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Citation for published version:

Lawrie, A 2022, “An experiment in optimism was coming to an end”: Gift exchange and giftedness in two novels of the Occupy era', *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2, 4, pp. 267-291.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875821000827>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1017/S0021875821000827](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875821000827)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal of American Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:

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“An experiment in optimism was coming to an end”: gift exchange and giftedness in two novels of the Occupy era

Abstract: This article examines the role of “gifts” and “giftedness” in two recent novels about Occupy Wall Street, Barbara Browning’s *The Gift* and Caleb Crain’s *Overthrow*. Together these novels explore how projects designed to offset the effects of neoliberal individualism very often end up replicating, rather than disrupting, aspects of capitalist exchange: the authors temper their own utopian impulses by interrogating the factors which prevent systemic change, such as individual complacency and governmental intervention. The article considers the cycle of gift-giving launched by Browning’s narrator, a project which falters because her understanding of economization is inadequate, and because she refuses to take account of her own class position. Crain’s group of young Brooklynites believe that mind-reading draws people together and prevents social isolation. While the vagueness of their aims can be taken as an implied narrative criticism of their impractical plans, the reason they abandon the project is because it encroaches on the government’s surveillance programme, which identifies them as security threats.

Occupy Wall Street began on 17 September 2011, when thousands of protesters gathered in Zuccotti Park, a few blocks from Wall Street. By this stage three years had passed since the global financial crash of 2008, and millions of ordinary Americans were still buckling under the weight of massive student loan debts, the collapse of subprime mortgages, precarious employment, and stagnated wages – at the same time as their tax dollars were used to bail out the major financial institutions whose actions had created the crisis in the first place. The Occupy slogan “We Are the 99%” became an effective rallying cry, succinctly capturing the reality that capital, and by extension political power, was confined to just 1% of the population, who had continued to thrive after 2008. The occupation itself was relatively short-lived, but by the end of 2011 the movement had already spread to more than 800 different cities both within the US and across the globe. This article examines two recent novels set during Occupy: Barbara Browning’s *The Gift* (2017) and Caleb Crain’s *Overthrow* (2019). Occupy was criticized for failing to come up with a list of specific demands or policy proposals; the characters in each of these novels, by contrast, devise schemes they hope will moderate neoliberalism’s most deleterious effects. But these projects, which posit gift-giving and giftedness as antidotes to capitalist profit-making and individualism, are ultimately let

down by the naivety and imprecision of their sponsors – criticisms which align them with the real-life occupiers. This article assesses the viability of each fictional scheme, and the hostile response they provoke from strangers, friends, and even federal law enforcement. By placing these two novels in conversation with each other, the article highlights the particular impact of Occupy on the novelistic imagination: these writers, much like their protagonists, are attracted to the utopian possibilities of the movement, but also maintain an ironic distance from their characters in order to expose the limitations of their proposals. Browning’s narrator attempts to offset neoliberal individualism by launching an endless cycle of gift-giving, yet this fails because her commitment to formulating an alternative is superficial, compromised by her class position. In *Overthrow* the “gift” in question is a telepathic gift – a group of young Brooklynites establish an Occupy working group to offer training in intuiting others’ feelings, with the goal of creating a more empathetic society. The implied authorial reservations about their scheme stem from the contemplative (rather than agentic) approach taken by these characters. But Crain’s critique also extends to governmental overreach, in particular its mass surveillance operation, through which it erodes citizens’ privacy and forestalls their attempts to initiate systemic change.

Near the start of *The Gift*, Barbara Browning’s work of autofiction, the narrator (also called Barbara) describes visiting the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations in Lower Manhattan. Barbara lives close to Zuccotti Park, and has been dropping by fairly regularly, “hanging out a bit, and talking with people”; she and her partner have also donated some books to The People’s Library, and after the encampment is cleared by police on 15 November, she volunteers to teach a few workshops for the Free University, an offshoot of Occupy.¹ Barbara therefore fully supports the protest and its (deliberately hazy) objectives, despite the fact that Occupy could reasonably be regarded as a peripheral event for her, given her circumstances: whereas the protesters are “mostly young and mostly unemployed”

¹ Barbara Browning, *The Gift* (Minneapolis and Brooklyn: Coffee House Press, 2017), 32.

college graduates “encumbered with huge loans”, Barbara is a university professor in her sixties with a spacious apartment in an expensive Manhattan neighborhood, and has money to spend on the theater and foreign travel.² This financial stability offers a contrast to the characters in *Overthrow*, Caleb Crain’s novel also set during Occupy, where a loose group of friends, most of them in their twenties and working in low-wage jobs, are regular visitors to the park, cycling over the bridge from Brooklyn to Lower Manhattan; one of them, Leif, was even part of the encampment until he caught pneumonia, and since then he and his friends have helped out with preparing meals for the occupiers, and set up a makeshift stall to recruit others to their nascent working group. These novels therefore present two very different experiences of living in New York during the Occupy era, yet each of their protagonists take inspiration from the movement to imagine a fairer and more empathetic society, however imprecisely this is conceived. Barbara’s solution centers on gift exchange as a potential corrective to the materialism and self-interest which is endemic to globalized neoliberalism – ideas which were articulated in Lewis Hyde’s famous 1983 book *The Gift*, a response to Marcel Mauss’s 1925 essay of the same name, which itself has generated a vast body of scholarship, including important work by radical anthropologist David Graeber, one of the “founders” of Occupy.³ Browning’s narrator is already well-versed in the ideas of Mauss and Graeber, and is reading Hyde in preparation for a graduate seminar; this, together with her recent visits to Zuccotti Park, inspires her to send out gifts to friends and strangers alike – a “love spam bandwagon” which she hopes will forge bonds of empathy and affection among a large group of people, as a mitigation on capitalist individualism and the “detached nature of commodity exchange.”⁴

² Todd Gitlin, *Occupy Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 21.

³ See for example Graeber’s chapter “Marcel Mauss Revisited” in *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), and his article “On the moral grounds of economic relations: A Maussian approach”, *Journal of Classic Sociology* Volume 14, No. 1 (2014), 65-77.

⁴ Browning, *The Gift*, 83; Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006), 69.

This article begins by exploring Barbara's gift-giving scheme and the reaction it provokes among her recipients, because while she imagines these gifts to be nothing more than "beautiful" tokens which will circulate freely without demanding a return, her confounding generosity leaves others feeling indebted, prompting their anxious withdrawal from the friendship. Hyde's book also put forward a link between gift exchange and artistic giftedness: like the material gift, the point of the creative work was to share it with others, who would then look at the world differently, and even be inspired to create work of their own. Following the analysis of Barbara's failures in gift exchange, this article will consider the work of her friend Tye, a gifted performance artist who manages to elicit an awed response from his audiences while continually foregrounding the economization of his creative vision. In contrast to Barbara, who rather naively imagines her scheme might lessen some of the worst impulses generated by neoliberal rationality, Tye remains much more pragmatic, capable of highlighting the inequities of free market capitalism without disavowing the benefits it affords him personally. That concept of "giftedness", which relates to Tye's creative endeavors, also figures prominently in *Overthrow* (which the second half of this article will focus on). In that novel Leif, a poet and barista, and his friend and roommate Elspeth, believe themselves able to communicate with each other through mind-reading, or extra-sensory perception (ESP). Like Tye in Browning's novel, Leif and Elspeth work hard at honing their gift, and its effects thrill those who witness it, who feel encouraged to try telepathy for themselves. And there are also marked similarities between this "gift", which the friends form an Occupy working group to promote, and Barbara's gift exchange: like her, they hope to create a more "beautiful" and connected world by being attentive to how others are feeling, and encouraging them to talk about their fears. But as the final section of this article will explore, while Barbara's scheme can be easily absorbed within the capitalist system she imagines herself capable of supplanting, Leif's mind-reading appears to threaten

the surveillance operations of corporate and federal agencies, who swiftly clamp down on the group's experiment, threatening to throw them in jail. The tone of each novel is initially buoyant, as the protagonists formulate rather quixotic proposals for alleviating, in however localized a way, the social atomization they perceive to be plaguing contemporary America. But that mood darkens as those schemes are shown to be not merely impractical but unintentionally harmful to those closest to them, and their plans are undone through a combination of personal naivety and the predictable reassertion of neoliberal structures, guaranteeing compliance with the status quo.

Occupy Wall Street, the catalyst for these characters' experiments in empathy, came in for sharp criticism over its failure to agree on a set of proposals for the government to respond to, yet this was a deliberate strategy: David Graeber explains that "the refusal to make demands was, quite self-consciously, a refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the existing political order of which such demands would have to be made."⁵ Graeber's book *The Democracy Project* (2013) therefore focuses much more on tactics than on policy proposals: the objective was to provide a functioning model of "direct democracy" that might be emulated in communities across the country, so that groups of people could take collective decisions, through discussion and compromise, about the issues which affected their lives.⁶ It was imperative that the movement maintained a "leaderless", horizontal structure: the general assembly was arranged so that anyone might ask to speak, with facilitators using the "progressive stack" to ensure a range of demographics were heard in the discussion. The assembly also split into smaller "working groups", which had specific responsibilities, some of them immediate (such as the Food Working Group, which prepared meals for the occupiers; the Sanitation Working Group, responsible for cleaning the site; and the Media Working Group, which created a live stream and used social media to publicize the

⁵ David Graeber, *The Democracy Project* (London: Penguin, 2013), 233.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

movement), and others more conceptual, such as the Alternative Banking Group and the Outreach Working Group. Hannah Appel, a participant in Alt Banking, has written about the “expansive and expanding economic imagination in disparate Occupy sites”, where radical alternatives to the current system of financial and political governance were freely discussed.⁷ she recalls feeling compelled to make lists of the ideas that were “lying around”, and describes how “As people streamed into the park, whether for an hour after work or to set up camp, many came with personal manifestos – books, Xeroxed fliers, or carefully handwritten thoughts.”⁸ The occupation in Zuccotti Park (which was renamed Liberty Square by occupiers), and in dozens of sites across the US and around the globe, became a space for new conversations not just about alternatives to free market capitalism, but other issues it directly affected, from the climate emergency to the militarization of the police.

THE GIFT

Although Barbara, in Browning’s novel, is not part of the encampment, the fermentation of ideas she encounters during her visits encourages her to come up with her own plan to address some of the inequalities and unhappiness accentuated by the 2008 crash: the “recent implosion of the global financial system made it evident that we needed to try something else”, she explains, and “maybe if I began (or, to be honest, continued) super-producing both asked-for and unasked-for recordings of my uke covers as gifts, I could possibly help jumpstart a creative gift economy that would spill over into the larger world of exchange.”⁹ This “creative gift economy” (a term coined by Marcel Mauss) would, Barbara hopes, be a stay on the individualism and competition she regards as endemic to American society. In Wendy Brown’s 2015 book *Undoing the Demos* she defines neoliberalism as a “governing

⁷ Hannah Appel, “Occupy Wall Street and the Economic Imagination,” *Cultural Anthropology* Volume 29, No. 4 (2014), 602-25, 603.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 615.

⁹ Browning, *The Gift*, 5, 4-5.

rationality” that “extend[s] a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life.”¹⁰ In this seemingly inescapable contemporary mode, “economic parameters become the only parameters for all conduct and concern”, with the individual configured as “a unit of entrepreneurial and self-investing capital.”¹¹ Barbara’s proposed “something else” is a system where the “market model of self-interest” is simply not relevant: tired of behaving as “market actors” competing for the best return on their investment, her putative gift-givers pursue instead an affective reward that comes from acts of spontaneous generosity.¹² This resembles the argument put forward by Hyde in *The Gift*, which Barbara is reading while Occupy is taking place. Central to Hyde’s thesis is that while purely economic transactions fail to create any type of connection, a gift establishes “emotional ties between the parties in the exchange”, a “feeling-bond”, and as gifts are passed around, they can “produce and maintain a coherent community” based on gratitude and sociability.¹³ Gifts thus function as “anarchist property”, in that the “connections, the ‘contracts,’ established by their circulation differ in kind from the ties that bind in groups organized through central power and top-down authority.”¹⁴ As a mode of exchange which strengthens human relationships and aims to build a rhizomatic community, gift exchange has

¹⁰ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43, 41.

¹² Browning, *The Gift*, 5, 33-34; Brown, *Undoing*, 31. Of course this runs very close to Sara Ahmed’s discussion of “happy objects”: she describes how “happiness functions as a promise that directs us toward certain objects, which then circulate as social goods. Such objects accumulate positive affective value as they are passed around.” Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 29-51, 29. But there is an important distinction to be made between Ahmed’s “sticky” objects and the gifts Barbara hands out. Ahmed writes that “Objects are sticky because they are already attributed as being good or bad, as being the cause of happiness or unhappiness.” Ahmed, 35. “It is not that we just find happy objects anywhere”, she explains; they have been settled on as generators of happiness: “Groups cohere around a shared orientation toward some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight.” Ahmed, 35. But in Barbara’s case the objects (or “gifts”) themselves are actually irrelevant: this is why she does not give much thought to what she gives away, because what matters is that something – *anything* – has been handed over, and that a connection between the two parties has been established. And the gift itself, already of little consequence, tends to disappear quickly from view.

¹³ Hyde, *The Gift*, 68, 58, 82-83.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

an obvious appeal for those sympathetic to the Occupy cause.¹⁵ And Barbara is already an enthusiastic gift giver, handing them out “randomly, all the time”; these often take the form of ukulele covers (and occasionally films of herself dancing), which she e-mails to friends, acquaintances, and even total strangers.¹⁶ She does not expect anything in return for these recordings, but hopes they might generate a relationship between her and the recipient – the songs tend to be love songs, often sentimental, and she imagines they will offer a shortcut to a type of “erotic investment.”¹⁷ If successful, this would effectively reverse (in however small-scale a way) the neoliberal “vanquishing” of a “demos ... the very idea of a public, including citizenship beyond membership.”¹⁸ Barbara envisions an expanding community built on goodwill and emotional interchange, and is adamant that her covers should be “available for regifting” to anyone who wants them, and thereafter circulate freely – just as Hyde suggested that “*the gift must always move.*”¹⁹

In the second half of his book Hyde made an explicit connection between gift-giving and artistic creativity, or “giftedness”. He suggested that as with material gifts, the work of art accrues social value when widely shared – and in optimal circumstances the creative energy or imagination of the audience is also stirred: “Reading the work, *we* feel gifted for a while, and to the degree that we are able, we respond by creating new work (not art, perhaps, but with the artist’s work at hand we suddenly find we can make sense of our own experience).”²⁰ Barbara similarly hopes that her ukulele covers will provoke a creative response in others: her thoughts seem to merge with Hyde’s as she explains that “in the best

¹⁵ For Deleuze and Guattari the “rhizome” is a “*map and not a tracing*”: it is “open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: The Athlone Press, 1988), 12. As a non-hierarchical network which connects people and ideas in unexpected and endlessly proliferating ways, the rhizome is a useful way of thinking about Zuccotti Park, where multiple chance encounters between strangers sparked new ideas about how society might be organized.

¹⁶ Browning, *The Gift*, 164.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸ Brown, *Undoing*, 35, 39.

¹⁹ Browning, *The Gift*, 13; Hyde, *The Gift*, 4.

²⁰ Hyde, *The Gift*, 196.

of all possible worlds, the recipient feels compelled to *do* something with the gift – mine (although my musical gifts, in both senses of the term, are pretty negligible) or the true musical gift at the origin of the song.”²¹ When she receives a generic spam e-mail from a weight loss doctor based in Illinois, she writes back to him with a cover of “I Wish You Love”, imagining it might prompt him to “sit down and noodle around on his Korg”, or perhaps even “record his own cover tune and embed it in the next batch of weight loss spam he sent out into the ether.”²² And ahead of a workshop she is due to give in Chicago, she sets the participants an assignment which she pictures setting off a chain of “weird art”, an endless diffusion of creative energy: “The idea was for each person to make something – a dirty haiku, a voice-mail apology, a videotape of him- or herself dancing around ... People would send these to me, and then I would respond, and maybe it would keep going.”²³

Barbara’s gift giving reaches a pitch of intensity during her relationship with Sami, a talented musician living in Cologne with whom she strikes up an online correspondence. Having found some of his “astonishing” ukulele videos on YouTube, she sends a message offering to choreograph a dance for his recital of a Paganini caprice, and he seems receptive to the idea; soon she is e-mailing him poems and ukulele covers, while he reciprocates with some of his own compositions.²⁴ These musical exchanges push them both to create more experimental art: she sends over videos of herself dancing naked to his “mostly phatic” voice messages, and after he reads her novel he composes “an entire jazz suite” in a “twenty-four-hour frenzy”, “each section titled after a small detail – an image from my narrator’s dream, the name of a hotel where she’d stayed, something funny she’d said.”²⁵ While these artistic exchanges foster a relationship of mutual creativity (as per Hyde’s hypothesis), their messages to each other also arrive as a type of accelerated intimacy: after Sami explains that

²¹ Browning, *The Gift*, 7.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69, 55, 55, 55.

he has Asperger's and suffers periods of extreme anxiety, Barbara offers to become a regular point of contact for him, and despite being told that "he found emotions confusing", she repeatedly tells him she loves him, even sending over an intimate video of a "hand dance" – presumably of herself masturbating – which she coyly suggests we (the reader) cannot be shown.²⁶ When he describes to her "the technique of bowing *sul tasto*" and "of playing the 'sweet spot'", she regards it as "one of the dirtiest messages anybody had ever written me", although "strictly speaking, it was all about the placement of the bow over the violin strings."²⁷

Despite Sami's reservations, Barbara continues to send videos of herself dancing naked, while subtly pressing him for personal revelations. And she dismisses his obvious unease when he attempts to stop her from sending over a package of gifts: he admits to "paranoia and social phobia" and explains that giving anyone his address "always sent him into a panic", yet she insists on having that information.²⁸ The parcel apparently having been lost in the post, Barbara then plans a trip over to Cologne, and gathers more gifts to give him in person. But when she appears to be nearing his (fake) home address, he begs her not to visit, even threatening to kill himself if she arrives with the gifts. This brings into focus the central drawback of gift exchange: generally speaking, gifts must be reciprocated by offering something of roughly equal value; otherwise one is left feeling ungenerous, and indebted, and the relationship turns unequal. When Barbara arrives back in New York, Sami explains to her that "objects, physical objects, often frightened him", and he "preferred weightless gifts, the songs and dances we'd exchanged. Objects frightened him because in the past his father had used them to control him ... Sami was afraid of feeling indebted – it was irrational, but it was how he felt."²⁹ In Mauss's anthropological essay *The Gift* he wrote at length about the

²⁶ Ibid., 23, 68.

²⁷ Ibid., 48.

²⁸ Ibid., 122.

²⁹ Ibid., 179, 179-80.

“obligation to repay gifts received”, and the sanctions (social, spiritual, and economic) if that generosity is not returned.³⁰ What Barbara fails to understand is that for Sami, accepting her “ridiculous bag of treats” would force him into a position of obligation, burdened by the need to reciprocate, but (given that material objects have posed a threat to him in the past) unwilling and afraid to do so; her rather simplistic claim that “I wanted to give you something beautiful” suggest she is oblivious (or in denial) about the rules of gift exchange, an assumption which is borne out by her later naive remark that “Gifts never make me feel obligated, though they make me feel inspired, so I make something in response but never out of a sense of debt.”³¹ Her visit to Cologne is a disproportionate act of generosity which diminishes Sami’s standing, leaving him weakened and upset – unable to return the favor, he has become the lesser partner in the relationship. This botched attempt to visit him also uncovers a steeliness in Barbara’s character: she admits that “I’d probably overdone it with the treats, oops”, and while that “oops” implies this was a simple misjudgement which has just occurred to her, her insistence about visiting him starts to feel like an act of violence: she warns him that “I’m starting to feel a little obstinate. I think I’m just going to do it”, as she maps out her route to his address.³² Only when she arrives back at Cologne airport, following her disastrous attempt to visit Sami, does she realise the magnitude of her error. There she notices, on a sign indicating which items are prohibited on a flight, “a picture of a bottle with a skull and crossbones on it, and next to it was the German word: *Gift*.”³³ The word “Gift” in German means “poison”, and this forces her to reconsider her behavior, which “had all started as a kind of joke”, but now feels ruinous: “it was so devastating to think that my gifts,

³⁰ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen & West Ltd, 1970 [1925]), 10.

³¹ Browning, *The Gift*, 165, 169, 181.

³² *Ibid.*, 159, 162.

³³ *Ibid.*, 172.

maybe even the beautiful ones, maybe even this novel, might be also poisonous for him ... the Germans were trying to tell me the dangerous thing was the gift itself.”³⁴

The misunderstanding between Sami and Barbara has arisen because she assumes their relationship operates according to the logic of “baseline communism”, an open-ended structure of obligations where favors and courtesies (and even gifts) are freely given out in order to maintain a level of sociability.³⁵ Graeber believes this operates within most societies, capitalist or otherwise: “Anyone who is not an enemy can be expected to respect the principle of “from each according to their abilities ...” at least to some extent: for example, if you need to figure out how to get somewhere, and they can give you directions, they will.”³⁶ The same principle works among close friends and family, where “relations are assumed to be eternal” and therefore “taking accounts [would be] considered morally offensive or just bizarre.”³⁷ Because Barbara’s inclination is to assume a close relationship with everyone she meets, she imagines that she and Sami have this type of bond – hence her belief that it is possible for them to avoid acting “out of a sense of debt” to each other.³⁸ But hers and Sami’s friendship does not operate on these familial terms, as he alone recognizes; their dynamic is one of “exchange”, a “fundamentally different sort of moral logic”, where the relationship is of “balanced reciprocity” between equals, but can quickly become “agonistic”: in particular, issues tend to arise when “two parties are acting like equals, trading gifts, or blows, or commodities, or anything else, but one of them does something that completely flips the scale.”³⁹ Sami’s sense of beleaguerment is triggered by Barbara’s confounding generosity, and by refusing the gifts and (temporarily) cutting off contact, he hopes to walk away before the situation spirals further out of control.

³⁴ Ibid., 172.

³⁵ Graeber, “On the moral grounds”, 69.

³⁶ Ibid., 68.

³⁷ Ibid., 70.

³⁸ Browning, *The Gift*, 181.

³⁹ Graeber, “On the moral grounds”, 70, 70; Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological*, 219, 160; Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (London and New York: Melville House Publishing, 2014), 117.

This brings us back to the Occupy movement: one of the main targets of the occupiers' fury was the level of debt with which millions of Americans were struggling, whether from student loan fees, mortgage payments, healthcare costs, or more mundane fees such as late fines on a credit card. After listening approvingly to some of the anti-capitalist debates in Zuccotti Park, Barbara has managed to come up with a plan which actually recreates some of neoliberalism's most deleterious effects, particularly indebtedness and its resultant power imbalances. But Sami's rejection of Barbara's gifts goes beyond simply a fear of debt, because the particular burden he is trying to forestall is less economic than emotional: he could probably afford to reciprocate in material terms, but he recognizes that the point of her gifts is to introduce a "feeling-bond" between them, and it is this keystone of her plan that he particularly wishes to avoid, since he struggles with social contact, preferring interactions that are more "rational" and "logical" than sentimental.⁴⁰ Yet Barbara is unable to accept that Sami might prefer to remain autonomous and unencumbered; she regards his apparent isolation (which he never in fact admits to) as a negative effect of global capitalism (with its relentless endorsement of individualism and self-interest), which she must alleviate by forging a connection through those forced gifts. Sami would rather keep his distance, finding impersonal modes of interaction much easier to handle because they do not require him to confront the "irrationality" of other people's emotions.⁴¹ This is why he rejects Barbara's gifts, and the hold over him they threaten to install: instead of seizing on her offer of an emotional bond to mitigate his supposed loneliness, he actually prefers the relative simplicity and anonymity of purely transactional relations (which market exchange operates on), where both parties are free to walk away after the trade has been completed.

FROM GIFT-GIVING TO GIFTEDNESS

⁴⁰ Hyde, *The Gift*, 58; Browning, *The Gift*, 24, 24.

⁴¹ Browning, *The Gift*, 24.

The sense of obligation that is intrinsic to gift exchange represents a major stumbling block in Barbara's plans for a "gift economy". And though her scheme has the potential to introduce a more personal, emotional element into the exchange of goods – Hyde describes this as "the bonding power of gifts" – this rarely seems to work out the way she expects.⁴² The Illinois weight loss doctor stops replying when she sends him one of her ukulele recordings, and when she e-mails one to David Graeber (who makes a cameo appearance in the novel), he flings back a one-line response which precludes further discussion. And her venture is further undermined by the significant economic advantages she enjoys personally: her sizeable apartment and well-paid job as a university professor suggests that she profits from the "larger world of exchange" she hopes to re-shape through gift-giving – even if she prefers to characterize her relationship to money as "a little mystical", as though existing apart from the capitalist marketplace.⁴³ Michael Taussig reminds us that "Manhattan has become unlivable for most people", but Barbara lives in Greenwich Village, a notoriously expensive neighborhood, in an apartment large enough to divide into two, with her son living in the other half.⁴⁴ Meanwhile at a conceptual dance performance by her friend Tye, she miscalculates the actual value of her free ticket, and while she admits \$500 for a single performance would have been "pretty steep", it was "worth it", and she could have easily stumped up that amount.⁴⁵ Barbara's rather breezy cataloguing of her various expenditures implies that a narrative judgment is being made about her level of commitment; the fact that this is a work of autofiction suggests this criticism is also being extended to the author herself, in a subtle moment of self-implication. Certainly Barbara's interest in off-setting some of the alienation created by global capitalism is tempered by the fact that the structures of neoliberalism have generally worked to her advantage, and her efforts to bring others on

⁴² Hyde, *The Gift*, 69.

⁴³ Browning, *The Gift*, 5, 138-39.

⁴⁴ Michael Taussig, "I'm So Angry I Made a Sign" in *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 3-43, 17.

⁴⁵ Browning, *The Gift*, 10.

board often feel desultory, as though she has no real desire to take it beyond the realms of a hobby. The clear limitations of her conceptual vision are underscored when she refers to her proposal as a “gift economy”, because that term is not strictly accurate; Alf Rehn defines a gift economy as “a form of economic organization ... in which gift exchanges function as the central framework of economic activity.”⁴⁶ Barbara’s plan to “produce a ridiculous surplus of unoriginal gifts of purely sentimental value” is a rather less ambitious proposal which poses no threat to capitalism’s dominance.⁴⁷ Her superficial commitment to formulating an alternative is in stark contrast to the full-time members of the occupation (those who camped out in Zuccotti Park), many of whom were precariously employed and heavily indebted to the financial institutions based just a few blocks away on Wall Street. Their sense of frustration at having the odds stacked so much against them lent their protesting a feeling of urgency: alongside the dancing, drum circle, and witty signs, the camp became a “sort of subculture of seriousness in a sea of snark”, the discussions earnest “because of what was at stake, which was no laughing matter.”⁴⁸ Barbara, largely unaffected by these issues, regards it as a pleasant diversion: when no-one shows up for her first Free University workshop she remains unperturbed, happily using the time to read, while at the second workshop her claims for the “gift economy” seem flimsy and ill-considered – easily picked apart by one of her only two participants: “When I started talking about the optimistic reading of gifts and the notion that wealth itself might have some agency and want to move itself around, she said, astutely, that

⁴⁶ Alf Rehn, “Gifts, gifting and gift economies” in *The Routledge Companion to Alternative Organization*, ed. Martin Parker, George Cheney, Valérie Fournier, and Chris Land (Routledge: Oxford and New York, 2014), 195-209, 199.

⁴⁷ Browning, *The Gift*, 172. Alf Rehn even suggests that capitalism has successfully co-opted gift exchange, which is now regarded as a legitimate business model, with consumers now “accustomed to receiving things for free and getting to try-before-you-buy” – examples include the “classic capitalist paradox of ‘free gift with purchase’”, and software companies giving away a “free-to-download demo” of a new game “to entice gamers to buy the full version.” Business strategists, Rehn explains, now feel that “the market economy has evolved to a point where the giving away of products and services would represent ‘business as usual’, and thus, in extension, that a kind of gift or attention economy would be on its way to becoming integrated into the market economy.” Rehn, “Gifts, gifting”, 205.

⁴⁸ Gitlin, *Occupy Nation*, 65.

this was interesting but risky, because the logic could also be invoked in defense of the so-called free market. True. That's a problem."⁴⁹

While Barbara vacillates in her attitude towards a "gift economy", shifting between vehemence and apathy while remaining vague about what she hopes to achieve, her friend Tye, a ballet dancer and performance artist, offers a much more nuanced understanding of how economization shapes his creative projects. His regular appearances in the novel redirect the focus from gift-giving to giftedness, as he sets out to answer the question posed by Lewis Hyde towards the end of his book: "How, if art is essentially a gift, is the artist to survive in a society dominated by the market?"⁵⁰ At the first of Tye's conceptual performances described in the novel, only four audience members are allowed in, and he even sends away a journalist from (fictional journal) *Art & America*, suggesting she might "try her luck again" at a later date.⁵¹ But this opening impression of Tye as lacking in savvy (or perhaps indifferent to the commercial side of his work) is inverted once he escorts the small group into the theater and explains in detail how the show is being financed; running through these "economic terms" is a hallmark of his work, as he lays bare how the creative process is subject to market forces.⁵² During another performance he tells the audience how much he is being paid (\$300), before subtracting the cost of materials for the staging, the \$15 an hour to pay his friend "to help schlep", and the same hourly rate he is paying himself for the carpentry – the calculation revealing him to be "in the hole" to the tune of \$766.56.⁵³ And at a performance at Judson Church, he asks a volunteer to help him build a wall out of plywood, before proceeding to give him a hand-job, and then exchanging money for services rendered: "I think it went on for about three minutes", Barbara observes, "and evidently at least Tye was satisfied, because at the end of that, he stood, counted out some cash, and gave it to the guy. Tye later explained

⁴⁹ Browning, *The Gift*, 191.

⁵⁰ Hyde, *The Gift*, 278.

⁵¹ Browning, *The Gift*, 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 30.

to me that the guy paid him two hundred dollars for the hand job, and Tye paid him a fifty-dollar performance fee.”⁵⁴ Tye’s candor about his relationship to commerce (and the implication that his art is a form of prostitution) offers a stark contrast to Barbara, who imagines her creative endeavors can circulate freely, uncorrupted by capitalist principles (but also, crucially, not corruptive of them either) – just as her own wealth has an apparently numinous quality, spontaneous and unanchored.

Most of Tye’s performances are paid for (however modestly) by major arts institutions including the Whitney and Bard College, and during the shows he often makes explicit that economic relationship. But despite their financial backing, Tye is not afraid to upset any of his benefactors: Tye insists that his performance at Bard be scheduled for after the museum has closed, meaning that visitors will miss the free bus back to New York; meanwhile the museum has to hire extra security staff who are given torches to guide the spectators into the space, since the building’s lights have already been turned off. Barbara notes that “this whole arrangement was a pain in everybody’s ass, and if you were to ask Tye if any of that were intentional, as I did, he would smile slightly to indicate that, indeed, the pain-in-the-ass aspect was part of his conception of the piece.”⁵⁵ In *The Gift* Hyde regards the creation of art (or “giftedness”) as incompatible with market logic: instead of focusing on commercial value, the gifted artist’s priority is to dedicate himself to producing work which will inspire others – just as Barbara and Sami initially forged that mutually creative relationship. Tye represents the dilemma faced by artists without private means: he relies on the patronage of wealthy institutions, but he still offers a pragmatic response, deliberately inconveniencing Bard staff and visitors as a means of proving that his creative vision will not be constrained by his patrons. Tye has vast student loan debts from his MFA, and works multiple jobs on precarious contracts (in bars and restaurants, babysitting, even sex work).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 113.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 205.

This puts him in the same category as many of the Occupy protesters, stymied both by the commodification of higher education, the cost of which “has been growing at a rate that outstrips any other commodity in U.S. history”, and by the collapse of the job market following the crash.⁵⁶ But Tye is more interested in exposing “the kinds of economic transactions that make art possible or impossible” than in looking for alternatives to the status quo.⁵⁷ Like Barbara, whose supposedly radical scheme in fact co-exists with (and even emulates some of the effects of) free market capitalism, Tye is resigned to working within the system as it currently operates.

In Hannah Appel’s article on Alt Banking, she explains that several of its participants were former bankers, finally disillusioned and radicalized by the reckless dishonesty of their Wall Street colleagues, and keen to apply their own skills and experience to imagining ethical alternatives. Appel’s point is that “the conditions of possibility for a certain kind of imaginative work” exist “in the dense and seemingly definitive spaces of financial expertise.”⁵⁸ To put this a little differently: there might be some benefits to working with like-minded financiers (and former financiers) to discover viable ways of making the system fairer. After all, capitalism can and does operate alongside other systems: Appel points to prominent anti-capitalism theorists such as Graeber and Erik Olin Wright, the latter reminding us that “*Economic structures are always hybrids*”, and “While it is useful for analytical purposes to define “capitalism,” “statism,” and “socialism” as three qualitatively distinct forms of economic structure ... no concrete economic system is ever purely one or another of these forms”, but are “complex configurations of capitalism, statist, and socialist forms.”⁵⁹ Tye’s artistic career is an example of how economic hybridity might operate at an individual level: accepting funding from wealthy institutions temporarily releases him from

⁵⁶ Graeber, *Democracy*, 72.

⁵⁷ Browning, *The Gift*, 113.

⁵⁸ Appel, “Occupy Wall Street”, 603.

⁵⁹ Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso, 2010), 367. I was directed to this section of Wright’s argument by Appel’s article, which includes a quotation from the same passage.

having to think in market-oriented terms – he is not required to reflect on whether his performances generate any type of profit, giving him license to create highly conceptual pieces which are unlikely to draw in large crowds. And yet his benefactors' largesse is only possible because of their capitalist enterprises – as Hyde notes, “Harriet Shaw Weaver, that kindly Quaker lady who supported James Joyce, did not get her money from God; nor did the Guggenheims, nor does the National Endowment for the Arts. Someone, somewhere sold his labor in the marketplace, or grew rich in finance, or exploited the abundance of nature, and the patron turns that wealth into a gift to feed the gifted.”⁶⁰ Tye is content with finding pockets of imaginative freedom within the current economic model, rather than joining Occupy protesters in debating a radical alternative. His deliberate pragmatism is evident in other, highly charged, contexts: when he openly criticizes the magazine *Women & Performance* during a commission paid for by them, suggesting it be renamed *Women & Transpeople & Performance* (Tye is a trans man), he also jokes that “his critique of the name of the journal, which was sponsoring the event, was something like going to a dinner party and complaining about the meatloaf because you’re a vegetarian.”⁶¹

As well as highlighting the way his performances are funded, Tye foregrounds the physical labor that goes into his art – audience members might walk in to find him sweeping the performance space, building a wall out of plywood, or using a power drill to construct the dance platform. After watching one performance, where Tye dragged a woman across the stage, Barbara observes that “He’s strong, but that’s a lot of weight to bear, and he was sweating a lot and breathing heavily by the time he’d finished that segment of the performance.”⁶² And elsewhere she explains that “He was into endurance, which should guarantee an ending when the artist can’t take it anymore, except that he had an unusual

⁶⁰ Hyde, *The Gift*, 279.

⁶¹ Browning, *The Gift*, 30.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 118.

tolerance – and appetite – for pain.”⁶³ This visible effort is another aspect of his “giftedness” – for Hyde “the ability to do the labor” is essential: “All artists work to acquire and perfect the tools of their craft” in order to create something “higher than what [they have] been given.”⁶⁴ Only when considerable labor has gone into the work might it be regarded as “the realization of the artist’s gift”, and the audience be able to “feel the gift it carries.”⁶⁵ After Barbara returns from her twelve-hour round trip to see Tye’s Bard piece, she reflects that “The pilgrimage was really necessary”, because “The whole thing of waiting, killing time, wandering around, feeling hungry, wondering what you were doing” created the right conditions for reflecting on the “difficult situations that Tye sets up for himself on a regular basis”, and that inform his artistic vision.⁶⁶ And her visceral response to the performance suggests that she has absorbed something of his “gifted state”: she writes to him that “when first one and then a second enormous man came in, that’s when tears started streaming down my face ... oh, I forgot to mention that during the fog part, I was standing on my tiptoes to see, and my legs were shaking and cramping.”⁶⁷ Tye’s performances generally elicit this type of response: when Barbara strikes up a conversation with a fellow audience member after a different piece she notices he seemed “a little stunned”, and at Judson Church there is “gasping and nervous laughter” as people stand on their chairs to get a better view.⁶⁸ Tye’s creative gift inspires because of the work that has gone into it – a telling contrast with Barbara, who describes her ukulele covers as mere “noodling”, and whose recipients (beyond Sami) tend to be either baffled or underwhelmed.

OVERTHROW

⁶³ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁴ Hyde, *The Gift*, 194, 147, 194.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 276.

⁶⁶ Browning, *The Gift*, 205, 207, 205.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 204.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 11, 112.

In Caleb Crain's *Overthrow*, the characters are also forced to balance their creative ambitions with the need to make money. Like Tye, most of Crain's protagonists are in their twenties, college-educated, and now precariously employed in jobs unrelated to their interests: Leif cannot support himself through his poetry, so he works in a coffee shop; Chris works for a removal company shifting furniture. They live in parts of Brooklyn where the rent is still cheap: Elspeth and Leif's apartment is slightly too large to have been bought and renovated by gentrifiers. Matthew, Leif's lover and a newcomer to the group, is a PhD student who can afford to live alone, but his apartment is small enough that he needs to fold up his futon every morning.

Unsurprisingly, given these characters' circumstances and their leftist views, Occupy plays a prominent role in this novel. Lief was part of the encampment until he got sick, and he and his friends are regular visitors to Zuccotti Park, where they help out at the People's Kitchen. Matthew is less enthusiastic than his new friends: though his political leanings broadly align with those of Occupy, he has a "history of not joining things", and struggles with a "lack of curiosity"; mainly he would prefer not to be distracted from his dissertation, and he feels that "To give even a little of oneself to a cause so undefined would bring too many questions too close to the surface."⁶⁹

But his new friends' involvement in Occupy extends much further than occasionally helping out with meal preparation; they are founding members of the Working Group for the Refinement of the Perception of Feelings, or WGFRPF – the name a conscious parody of the countless number of specialized working groups formed during Occupy. Like Barbara in *The Gift*, the aim of this working group is to create a more connected and empathetic society, better attuned at recognizing how others are feeling; in place of Barbara's gift exchange, their approach is to use mind-reading (which Leif and Elspeth appear to have some talent for) in order to encourage people to admit the commonality of their feelings. By "reading" other

⁶⁹ Caleb Crain, *Overthrow* (New York: Viking, 2019), 18, 16, 16.

people's minds, and sharing with them their own fears about the crises facing the world, the group imagines they might help people feel less alone: as Elspeth explains to a journalist, "The part where we said everyone probably knows more about what each other are feeling than we usually let on, and if we let ourselves know that we know, the world would probably be a better place – that was literal."⁷⁰ Leif is the most sensitive of the working group, and its de facto leader: his telepathic powers are repeatedly referred to as a "gift", and he is variously described as a "swami" and a "shaman", capable of performing a type of magic which operates as a closed system: "If it hadn't been given to you, the most you could feel was envy, and it would be a strange kind of envy, since it would be of something you couldn't even honestly say you believed in. A kind of longing."⁷¹ The haziness with which Leif's power is described seems deliberate: Matthew, the most cynical of the group, marvels at Leif's "strange gift" which seems to him "as fluid as the congregation in the park around them. A potential rather than a quantity", and even Leif declares simply that "We're going to save the world by being beautiful together ... Beautiful in our *souls*" – a phrase which compares with Barbara's fixation on "beautiful things", while exposing the limitations of Leif's purely meditative approach.⁷² Hegel looked derisively on the "beautiful soul" who "in order to preserve the purity of its heart ... flees from contact with the actual world"; Crain's deliberate allusion to Hegel implies his ironic judgement of Leif's refusal to come up with realistic strategies for social change, as he substitutes contemplation for necessary action.⁷³ For instance when Elspeth asks Leif "Don't we save the world?", he responds in typical fashion that "It might be a matter of helping people become able to talk about the ending."⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibid., 321-22.

⁷¹ Ibid., 28, 42, 10, 97.

⁷² Ibid., 28, 59.

⁷³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 400.

⁷⁴ Crain, *Overthrow*, 60.

To outsiders the group's telepathy seems to be entirely trivial, as quirky as Barbara's ukulele covers, and no more dangerous than a parlor game: when Elspeth performs a tarot reading on Matthew, she admits she uses the cards in a "made-up way" because "The instructions that came with the deck are in French."⁷⁵ And Julia, whom they first meet when she visits their stand in Zuccotti Park, is baffled by the whole premise of their working group, joking nervously that "It almost sounds like the sort of thing my therapist would be happy to hear I had joined."⁷⁶ Yet in contrast to *The Gift*, where Barbara's proposed remediation of neoliberal individualism never passes beyond the realms of a hobby, the working group's scheme has real-world consequences: when Leif appears to guess the computer password of Joseph P. Bresser, a private security contractor hired to carry out government surveillance, he and three of his friends are arrested within hours, and handed a series of trumped-up charges which could land them years in prison. Chris had some intimation of the threat Leif posed to the authorities when, during an encounter several days earlier, he witnessed him unnerve Bresser by again seeming to guess his password; a few minutes later, Chris and Raleigh were arrested for obstruction of traffic: "It had worked ... A few hours ago, just before he was arrested, he had been able to see fear in a security official's eyes. Elspeth had seen it, too; Chris had shared a look with her when it had happened. Leif had done it."⁷⁷ But Leif's own faith in his telepathic gift seems to weaken after Zuccotti Park is cleared by police in a night-time raid on 15 November. Matthew wonders if "An experiment in optimism was coming to an end" as Leif asks the group blankly "What's my gift?", before telling them that "I guess things ... I'm just making things up. I can't do anything about anything."⁷⁸ And later, after he

⁷⁵ Ibid., 11, 10.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 39.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 60. In this oblique reference to Lauren Berlant, Crain suggests that the Occupy movement (itself a furious response to the "impasse of the historical present" and "the fraying of the fantasy of 'the good life'") has become yet another instance of "cruel optimism", as Leif's attachment to its "cluster of promises" finally collapses into despair. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 259, 19, 1, 23.

and the others have been released on bail, he wonders aloud if he was simply the “most suggestible member” of their group, fooled into believing he had these “great powers.”⁷⁹ For Hegel the beautiful soul eventually becomes a lost, “unhappy” figure: having failed to “transform its thought into being” it is “filled with a sense of emptiness” and “its light dies away within it”.⁸⁰ Leif increasingly feels like Hegel’s “disordered” soul: after learning that Bresser’s server was rigged to allow them access, and he did not therefore “read” the password, he attempts suicide; listless and under heavy sedation in a treatment facility, he doubts he and Elspeth ever possessed a gift for reading minds: “That’s my hobby now: trying to figure out if it was mania or an epileptic aura or did we just have very delicate mechanisms ... Of course it might have been just nothing at all.”⁸¹ He explains to Matthew that “if it’s not what I thought it was, then I don’t know what it is” – the perceptiveness he had previously accredited to telepathy seems to have curdled into something more sinister as he admits to hearing voices, and though he knows these are not real, they still have the power to disturb: “If you mean, Is it alarming to sometimes hear these voices talking almost as though they were talking to one personally, then the answer is yes.”⁸² At the start of their relationship Matthew had felt exposed in front of Leif, conscious that he might “read” his thoughts, and Leif had even warned him, half-jokingly, that “you’re fairly transparent to me right now.”⁸³ But after the arrest they struggle to communicate: Matthew storms out of Leif’s café after a terse argument during which Leif admits that “It’s hard for me to find out how I am, right now ... What I’m feeling.”⁸⁴

To understand the deterioration of Leif’s emotional acuity it is constructive to return briefly to Lewis Hyde’s description of giftedness: he explained that “Once a gift has stirred

⁷⁹ Crain, *Overthrow*, 310, 58.

⁸⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 400.

⁸¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 407; Crain, *Overthrow*, 276.

⁸² Crain, *Overthrow*, 271, 221.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

within us it is up to us to develop it. There is a reciprocal labor in the maturation of a talent. The gift will continue to discharge its energy so long as we attend to it in return”, but it becomes “a kind of poison” if it is not used.⁸⁵ The group’s mind-reading functions in much the same way as a creative gift: they dedicate themselves to refining their skills, using the tarot cards on each other as a form of training exercise. Hyde wrote that the “embodied gift – the work” is able to “reproduce the gifted state in the audience that receives it”, and Chris in particular is thrilled after witnessing Leif’s effect on Bresser, and throws himself into mastering the technique.⁸⁶ But for Leif his gift feels increasingly like an affliction, particularly when he starts hearing voices, and he is guilt-ridden – “synoptically sorry” – about the arrest of his friends.⁸⁷ When he stops attending to his gift, even casting doubt on its existence, he becomes awkward and withdrawn, unable to maintain even long-standing relationships. He and Elspeth had been “witchy together” since college, able to communicate on an intuitive, unspoken level.⁸⁸ But Leif’s disenchantment with his apparent gift leaves him enervated, and Elspeth finds herself cast adrift, unable to “find him in her mind”, and finds her own faith in the working group’s potential is also shaken.⁸⁹

Given the friends’ vagueness about what they hope their gift might achieve (beyond talking about their feelings, and encouraging others to do the same), the police crackdown on their activities seems entirely immoderate. Leif in particular hardly represents a threat to state security: after the occupiers are evicted from the site by police, he half-heartedly suggests the group might perform an “Occupy action” (“Chain ourselves to something. Hold a public séance”), but again like Hegel’s figure he wonders idly if it is “a philosophical problem”, and quickly drops the idea.⁹⁰ Both *The Gift* and *Overthrow* feature protagonists who register their

⁸⁵ Hyde, *The Gift*, 50, 148.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁸⁷ Crain, *Overthrow*, 140.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

desire to build a more empathetic society, but are reluctant to sketch out anything in detail. This seems appropriate given that Occupy famously refused to make specific demands, fearing this would delimit the scope of their movement and force them to negotiate with a state they regarded as illegitimate and corrupt, and entirely incompatible with their progressive politics. Crain's emphasis on Leif's frail grasp of practicality might be seen as an implied narrative criticism regarding the loftiness of the group's aims, but in fact the novel as a whole is deliberately imprecise: New York is never named, and nor are any other places around the city, as though Crain knows the ideas he is exploring will simply fracture (or perhaps evaporate) when placed in contact with reality. And he reserves his main ire for the overreaching of federal authority, because despite committing no crime, Leif and his friends have been under government surveillance for quite some time. In their article on the policing of Occupy, political scientists Matthew Bolton and Victoria Measles found that since 2007 security in Lower and Midtown Manhattan has been governed by an agreement between the NYPD and firms including JPMorgan Chase and Goldman Sachs, who cover most of the cost for thousands of CCTV cameras covering the entire area, which are watched by "representatives" from both the "public and private sector."⁹¹ Surveillance was further stepped up in response to Occupy, with private agents milling around the park to keep a covert eye on the protesters. In the novel Bresser, a private security contractor working closely with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is often at the site in order to keep track of Chris, Leif, and their fellow members of the WGFRPF, whom he regards as security threats. He has been leaked a piece of intelligence gathered by federal analysts which revealed that an individual had been "approaching hackers on chat channels ... to ask how much better than random a wholly new kind of guessing algorithm would have to be in order

⁹¹ Matthew Bolton and Victoria Measles, "barricades dot net: Post-Fordist Policing in Occupied New York City" in *Occupying Political Science*, ed. Emily Welty, Matthew Bolton, Meghana Nayak, and Christopher Malone (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 163-90, 170.

to be valuable.”⁹² This person “had been vague about what he had, but he had let drop that he had something to do with Occupy”, and Bresser swiftly “geofenced Occupy” and used an ISMI-catcher to gather call data, eventually identifying the friends as being behind these claims.⁹³ But Bresser is intent on tracking (and charging) the “Telepathy Four” not because of their vague anti-capitalist motives or their presence at Occupy, but because he is anxious to protect his own business model: he has recently developed a piece of software which “coordinated sets of data about surveilled individuals” in order to tie them to other persons of interest, “mapping the patterns of interaction within each set against one another”, and this potentially lucrative tool is currently being pitched to government agencies and the private sector; when he hears the group “talking cryptically about a new kind of decryption” he assumes their “algorithm” must be a sophisticated new piece of software – “some kind of bioinformatics”, he imagines – which might compete with his own product and scare off potential stakeholders.⁹⁴

The joke here is that the group’s apparent “algorithm” is of course ESP – hence their reference to its being “analog”, and having “a somewhat jerky variance in its margin of error.”⁹⁵ Nevertheless Leif and his friends are caught up in the very system they were there to protest. A central plank of the Occupy agenda was to draw attention to the cozy alliance between the government and the corporate sector: political campaigns run on big donations, and those wealthy donors then have leverage over government policy, which ensures their interests are protected. This pact between Wall Street and the government was plain in the aggressive way Occupy was policed – by funneling money directly into the NYPD’s coffers, billion-dollar financial institutions could exercise authority over how the area was patrolled, and law enforcement officers made it a priority to protect those institutions from property

⁹² Crain, *Overthrow*, 386.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 386, 387.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 172, 387, 387, 386, 386, 387.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 386.

damage and ensure employees could get to work safely; control tactics included steel barriers, riot gear, pepper spray, batons, and even horses. Bresser in the novel is another example of federal law enforcement working closely with private sector partners, and he highlights (just as the 2008 crash had highlighted) the potential for wrongdoing when corporate practices are not fully scrutinized. Federal agents are not permitted to listen in to calls and texts, but only “to track who called whom, from where, and for how long”, yet Bresser is not a government employee, and takes advantage of that “legal ambiguity” to go after the material he wants.⁹⁶ In a 2013 *New York Times* article Tim Shorrock reported that “Seventy percent of America’s intelligence budget now flows to private contractors”, making “private intelligence a \$56 billion-a-year industry.”⁹⁷ This is a cause for serious concern, Shorrock suggested, not least because “it is dangerous to have half a million people – the number of private contractors holding top-secret security clearances – peering into the lives of their fellow citizens”, particularly since they “aren’t subject to Congressional oversight”, or indeed any oversight at all beyond their company’s shareholders.⁹⁸ By paying these companies huge sums to gather intelligence, while exercising little to no control over how that information is used, the government is giving agents like Bresser free rein to monitor ordinary citizens without just cause.

When Matthew wanders around the park waiting for Leif he quickly grasps the scale of that surveillance operation: suspended from a crane he sees “a white metal observation cabin, which had the gleam of a new device”, and he assumes this was bought “with the

⁹⁶ Ibid., 388, 389. This is the “content-envelope distinction”: Daniel J. Solove explains that the Supreme Court has ruled that “a list of the phone numbers a person dials (envelope information) isn’t protected by the Fourth Amendment”, whereas “What’s said during the call (content information) ... is protected.” Daniel J. Solove, *Nothing to Hide: The False Tradeoff Between Privacy and Security* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 157. This means that while it is reasonably straightforward for the government to be granted court permission to obtain a list of phone numbers dialled and received, a much higher bar is set for obtaining a warrant to intercept conversations.

⁹⁷ Tim Shorrock, “Put the Spies Back Under One Roof”, *New York Times*, 18 June 2013, 25.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 25.

city's share of anti-terrorism money."⁹⁹ He instinctively understands that CCTV cameras will have identified him immediately, but tries to shrug this off: "Well, so [he] would show up in a database. To mind too much about the surveillance would be a form of surrender to it."¹⁰⁰ Since the passing of the Patriot Act and other legislation, US citizens have been subject to a mass surveillance operation under the guise of counterterrorism. The full extent of this programme became publicly known in December 2005 when a *New York Times* article revealed that Bush had authorized the NSA to wiretap the international phone calls and e-mails of thousands of Americans without first seeking a warrant from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Court, as had been required since FISA was passed in 1978.¹⁰¹ But the government's surveillance operation actually went much further than these initial revelations suggested: the NSA was also operating a systematic "*dragnet* collection" of all domestic metadata (phone, internet, and e-mail), and then "using the data as an alert system, telling analysts whenever someone using a phone number they were interested in placed or received a call."¹⁰² Bresser is mindful of the government's tendency to reinterpret FISA Court rules, and predicts that once the benefits of his surveillance software are understood, the DHS is bound to seek changes to the law which allow them to adopt it: "all he was selling to the government was the blindfolded untying of its own hands, and once change agents in the government saw what he was able to do ... they would be incentivized to make it legal, or at least to declare formally that they were not going to make it positively illegal."¹⁰³ This steady erosion of citizens' privacy has become a highly lucrative enterprise:

⁹⁹ Crain, *Overthrow*, 17, 17-18.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰¹ The *New York Times* knew about this story for a year before they printed it: towards the end of 2004 the article was almost ready to be published but the government stepped in, convincing the newspaper not to publish the story by claiming that "the program was saving lives and assuring them the Justice Department had no doubt it was legal." Charlie Savage, *Power Wars: Inside Obama's Post-9/11 Presidency* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 196. The Pulitzer-winning story, written by James Risen and Eric Lichtblau, was eventually published on 16 Dec. 2005 under the title "Bush Lets U.S. Spy on Callers Without Courts."

¹⁰² Savage, *Power Wars*, 165.

¹⁰³ Crain, *Overthrow*, 389.

“surveillance capitalism”, as Shoshana Zuboff has described, refers to the harnessing of data about an individual’s preferences, information which is then sold to large corporations so that they might customize their advertising in order to target users more effectively, whether for political or consumerist purposes.¹⁰⁴ We can see this as the logical next step for neoliberalism, in that one’s private and even unconscious desires are converted into data sets which are then analyzed and exploited to increase a company’s market share. Leif fears that his telepathic gift, if placed in the wrong hands, might be used for a similar purpose: whether or not he can read minds, he is sufficiently perspicacious to understand the inherent dangers of having access to other people’s secrets: “If feelings could be made generally audible, was anyone safe? There were cruel people in the world, after all; in a state of perfect knowledge, not everyone would forbear to take advantage.”¹⁰⁵ But though the WGFRPF appear to be working along similar lines to Bresser in gaining access to “a living person’s secret thoughts”, they pitch their scheme as having a benevolent purpose: the group’s “whole philosophy” is that they can only find out information “that it’s morally right for us to know.”¹⁰⁶ The friends present a “new moral understanding” which guarantees that their gift – the “reading” of other people – will never be used for personal gain: “the capacity that interested them [the WGFRPF] either was, or was inextricable from, a supersensitive variety of tact, and couldn’t be used to open any door that it wouldn’t be appropriate to open”¹⁰⁷ This seems a rather weak defense, since the hacking of Bresser’s computer system might reasonably be regarded as an improper use of their powers. Yet the door was deliberately left open for them to walk through, and once they logged in, they found folders of surveillance on each of them, including illegal recordings of their phone conversations, which Bresser had passed on to the DOJ to build its prosecution case against the group.

¹⁰⁴ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

¹⁰⁵ Crain, *Overthrow*, 69.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 15, 330, 52.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 330, 96.

CONCLUSION

In Browning's *The Gift*, Barbara's gift exchange always seemed more of a hobby than a viable replacement for global capitalism. In part this is down to her lack of curiosity about how the existing system operates, since she tacitly understands that her relative comfort relies upon keeping things as they are. But even those characters with something to gain from a systemic overhaul seem reluctant to consider it. While Barbara's artist friend Tye routinely draws attention to the impact of economization on his creative endeavors, a system which generally leaves him worse off after each performance he gives, he is nevertheless resigned to working within those constraints, finding enough to sustain him in brief moments of reprieve from financial burden. But Barbara's proposal fails for another reason that is intrinsic to gift exchange: her scheme depends on the construction of "feeling-bonds", an emotional connection that is established as gifts are passed around. Yet as the painful falling-out with Sami reveals, those bonds are bound to be asymmetrical, with one party more invested than the other, because feelings themselves are rarely perfectly balanced; this renders the entire system disorderly and unpredictable, and many of her recipients reject her impulsive attempts at connection. In *Overthrow* Crain's protagonists come up with a plan that seems even less practicable, relying as it does on being able to perform ESP, yet their supposed gift in fact poses a twofold threat to the government's surveillance operation: firstly, they seem to be capable of playing security agents at their own game, accessing private information using non-digital methods which leave no trace – allowing them to go further even than Bresser in gathering unlimited and unwarranted intelligence without fear of being caught. And secondly the telepathy, which Raleigh jokingly refers to as "communication technology", allows them to exchange potentially incriminating information *among themselves* using that "analog" method, thus evading the surveillance technology used by the government and their private

partners.¹⁰⁸ Leif and Elspeth are the most gifted at ESP and seem able to communicate on an intuitive, non-verbal basis; even when they talk face-to-face they speak in a type of secret language, with their friend Diana witnessing conversations at Occupy that “seem to come out of nowhere, conversations that don’t work unless they seem to fall out of the sky.”¹⁰⁹ Bresser manages to intercept the group’s communications, but he discovers that “when they quoted lines of poetry to one another, the lines weren’t reference texts for ciphers but places where they could meet. They allowed for a kind of peer-to-peer calibration, the operation of which depended somehow on the way that phrases from the poems sometimes got lodged in one’s mind.”¹¹⁰ Because their texts and calls take on meaning through instinct, they elude his program’s capacity for interpreting the content. In *The Gift* Barbara’s gift exchange is bound to fail because the “feeling-bonds” on which it depends are unruly and unpredictable, yet it is these same qualities that allow Leif and Elspeth to frustrate Bresser’s attempts to monitor them. ESP relies on instincts and perceptions irreducible to rationality, common sense, and coding, which means it resists the kind of semantic capture on which totalizing information and surveillance systems seem to depend. Nevertheless the impact of the group’s experiment remains limited. When Elspeth discovers the files on her computer, proving the government had gathered intelligence on them illegally, all charges against her friends are withdrawn, but only to prevent the larger surveillance operation being exposed: “we’re protecting the programs and losing the cases”, Bresser is told by his DOJ contact.¹¹¹ Much like Tye’s performance art, the friends’ telepathic gift lifts the curtain on how American lives are governed by the bottom line. Reading these two novels side by side has highlighted some significant commonalities in how Occupy is represented at a fictional level: both Crain and Browning maintain an ironic distance from their protagonists in order to expose the naive

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 170.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 314-15.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 396-97.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 384.

optimism of their visions for change. These plans, which the characters express in the vaguest possible terms, tend to disintegrate when they encounter even the slightest opposition. And finally in each of these novels the Occupy movement itself is thinly sketched: an occasional backdrop rather than a major plot detail, the occupation never feels tangible, and is eclipsed by the imaginative (if impractical) proposals it inspires.¹¹²

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