wynter brings into focus the historical roots of a racial order centered on the white liberal norm subject in its two main iterations, renaissance humanist (“rational man”) and biocentric-Darwinian (“homo oeconomicus”). In Wynter’s broad optic appears a decisive rift between these successive hegemonic elaborations of the Western figure of “man”, mostly exclusionary and repressive, and the broader humanist fray, whose autopoeitic potentials are still largely untapped. While such a macro-critique of the Western order would be by and large in accord with Maiese’s and Hanna’s critique of the prevailing late-liberal status quo, it breaks company with their project at the point where “rational man” again sets out to monopolize the domain of the human. This “overrepresentation of man”, in Wynter’s parlance, crowds out the truly emancipatory potentials that the human symbolic species possesses in virtue of its auto-instituting powers.<sup>8</sup> My point is not so much that Maiese’s and Hanna’s forward-looking proposal falls short in this regard (although it likely does), but that this broader framing of the issues does not nearly figure in their narrative. By refusing to distinguish at all between “human” and “man”, and by all too confidently and imposingly speaking of “true human needs” (when what is in fact at issue is a parochial Western list of hollowed-out values at best), the authors inadvertently, and

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<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3 no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

<sup>8</sup> See Wynter, “Unsettling,” 260.

despite their best intentions, return us to a mode of thinking that is of a piece with what they have set out to critique.

What alternative would I recommend given this broader, more complicated dialectical picture? Most importantly, I think we should refrain from offering facile visions, let alone blueprints of a “better world”, and instead stay with the thorough and detailed critique of the dystopic status quo. This would much aid the urgent task of performing a rigorous deconstructive critique of the Western order and its deep history; it would help it by bringing out, gripping analysis after gripping analysis, this order’s utter unbearableness. In this endeavor, those of us who have just recently arrived in the barren lands of “progressive dystopia”<sup>9</sup> can learn quite a bit from the ones who have been forced to reside in ravaged, hostile and utterly derelict territories for so much longer.

In this spirit, I would like to add the following recommendations to the list of “mandatory readings” offered by Maiese and Hanna: Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952); Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997); Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (1997); Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom” (2003), Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons* (2013). This body of texts – and many more I cannot list here – brings us closer to a place from which central issues of the Western intellectual heritage will appear in a clearer, if much less favorable, light. Maiese’ and Hanna’s energetic reorientation of the philosophy of mind is already thrusting in this direction. Given these promising beginnings, it is all the more important not to stop at the half-way point and instead push on further into a discursive realm that prepares us to confront our present dystopic moment head-on.

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<sup>9</sup> See Savannah Shange, *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2019).

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