

THINKING THROUGH DENORMALIZATION, COUNTER-NORMALIZATION, ANTI-NORMALIZATION, AND STRATEGY



Adam Curtis: *Hypernormalization* documentary, screenshot 2016-09-23 at 10.09.50

1. REASON(ING) + CAUSE

Documentarian Adam Curtis and the Tweeting thumbs behind *Trump Normalization Watch* both describe “hypernormalizations” as dangerous symptoms of a globally-trending political overturn of “reason.” While some urge a sort of “return to reason,”¹ tactics of more complex “anti-normalizations” also emerge in resistances to an authoritarianism already operating beyond current laws and norms beyond reason.²

In his viral letter *HOW WE RESIST TRUMP AND HIS EXTREME AGENDA*,³ one of New York State’s Democratic Congressmen, Jerrold Nadler (image right), writes that “we cannot allow for the *normalization* of the hatred and bigotry that Trump used to stir fear and resentment, or of his behavior that is completely unbecoming the office he is about to occupy [...] We must never lend these things or his expressed contempt for democratic principles any legitimacy.”



Here, Nadler clearly sees “democratic principles” as a desirable norm (which, in his mind, include a lack of hatred and bigotry) and does not wish to have these real, good norms replaced by Donald Trump’s “authoritarian principles” via a process of “normalization.”

Indeed, “authoritarianism” is always seen as unreasonable by those who experience it and/or call it out. Authoritarian governments are those which enforce norms and laws exceeding popular (or “common sense”) expectations for state regulation of behavior and action. Authoritarianism is the authorization of a few to coerce and regulate peoples beyond those peoples’ *own* senses of what is sensible and reasonable coercion and regulation. In short, authoritarian laws and norms are exactly and *definitively* those seen by regulated masses or “normatively⁴ subjected” populaces as “unreasonable” or “extreme.”⁵ Authoritarian states and their leaders—in addition to performing actions which a *majority of persons* deem insensible, unreasonable, even morally wrong—tend to have especially narrow, numerous, and violently-enforced laws and norms predicated upon “versions of truth” which seem to others to be outright lies.⁶

¹ usually their own forms of reason, see Neil deGrasse Tyson and his “#Rationalia,” Michelle Bachman’s repetition of the sentence-beginner “Reasonable people believe...”

² both in the sense of “reasoning” as a logic, and in the sense of “reason” as a cause or motivation.

³ <http://www.jerryadler.com/news-clips/how-we-resist-trump-and-his-extreme-agenda>

⁴ We may preliminarily understand “normativity” as a stage or state within which actions, identities, and other elements of human experience are related to an ideal model or compared with a systemic template for “correct functioning.” “Norms” are the building blocks of the model, the model may also be called “a construction.” Normative states are often invisible to those who fulfill them. Normative states are usually oppressive for those who do not fulfill them, generating valuation and qualification hierarchies and hegemonies when—within processes of comparing or relating elements to norms—discrepancy or difference is seen.

⁵ On the other hand, throughout almost all systems of colonial governance and imperial forms political order in human history, disempowered and “minority group” persons perceiving laws and norms as unreasonable or insensible is the very crux of normativity, the very definition of hegemonic “business as usual.”

⁶ The extent to which a statement or belief can be proven incorrect, inaccurate, an “outright lie” is predicated upon the use-value, substantiation, shared belief in validity of forms of proof, as well as upon historic/socio-political memory of occurrence/actuality. Trump’s “birther lie” for example, that President Obama was born outside of the USA, is a lie because the vast majority of persons in the USA trust and use birth certificates to prove their place of birth and Obama’s birth certificate thus “substantially proves” that he was born in Hawaii. Further, we trust Obama’s narrative of his own life (at least the authors of this article do) and the words and memories of his mother. Let us not reduce the complexity of our senses of “truthiness;” complexity in analysis of the ways in which truths are constructed and proved, are crucial to our efforts to understand the sources of and disprove lies which hurt people and spread violence-causing reality-constructing perceptions and conceptions.

The laws and norms of both Authoritarian and Democratic states may, and usually do, involve authorized regulation (laws) and correlative culturally-authorized or “autonomous” regulation (norms.) In many cases, dominant, “common” and “normalized” morals and senses of “right and wrong” are the weapons of authoritarianism and the sustenance of neoliberal or “universalist” democratism.

In the particular case of Donald Trump, if he can get a majority of persons to deem his ideals, pictures of reality, and beliefs as “normal,” they are no longer authoritarian; they become democratically-authorized and socially-substantiated as *reasonable within our so-called democratic society*. In order for Donald Trump to become a Democratic leader performing normalized construction and enforcement of oppressive laws and norms, he must convince a majority of citizens to accept his ways of seeing and behaving, to see them as “normal.” George Bush I was successful in this, so was Bill Clinton, and the second George Bush, and so we have continued to—through Barack Obama—normalize warfare against a conceptual tactic (“terror”), set up military bases around the world, expand surveillance of citizens, redact countless civil liberties laws built up since the 1870’s, deny rights to due process, obstruct equal legal and political representation, and do next to nothing to reduce carbon emissions. At this point, in order for us (Americans, and others) to prevent the normalization (and therefore Democratization) of Donald Trump’s ways of seeing and behaving, we can only point to his (presumably honest⁷) expressions of racism, misogyny and xenophobia (the same racisms, misogynies, and xenophobias that Black people, Indigenous people and other persons “of color,” women, femmes, non-binary-gendered and trans persons, religious minorities and immigrants are quite used to in “US society”) and label his ways “authoritarian,” “fascistic” (or otherwise seek to prove his ways “abnormal,” reifying the fact that he himself declares them abnormal as a selling point), hoping to position them against the laws and norms supposedly desired by an autonomous yet “universal” majority.

Jerrold Nadler continues, “Anti-normalization is the first key step to long-term eroding of Trump’s support” and identifies several Democratic ways (i.e. in alignment with the laws and norms of democracy and its principles so-defined by Nadler and other neo-liberals) “anti-normalization” may be practiced: ongoing public protests and letter-writing campaigns to “change the tone of the media,” “rhetoric and financial” support of “organizations stepping up to fight normalization,” and “loud condemnation.”⁸

In a very similar vein, conflating “abnormality” with “disturbing,” Joshua Foust⁹ offers no specific anti-normalization tactics but decries the species “abnormalities” of Donald Trump, writing that “The one thing authoritarians want you to do is to accept that their conduct is normal, even when it is not. [...] The presumption of normality during abnormal times is one of the most powerful weapons the authoritarian has, and that is why it is so important to recognize how profoundly abnormal Donald J. Trump will be as president.”

Nadler’s suggestions and Joshua Foust’s lists involve their own assumptions and beliefs, such as a certain faith that the media reflects public dissent and can serve as an accurate picture of some state of popular, common, universal sense, and the assumption that legitimization and righteous laws and norms are a product of *the majority opinion of the demos*.

Perhaps Nadler and Joshua Foust agree with us here that a neoliberal position of “universal normality” must also be anti-normalized alongside those positions propagating white supremacy and a more outright (and arguably *renewed*) capitalist incest, profit over people, and corporate hegemony.

Actions—such as state sanctioning of torture and murder, military force used against citizens, as well as “free” forms of speech and other “inalienably rightful” pursuits and demands¹⁰—are regulated and “allowed” or “disallowed” by orders of positive and negative liberation.¹¹

Orders of positive and negative liberation include both legislation/laws and cultural norm-making via peer pressure, ostracization, moralizing, censorship, racism, prejudice and bias, and other forms of social mediation, conceptual valuation, faith-based envisioning, and cultural construction. The extent to which these ordering processes are visible, describable, intentional, or related

⁷ As many others have said, at least Trump doesn’t “beat around the bush,” the alternative in this archaic pheasant-hunting metaphor, we guess, being to take a flame-thrower to the whole damned prairie where the bush and its resident pheasants live.

⁸ Sure, #tryeverything

⁹ <http://joshuafoust.com/this-is-not-normal/>

¹⁰ In the US, “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” are the three inalienable constitutional or “natural” rights described by the Bill of Rights composed by Thomas Jefferson. Interpretations and emphasis of course abound. Compare: <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2013/09/23/what-did-thomas-jefferson-mean-by-unalienable-rights/> and https://ourfuture.org/20110112/FDR_The_Second_Bill_of_Rights

¹¹ Elsewhere, we have discussed the pluralist models of political and cultural theorists such as William Rawls, Isaiah Berlin and Kwame Akroma-Ampim Kusi Anthony Appiah regarding the distinction between positive and negative liberations. Roughly, positive liberation is laws and norms which *enable, support, advocate, catalyze* particular behaviors and abilities, while forms of negative liberation involve removal of restrictions, thus *allowing, accepting, corroborating, not preventing* (non)particular behaviors and abilities.

across spectrums of political and private maneuvering cannot, however, be simply reduced to a division between the “normal” and the “abnormal.”

It is quite likely, moreover, that Donald Trump does not *care* if he becomes a Democratic leader, instead perfectly comfortable with operating against the desired norms and laws of the majority (instead believing, as dictators usually do, that his actions and beliefs are ordained by a natural/divine order¹² beyond the individual wills of the *demos*). Without need for democratic support, via a system of emergent and all-encompassing biohegemony, Trump indeed becomes an authoritarian leader, and then, even if “everyone” sees and experiences the suffering caused by enforcement of regulations, laws, norms, morals, etc “beyond reason,” an abundance of successful “anti-normalizations” must hope to generate outright revolution, coup, succession, or other overthrow of the logics constructing biohegemonic political, economic, environmental, and cultural order(s), not just changing the “tone” of the mainstream media.¹³

In a political context beyond the US’s romantic view of enemy-pairing between two capitalist hands of “normal” neoliberalism and “abnormal” alt-right white supremacy and corruption, the identification of “anti-normalization” as a key aspect of resisting totalitarian, authoritarian, colonial, apartheid, and oligarchical political orders has an interesting recent history. In the past two decades, the particular terminology of “normalization” and “anti-normalization” has been used by Palestinian activist campaigns. In 2010, 41 Palestinian youth organizations endorsed a public statement with the following:

“Economic, political, cultural and institutional normalization legitimize Israel’s oppression of the Palestinian people by giving the appearance of normalcy to the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. This relationship is hardly one between equals as Israel continues to violate our inalienable rights, steal our land, and prevent refugees from our right of return in contravention of international law and numerous UN resolutions.”

This statement re-publishes and adopts anti-normalization positions proposed by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel and endorsed by the BNC.¹⁴

“Refuse to take part in whitewashing Israel’s public image and therefore reject any Israeli-Palestinian meetings that do not recognize our inalienable rights, and explicitly aim to resist Israel’s occupation, colonization and apartheid. [...] We will not contribute to any event that undermines our rights, or portrays Israel as anything but what it really is: an apartheid state.”

This statement is a paradigmatic rejection, opposing a particular portrayal and enactment of “normative conflict between Israel vs. Palestine,” re-framing “the legitimacy of the state of Israel.”



Image: <https://electronicintifada.net/tags/bnc>

It is easy to say that what is considered “normal” is subjective. But not just in the sense that everyone has their own definition of what normal is, what normal should be, and what should be done about the lack of any shared definition of normality. Definitions of “normal” are also subjective in the sense that normativity involves (dis)(em)powerment and authorization paradigms by which persons are *subjected* and *subject others* to enforced, distributed, mandated, substantiated, and legalized norms and laws which order human behavior, opinion, ability, action, speech, belief, movement, love, death, and so on.

When we investigate strategies of resistance to normalized subjection at large (whether this subjection is carried out by an authoritarian government or by colonialism and general white supremacist hegemony, patriarchy, xenophobia, corporate control and other “senses which subject”), we find several larger frames and assumptions that may help us devise such strategies and locate our aims:

1.) If we are looking for “strategies of negation” which reject particular ways of seeing and behaving *which are seen currently as normal by a majority*, perceiving ourselves that some “dominant/common sense” perceptions *are not accurate*, or attempting to reject them because they stimulate oppressive laws and norms that cause us suffering, we are looking for forms of intervention and attention-attraction, ways of rupturing and de-stabilizing the current, dominant,

¹² authoritarian fundamentalists (including Trump perhaps, definitely many of his supporters and those following Putin, Erdogan, etc) believe in a “natural” (divinely-designed) normativity involving capitalist and “genetically determined” (monarchic/supremacist) oligarchy.

¹³ Acknowledging a problem yet doing nothing about it is a very “normal” way that privileged and authorized persons tend to operate. Doubtless, there will be “forced transgression” embedded in the theater of our immediate future.

¹⁴ <https://bdsmovement.net/bnc>

common sense of what is normal. These strategies of negation tend towards localization, self-separation, and self-removal from coercive interplays, subcultural subversions, protests, blockades and obstructions.

2.) If we are looking for “strategies of position” which advance and attempt to enable particular ways of seeing that we determine “truthful” and behaviors which we perceive as “normal” or “reasonable” (and therefore, presumably, more desirable), trying to either return to these from a current, dominant, common “abnormality” or replace a current, dominant, common sense of normality with our own, we are looking to devise our own counter propaganda, convince and subject others of and to our way of seeing, and to stage alternate or utopically-oriented visions, situations, and events. These strategies of position tend towards prefigurative enactment of political formations and often claim to operate in alignment with “universal” morals and as if we are on “the right side” of “history,” involving speeches, texts, thinktanks, production of propaganda (which the makers see as “information”) and political participation (lobbying, campaigning, public office, pundit performances).

3.) If we are looking for third option, for “strategies of reformation” which attempt to deconstruct and/or reconstruct ways in which laws and norms are made and enforced and to alter ways in which sense and perception operate via modes of construction and distribution, we are looking for “alternative” materializing and mediation strategies, which involve cultural and political performance modes. These “third options” must involve larger-scale propositions to replace biohegemonic norms, work somehow “beyond” universalizing currents of righteousness, and refuse locations, subjections, and incorporations within the most fundamental of political, economic, and psycho-social paradigms.

This set of three causes/reason(ing)s is in no way complete, and of course there are hybrid and synthesizable versions of many other strategies for resisting and reforming laws and norms. These three ways of strategizing ways of resisting and preventing normalization, however, are described to help us think more specifically about our own disparate “agendas” and how to be concise and targeted in our actions.

SELLING MUDPIES

If we do not believe in the simplistic bully-cry “survival of the fittest” (a socially Darwinist worldview¹⁵) or in predetermination and intelligent design (divinely-regulated norms and laws) or that these are base elements of “normal” human nature (or “nature” in general), we can see that different versions of reality cause humans to hold, carry, and enact very diverse norms and advocate and enforce very different laws and cultural orders and that there is no one and no way to totally unify or “correct” any of us.

For our purposes here, we maintain general “constructivist” and “atheistic” views, which makes *how people see* a crucial political cause. We do not seek to negate “the lies” or reify “the facts” as we (personally, as culturally-located) see them, rather we construct our values, ideations, and actions around *analysis of the affects and consequences* of particular(izing) and universal(izing) ways of seeing, upon our own bodies and on the bodies of those we see.¹⁶ The urgency of this shift, from attempts to sort out reality and truth once and for all to focusing on performative reformation of realities based on the experienced outcomes of different forms of realization and materialization, cannot be reiterated enough.

Who performs reality-construction and *how* are far more helpful to us as lines of inquiry as we attempt to strategize for a future that deals with the “reality” of billions of seemingly non-compatible versions of realities.

As Dr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains, the views and realizations of *the very oppressed* (i.e. the “beyond subjected” or “the subaltern”) are rarely seen by “dominant canonical history” to do more than directly counter what is seen as “really true” or “normal” by their oppressors.¹⁷ The experiences of those subjected or relegated tend to devise very different truths than those designed and endorsed by powerful “knowledge-producing” mechanisms of colonial and imperial sense-authorization, in both form and content. In our self-alignment with the “traditionally” (read: Orientalized, Black, African, Feminized, Stigmatized, etc) anti-real, the unseen, the ghosted and magical, the nativized or framed-as-pre-conditional, many artists share *some ways* of thinking with megalomaniacal “irrational” dictators who operate on their “own” beliefs without mass social

¹⁵ see a Keynesian economics and then neo-liberal economic politics transfigured into “folk politics,” a la John D. Rockefeller: The growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest.... The American Beauty rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it.”

¹⁶ see <http://badatsports.com/2016/searching-for-visibility-documenting-racial-strife-and-police-brutality-before-blacklivesmatter-and-the-information-age/>, *Visibility and Power: Essays on Women in Society and Development*. Leela Dube , Eleanor Leacock , Shirley Ardener. Sarah Deutsch, see also Panopticism as discussed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975)

¹⁷ see Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (2010)

substantiation, namely following our own paths along those ways of thinking which keep us motivated and moving no matter how many people scream and shake their fists at us.

Sometimes, we even share with authoritarian megalomaniacs or colonizers the belief that our own views and acts are ordained by nature or by God, that our ways are “more natural” or “inherently more good.” Perhaps this sense of righteousness is, as Wole Soyinka and Shakespeare attested, is the tragic hubris of humankind and “his¹⁸ civilization.”



(left) Scene from Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*, performed in Terra Kulture by PAWS Production and directed by Kenneth Uphopho, performed in July 2015. Photo by Charles Okolo.

Barring further esoteric musings on the nature of nature, reality, consciousness, patriarchy, and human motivation, we end up with beliefs suspended in a cloud of qualifiers, beliefs that humans intentionally design and construct their realities and that these realities are either *socially substantiated, legitimized, authorized, made real* by the cultural formations through which we live, or not.

Strangely, Donald Trump seems to share some sort of “constructivist” view, an anti-universal “magical realism” which is peculiar to a politician and more often found in radical cultural theory and philosophy. Reality Television and Julian Jaynes here blend together into a confusing rhetorical mudpie. Beyond the agreement that “reality is constructed” however, whether or not Trump believes he is *ordained by God or by some natural right/inheritance* remains to be seen, but this layer of belief would seem to fit in with his other forms of demonstrated sociopathy.

Historically, the difference between the very-authorized (with their lease to fabricate truths that serve their own agendas) and the very autonomized (devising new cultural realities to sustain emotional and psychological health, community, and alternate values beyond the reach oppressive dominant/imperial culture) is pure “size” and “strength.” Gunpower, medicine, and technology are the direct tools of dominance that do not require conceptual or philosophical unity to control bodilyies, while “truth laundering”¹⁹ including proselytization via many forms of localized and mass media, are forms of power which normalize power paradigms and keep living humans locked into colonial and imperial realities (oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized).

When we have no access to those “mass” sense-distributing platforms (church, state, media) which nominate themselves as the only real substantiating, legitimizing, authorizing, materializing, realizing forces, our strategies cease to resemble those of authoritarian leaders. Another argument appears here, between the view that grassroots, “folk” and “popular” belief truly construct culture(s) vs. the view that the “mass media” has now become a global form of hyper-colonization, monopolizing the dominant ways in which ways of seeing and believing *come to be seen* as truthful/real/natural, and also the ways by which “abnormal” perspectives and senses of reality come to be seen as either subcultural art, “childish/primitive speculation” or even as “abnormal” propaganda.²⁰

Noam Chomsky is perhaps the best-known “humanist” theorist of mass media, writing that “The elite media set a framework within which others operate [...] if you try to break the mold, you’re not going to last long. That framework works pretty well, and it is understandable that it is just a reflection of obvious power structures.”²¹

For Chomsky and other linguistics-and-mediation-oriented cultural theorists “Reflection of obvious power structures” then operates in variously “sized” ways. On a global economic scale, the mass media of the USA is dominated by five major companies (Time Warner, VIACOM, Vivendi Universal, Walt Disney and News Corp) which own 95% of all mass media.

Monopolized mass media orders are designed first of all for commercial utility, as “information bits” or “streams” are monetized in terms of space, capacity, and attention. Modes of production of bits, tips, infos and stream “content” materials are homogenized to benefit the efficiency, familiarity, and quantity, and “one to many” form of communication, whereby products are mass-produced and disseminated to a great quantity of “audiences” in alignment with the values and demands of post-consensual capitalism. Formally, materials are designed with sole regard to relevance to the largest number of analytically/algorithmically-described demographics. Majority

¹⁸ gendered pronoun intentional

¹⁹ Jon Stewart

²⁰ poor Bernie, he leaned too far into us, and not far enough

²¹ Noam Chomsky, *What Makes Mainstream Media Mainstream*, Z Magazine, October, 1997
<https://chomsky.info/199710/>

attentions are fought for, while smaller groups of viewers, readers, identity-defined populaces, and other consumers are packaged and sold as niche markets.

In addition to setting frameworks for their own normative senses of what is sensible, independent and commercial media alike are formally designed by capitalist battles for primetime, for clicks and shares, and generally compete for the most general audience. Once certain ideas and ways of seeing are set up as a normative model defining truth and factuality, these ideas and ways of seeing are distributed via a kind of “trickle down” and “in-forming” *reproduction* of cultural sensibility and knowledge. Simplicity, superficiality, speed, and affect-value often determine how and which “infos” are reproduced.

Networked media, we might argue, complicates classical senses of mass-mediation, instead of reducing and controlling “infos,” allowing the rise of the most truthful and most normatively-acceptable-as-fact bits to “the top” like fat on water; imaginative individual persons are now participant in generating content...hooray...yet “the free market,” and its fabricated senses of “natural selection” (in conflation), remain the normative processes by which individual expressions and elements are included in the surviving whole or let slip away into oblivion and death.

Modes of capitalist sense-distribution may be seen as the *core* “principles of democracy,” as “democracy” has long come to mean *majority-consumption-rules*, in alignment with even more universalizing senses of value, truth, and sense, as designed and implemented by necropolitical capitalism.²²

Over the last decade the metabolic normalizing/universalizing processes of mass media have been seen as less and less trustworthy even by the very elites setting up their complex systems, with “the normalized” and “the truthful” increasingly seen as distinct and often very different ways of seeing. This self-criticality crops up when such complex systems—which are formally autonomous from though adaptive to any bodies—change “hands.” In other words, objectivity seems possible when you’re the one practicing it, it becomes less believable when other people start telling you their “objective” views.

As the “alt-right” counters neo-liberal hegemony with infiltration of US mass media, liberals become quite disturbed.²³ Mass media figures such as Ira Glass (*This American Life* podcast series on National Public Radio²⁴) describe themselves as “Watching lies become the truth in this year’s election” and attempt to give voice to “a few people who try to bridge the gap between the way the two sides see the facts.”

While Glass and others attempt to break “the mold” from within mass media (re)production and distribution paradigms, there is no framework or media-system which can be trusted by those most violently excluded from these paradigms. Even “science,” as practices of human investigation of natures for nature, is ideologically-driven and, like “art,” is largely mediated by capitalist demands and mentalities, dependent on corporate-government funding and therefore very vulnerable to manipulation by whatever normalized/empowered regime for “sense.” Further, “science” is dangerously charged with the task of proposing models against which observed and inferred elements of existence are compared, thus responsible for *defining* normalities and abnormalities, “real natures,” mutations, health and disease in terms of use-capacity, function, and other values (i.e. now those of post-consensual capitalism and/or whichever companies, autocrats, or knowledge producers need to prove valuable/nonvaluable.²⁵) Often, throughout history, many “scientific theories” result in eugenics and other forms of genocidal genetic and bio-coercive normalization in alignment with human sentiment and sensibility.

It can’t be “true” that the true definition of truth is that which is believed by the largest number of people, nor can it be true that the definition of truth is that which is believed by an oppressed or marginalized group of people and disbelieved by the majority or oppressing group. Nor (certainly) can we believe that those ideas which call themselves “objective” must indeed be so. Just because people agree with you does not mean you are right. Just because you are winning does not mean you are the best. We must investigate and practice other forms of evaluating media and performing mediation.

While Yale professor Timothy Snyder urges us to “Believe in truth. To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most

²² See Achille Mbembe

²³ this is not to say that we can’t see how the views held by the “alt-right” are damaging, we are downright terrified of their “news.” Further, we do believe that the anti-science positions (including climate denial and pseudo-scientific eugenics-oriented “genetics”) held by white supremacists, religious fundamentalists, chauvinists, and righteous moralizers do not belong in the version of “reality” that might allow us to live without hemorrhaging misery and toxicity from every pore of our being(s).

²⁴ <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/>

²⁵ We may be lucky, at the moment, that the white nationalists are anti-science, else they might co-opt scientific institutions and direct research—as the Nazis did in the 1930’s and ‘40’s—to justify the most extreme “solutions” to staged biogenetic competitions.

blinding lights,”²⁶ we can only agree that truth is always that which is *believed*. It is more blind *not* to acknowledge that all *is* spectacle, and the biggest wallets *are* paying for the most blinding lights. This is “normal.” The basis on which we criticize power is always ethical, based on witnessed and experienced suffering, as well as vast arrays of beliefs, felt affects, analyses, and consequences of truths pitched as particular and/or universal. Clinging to “truthist pathology” only keeps us locked in no-win lightshow competitions.

We must stop being righteous, even if we believe that our truths are valuable and have positive affects. This is not to say that we must stop *advocating for* or *proposing* ways of seeing that do not cause us to suffer or do bring us pleasure: we just can’t argue that these are “objectively natural/true/real/good.” Rather, (reiteration) we must be able to *frame ways of seeing in terms of experienced affects and consequences of seeing in those ways*, not just in terms of the “opinions” themselves, but also in terms of the ways in which *seeing is performed*.²⁷

In attempts to inquire further into such matters and transform inquiries into some practical performances, we’d like to unpack the three areas delineated above as “reasons” or “causes” for devising anti-normalization techniques, tactics, strategies, and methodologies. This is difficult, as we are currently saturated by the sense that “simple is more true,” that efficiency, productivity, and bite-sized and easily-consumed ideas are better ideas. This sense is one of the many which reproduces capitalist forms of logic within our very forms of consciousness.

Thus, it is hard and “nonvaluable” mental work to devise “anti-normalization strategies.” Nevertheless, in resistance, we begin by breaking *strategic modes* into three distinct combines of reason/cause/intent and correlated strategies/acts. We will call these three combinative modes:

Denormalization
Counter-Normalization
Anti-Normalization

EXAMPLES:

If we wish to denormalize the idea Muslim immigrants are “terrorists,” we pursue strategies *denormalizing* anti-Islamic ideas, non-Muslim history, and non-Muslim identity. We seek out environments where Islamophobia is rampant; a white Midwest-born artist for example, returns to his fundamentalist Christian community perform a play about Christian-lead terrorism in the USA and to reify the “love your neighbor” moral rhetoric of Jesus Christ. Here, the *whole* remains stable: the Christian community, their view of a loving society, the non-violence-valuing whole is made “better,” towards prevention of hate crimes against Muslims in the USA. The outcome of this play’s staging might stimulate a localized and interpersonal re-thinking of anti-Islamic views, but it might also reaffirm the notion that following Christ’s “truths” leads to more moral behavior, thus invigorating audience members to convert Muslims to Christianity. The “conflict” between Christianity and Islam is in no way challenged and the idea that religious views can lead to violent action remains normalized.

If we wish to argue that seeing Muslims as a threat is “morally wrong,” we attempt to prove that Muslim immigrants are not a threat and that Islam is morally right: we counter-normalize the claim that the religion of Islam is inherently a threat (to “good Christian Americans” or whatever) by using normative tools (i.e. statistics, say) to directly counter this truth with our own truth (both truths in the same mediated form). “Normalization” of the binary argument here (a threat vs. not a threat, right vs. wrong) does not prevent Muslim persons from being targeted by anti-Islamists at all. Rather, it allows those anti-Islamists in power to fall down on one side of the binary debate and to throw their full righteous weight towards their own beliefs and consequential actions. Any example of violence by a Muslim becomes food for their argument. Thus, we would only reach a state of positive positioning, re-producing a binary paradigm via use of counter-normalization strategies.

Another example of counter-normalization might seek to counter a “general sense” that Islam makes people “violent” and that all Muslims are therefore dangerous to so-called “democracy” by interviewing Muslims about how they feel about violence. Here, we might also propose a “humanized” or counter-normalized view of Muslims and of Islamic history; a famous filmmaker presents a documentary about the development of algebra during the Islamic golden age and the work and life of Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, a scholar in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad. This documentary is marketed and shown by HBO or The History Channel and significantly panders to non-Muslims, made and produced for and by non-Muslim audiences. This strategy might be helpful in normalizing Islam, yet it also does nothing to *change the normative processes by which mass media representation is the only way to include particular normativities into a single, mass-mediated model of normativity designed and operated by famous/authorized non-Muslims*.

²⁶ <http://inthesetimes.com/article/19658/20-lessons-from-the-20th-century-on-how-to-survive-in-trumps-america>

²⁷ this claim is by no means original, it can be found inherent to Badiou, Agamben, Ranciere, Butler, and many other “post-structuralist,” “neo-constructivist,” “communalist” (etc, etc) academic theory, as well as in the views of performance-makers, activists, and communications researchers.

Anti-normalization, unlike denormalization or counter-normalization, is a refusal to participate, a refusal to be “reasonable” and “sensible” within *or even directly against* dominant modes of reasoning and definitions of sense. Anti-normalization is risky and it moves across articulated “issues” defined by oppressive paradigms; in attempts to relate to our other example here, it might involve mass public prayer demonstrations performed by Muslims and Christians in the lobby of Lockheed Martin Corp, or elementary school teachers in Indiana learning Arabic and teaching the Quran as well as the Bible to their kindergartners in that language. Anti-normalizations are subject-dependent and involve *behaving abnormally*, drawing on what individuals and organized groups can and will do but also moving *through* embarrassment, difficulty, shame in taboo, physical discomfort, strange relationships, failure, anxieties, very real dangers, and senses of “private, personal scale” to expand possibilities for human action. While we may be tempted to focus on staging anti-normalization actions specifically and carefully within and as multiplicit “non-mass” or “micro and meso” cultural interactions and particular situations, they can also be staged through longer periods of time (“the long game”) and/or become vast networks (such as Silk Road), new religions (such as Mormonism), and new states (see Liberia).

As we see a distinction emerging between “denormalization,” “counter-normalization” and “anti-normalization,” we can work to design tactics that operate in different ways, dependent on our own cultural negotiations, positions, and visions.

DENORMALIZATION AND IDEALS

"No, I don't want to normalize with you I don't want to hug, have coffee, talk it out, break bread, sit around the campfire, eat s'mores and gush about how we're all the same." Remi Kanazi, *Normalize This*

The term *Denormalization* comes first from computer sciences: denormalization keeps attention on the whole “performance” of an operating system, paradigm, or database. Denormalizations tend to be *negative* tactics following objectives towards improvement of some whole, say, a whole government, a whole society, a whole program. Denormalization processes are designed by idealisms, seeking to ensure an *ideal performance for a single whole*.

In order to improve the performance of a whole, some “diseased” or “broken” code or function is intentionally negated, “healed” (removed), re-organized, deleted, disrupted, ironically copied (re-framed, re-oriented, re-written) or obstructed in order to adjust the whole’s function, ability, and operation. When “the whole” is perceived to be functioning in a bad way (for example, the state has become authoritarian), “improvement” comes to mean negation of and resistance to the current “non-ideal” operation. Then, denormalization might be seen as embedding or encryption of chaos into a complex system thereby changing the operations of the system, or deleting of critical words within a sentence thereby distracting intelligibility or meaning.

Denormalization defines the successful tactics of the Trump administration, the alt-right, and white supremacists; a flood of “dissent” ideations, images, and speech acts which overwhelm and overturn more moderate mass sensibilities and righteously claim a new ideal for the whole *from within that self-supposing whole*. Denormalization may also be seen in acts of suicide bombing, mass shooting, the deliberate spreading of cruel rumors, or other forms of violent “negation,” which seek to simply dismantle norms of safety, tolerance, and human social contract.

On larger scales, denormalizations are only possible to practice when those practicing it already have a mass platform, power, authority, and access to mainstream modes of mediation and sense-distribution, either in the form of television coverage or bombs.

Any other denormalization tactics (performed by those without power) usually result in (intended or unintended) *improvement* of the ways in which a whole system(s) is already in operation. Here, denormalization’s best analogy can be seen in contemporary medicine; sub-group-driven or “from without” forms of denormalization are rather like a vaccine that temporarily resembles a particular micro-organism in order for the whole body to build up antibodies and resistances to the particular disease the vaccine resembles.

Similarly, we might see a congressman’s filibuster or a consumer boycott as merely as a vaccine that allows the Republican majority to see how best to prevent filibusters or show companies how to effectively “wash” their behaviors (respectively). One act of violence catalyzes a whole surge of surveillance, increased policing of an area, a resonant and resolute step towards marshal law. We might see a protest in the street as an example of a protest that can be used by the police to prevent further protests. Any staged chaos then is weakened by its mere *resemblance*; it only improves the system whole by exploiting an ability that can then be disabled or a weakness that can then be “fixed” itself by a self-healing (autopoetic) body.

On the other hand, we might see denormalization generally as tactics which add to (thereby covering over, highlighting parts, or crossing out elements of) “the picture that paints us.” As negative (negating) strategies for resistance, denormalizing processes rely on disrupting and distorting “existing” (“already-painted”) normativities.

In general, denormalization strategies revolve around and participate in “functionalist” pictures and designs for society. Functionalist pictures can imagine grand orders inside which humans are mere “cells” or “components,”²⁸ promoting narratives of resistance to “the machine” as well as futurist fantasies involving “networked subjectivities.” Functionalist pictures can also see societies as “complex systems” with subject-determination as currency which is positively organized, traded, channeled, and manipulated by supposedly-universal morals and markets.²⁹ Largely, functionalist frames and worldviews debate the “role(s)” of individuals” and different ways of describing conflicts between individual health and the health of an engineered whole.

Hannah Arendt describes normalization as a dominant imagination of the duty of a self in society, a presentation of a subject-independent reality that makes “evil” into a banal appearance of daily business, allowing persons to complete horrific actions without personal guilt as such actions become *definitive norms* for duty, responsibility, and law. Arendt advocates subject-lead deep thought and introspection as ways of subverting themes of duty (and other psycho-social forces), believing (in a classically Feminist psychoanalytic manner) that *personal evaluation* of one’s relationship with norms and laws can prevent individuals from acting in complicity with, say, a white supremacist regime’s whole picture of reality. Here, denormalization is inserted into mental lives, located within and as individual embodiments, allowing individuals to exist as “glitches” or “redactions.”

Recently, Sarah Kendzior published a thinkpiece with a similar view, urging individuals to write down their values and beliefs before they were stolen by “kleptocracy.” She writes: “It is increasingly clear, as Donald Trump appoints his cabinet of white supremacists and war-mongers, as hate crimes rise, as institutions that are supposed to protect us cower, as international norms are shattered, that his ascendancy to power is not normal. [...] I need you to fight too, in the way that matters most, which is inside. Authoritarianism is not merely a matter of state control, it is something that eats away at who you are. It makes you afraid, and fear can make you cruel. It compels you to conform and to comply and accept things that you would never accept, to do things you never thought you would do.”³⁰

Carrying similar conclusions that the “will” of individual persons was the only countermand to fascistic conditioning, American social and psychological scientists after WWII continued (in the vein of German and Italian social scientists and engineers, though they had previously framed the interests differently and bent findings into construction of particular fascistic designs) to invest themselves in researching peer pressure, suggestion, mass mentality, and other “phenomena” designed to explain how and why millions of people *allow and become complicit* in violence that carries on, at best right under their noses and at worst, is carried out in *seeming* (yet “morally illegitimate”) alignment with their own inherent/instinctual human desires to be included, loved, appreciated, to belong, to be *normal*. These social scientists did not, as primarily white men in the USA, particularly consider the “phenomenal” affects of being the *subjects* of genocide, oppression and slavery, they focused generally on those witnessing and perpetrating these.

Hence, the image of a machine, or vast media mechanism that was more to blame than individual persons (and/or carrying the ultimate power to harness the will of humankind), emerged, with individuals imagined as nodes of zero-source denormalizing resistance, looking deep within themselves to remain “true” to “normal” anti-fascist values whilst the machine attempted to coerce their complicity.

Indeed, individualism and self-determination were and always have been seen forms of resistance to totalitarian mass normalization (fascism, capitalism, colonialism). When carrying a view of individualism as a resistance to authoritarianism/moral relativity/big government in place, language and portrayal (“propagandas”) are recognized by “both sides” as the “conceptual battlefield” of present coercion, oppression, and extraction paradigms (howsoever these may be defined, differently by different factions).

Nadler, Palestinian youth organizations, and Trump *agree* that *individually mediating ways of seeing* literally, practically, pragmatically, can change reality, especially when strategies are negative, resistant, working to dismantle normativities.

The power, ability, and authority to mediate and control ways of seeing, however, is dependent on further control within and as *forms* of mediation. Else, the consequences of denormalization strategies tend to be quickly metabolized by the very functionalist machine(s) such negative reactions project.

²⁸ see Jan Smuts, Holism, and apartheid, FDR and “The New Deal”

²⁹ see the speeches of Barack Obama and Angela Merkel, for example the much-covered speech at Hiroshima during which Obama deplored the US’s lack of “moral high ground,” pleading for a return to “universal morality.”

³⁰ https://thecorrespondent.com/5696/were-heading-into-dark-times-this-is-how-to-be-your-own-light-in-the-age-of-trump/1611114266432-e23ea1a6?utm_source=pocket&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=pockethits

Denormalization works best when it directly negates ways of seeing by disrupting the most dominant forms of mediation: social networks, online video and web content, TV. Thus, only famous persons, political leaders, and other individuals with access to these distribution systems can really practice effective denormalization tactics.

Other non-authorized sense-distortion attempts—like those of artists working in Dadaist, Surrealist, or Abstract ways—are not quite disruptive enough to even be called denormalization; even if the images or ideas worm their way into mass media distribution systems as they can be used, sold or otherwise appropriated by those in power. Any forms of art which are objects (paintings, sculptures, videos) are too similar within “the machine” to other mediated, regulated, and normalized components to do anything but provide examples of raw matter to control and metabolize.

Once again, let us re-iterate, individual denormalizations seem totally bound within *mass* authorization, legitimization and sense-distribution mediation forms. “Acting out,” or “transgressive” ways of seeing and behaving *when selfsame in form to other components of the mechanisms negated* only adjust normalization processes when they are incorporated, swallowed as a poisonous pill or anecdote, by mainstream and mass conceptions of normality, and even then, they often simply expose weaknesses in the system which can then be fortified by that system, ultimately strengthening it.

COUNTER-NORMALIZATION: BATTLES, LADDERS, AND FEEDBACK LOOPS

“Now is the time to counter lies with facts, repeatedly and unflinching, while also proclaiming the greater truths: of our equal humanity, of decency, of compassion. Every precious ideal must be reiterated, every obvious argument made, because an ugly idea left unchallenged begins to turn the color of normal. It does not have to be like this.” -- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie³¹

Unfortunately, since extreme anti-normalization positions have historically been difficult for moderate conservatives and neo-liberals (political majorities, or “normality-oriented” persons and groups) to comprehend, let alone to activate, counter-normalization is perhaps the most dominant and “normative” form of resistant mediation strategies currently being proposed by “liberal” thinkers and Democracy-advocating politicians as well as by moderate Republicans in the USA.

Counter-normalization is “positive strategizing” which mostly participate in competitions for power over and control of images and ideations, thus over laws and norms.

These competitions for power and control may be held between artists for a grant, between politicians for a seat, between bidders at auction, literally anywhere there is some-thing valuable to obtain or to consume. General neoliberalism promotes individualism and self-determination across many types of competition, but, even more deeply, neoliberalism values *sharing of realities*, involving specifically *forms of competition as definitions of normality*.³²

In order for a neoliberal democracy to exist, a unified, singular, and controlled reality must be maintained by the largest possible number of persons. Democrats and Republicans are “supposed” to fight over the attention and support of the majority, different peoples are “supposed” to fight each other. Men and women are supposed to fight each other, Blacks and Whites are supposed to fight each other, the Morally Righteous and The Wretched are supposed to fight each other, etc. In order to maintain all the fights (locally and globally), “versions of truths” are selected when they prove their worth in competition over majority substantiation. Within this umbrella truth that the best realities are those which are substantiated by the most people (or at least by the most powerful people), analytics and statistics proving different viewpoints are exhaustively interpreted, and rational oppressors move towards an ideal pluralist universalism involving morals and ethics shared by the most people like them.

For less simplicity-oriented neo-liberals, a “the most correct picture” must be discovered through pluralistic (or even “agonistic”³³) debate and then used thereafter as a normative model for truth and value or relationally and continually re-structured via agreed-upon modes of re-structuring. Not so differently, neo-conservatives/“the alt-right” and white nationalists in the US, believe that it is possible to use reasonable interpretations of their own experiences and texts to determine an “ideal picture,” which must then be shown to and then used by moral individuals to design truth and value for the good of the whole.

As they are absorbed into capitalist academia and art worlds, mainstreamed Feminist, Black, and Queer art and theory lately have increasingly capitulated to such pluralist and universalist dreams and schemes. Instead of resisting coercive modes of reality-commodification and universalism³⁴

³¹ <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/now-is-the-time-to-talk-about-what-we-are-actually-talking-about>

³² throughout this text, I am using “neo-liberalism” to describe very diverse views and positions which generally replace economic regulations and norms and laws favoring human liberation with “free market logics,” including (foremost) unrestricted and negatively-liberated forms of competition.

³³ See Chantal Mouffe, *Agonism*

³⁴ both neo-liberalism and white nationalism are “totalitarian” political worldviews, despite semantic entanglements, as both presume total subservience to a single instated, self-serving (autocratic) reality

or positing alternative ways of being and seeing, they resist their own “definitive abnormalities,” arguing that different does not mean “worse” or “less than.” We argue that we are not merely a “second sex” to a primary one, we are not deviants, we are not subhuman, our lives matter, we *should be* considered normal, *included in and considered by* that one Total and Universal substantial “normal.” Such assertions are necessary in our states of competitive emergency: what and who is seen as normal, natural, needed, is that and those preserved, protected, valued, allowed to *survive* at all.

Activists and thinkers have long been divided over advocating brands of participatory reconciliation *including* clear, binary (embattled) competition (combat/competition being a form of participatory engagement, with “sides” framing such binaries and embattlements *as normal*) and movement towards anti-normalization, de-parture from systemic binaries, escape from constructions and historic paradigms, and refusals of battle as a fundamental way of existing. This divide is seen between the ideas of Martin Luther King Jr. (who argued for non-violent reconciliation) and Marcus Garvey proposing total independence and territorial redemption of “the African race” from any existing economy or other model for socio-political being. Various arguments for group-succession, group-assimilation, outright victory or surrender, deconstruction of ideals and models around which conflicts are staged, and so on, orbit in non-linear ideation around historic struggles over resources, rights to exist, and core ethical conflicts such as the one between 1.) ensuring survival of the unnaturally subjected 2.) enabling “natural” survival of the “fittest.”³⁵

As part of a “generic battle” for hold on, design of, and inclusion in *the* (singular) normative model that will determine survival, we may see a kind of ladder³⁶ up which we must climb in order to gain the privilege and even divine right to propose, define, and operate as “the norm.”

This “fight to climb up the ladder” is perhaps what Nadler believes forms “Normal Democratic America.” Yet, the desperate need for this ladder itself to be re-considered, anti-normalized, and ripped down has long been the goal of anti-capitalist, anarchist, and more complex social justice and climate-protection movements.

“There will be no more business as usual” was the cry of Occupy Wall Street, yet “business as usual” does and has *normatively* included certain small bands of dirty privileged mostly white youths encamped in public spaces, protesting something. Marches on Washington, petitions, and national (this time on CNN) discussions about “whether or not Jews are people” are easily recognized as norms when old, very normal binary oppositional forces are re-established or simply recognized. Is it possible to resist or re-frame the “normality” of such ongoing, repetitive, familiar performances? Is it possible to formulate a difference between projection of an imaginary, ideal, utopic “normal” which has never actually existed (bloodshed has always been the norm), and an “anti-normal” which proposes no normativity, no ideal(s) yet resists the biotic crises perpetually becoming-normal at hand?

While any majority-believed, in-stated and legalized/legitimized binaries between “normal” and “non-normal,” “weak” and “fit” and so on are at the root of supremacies, apartheid and fascist political orders, conceptions of sense and nonsense, function and dysfunction, assimilation and dissimilation, right and wrong, tactics for counter-normalization proliferate like platelets as each new binary-cut draws blood. These cuts accumulate and cause emergence of the “perpetual struggle” bespoke by Marx (oppressor and oppressed), Trotsky (worker and soldier), Fanon (colonizer and colonized), and so many others (now, we find “ongoing struggles” framed as: oil-baron vs. water-protector, kthulic death-drive vs. gaiac life-force, child-eater vs. child-bearer, and so on).

In the past, artists have aligned themselves with and/or have been members of “the oppressed” and have been inclined to participate in competitions small and large, moving their anti-normality or “subnormality” “up through mediated layers, carrying “their own” values and images up from the base of private, personal experience and subconsciousness up towards the pinnacle of mass media and everlasting historic sense and truth.

This is a “counter-normalizing” process, by which we attempt to make the deepest elements of private subjecthood into dominant, public, and normal elements, able to then operate as norms which then condition further deep elements of private subjecthood. Between the individual and society, those images, ideas, identities which have proved themselves valuable in competitions (i.e. in the marketplace and economies of attention), are metabolized in a feedback loops of becoming-normal-norms-becoming.

More radical theorists of Black, non-Christian, and Queer identity and experience have pertinent counter-normalizing things to say about what they often call “mainstreaming.” Via mainstreaming processes, those persons, actions, beliefs, and behaviors previously (in cultural time) seen as “abnormal” or “dysfunctional” are made normal through processes of increased exposure of

inside which, for example, persons cannot survive without holding some imaginary form of value, i.e. “currency.”

³⁵ the author’s views are here confessed in placement of “scare quotes”

³⁶ echoing Judeo-Christian models of the pre-scientific universe, with heaven at the top and layers of earth and hell below

masses to positive (“winning”) images and imaginations representing queer persons (for example), inclusion of queer persons and their experiences within (and as subject to) dominant cultural narratives. Winning over the hearts and minds of “normal people,” queers are then allowed to do things that people are “normally allowed” to do, such as get married.

Mainstreaming and counter-normalizing processes depend conceptually on a *single-truth model* for individuals and society, which we might call the “feedback loop model.”

This feedback loop is how we see the affects of one individual on society, and how we see society emerging from competitions between individuals and groups. We can frame this feedback loop positively; we can claim that by driving their “memes,” images, sensibilities, and ideas up, individuals resist and re-model norms and systems. Or we can frame this feedback loop negatively; we can claim that norms and systems condition all that individuals do and feel, that the largest layers order and organize all that individuals feel and think, in an implicit cycle.

Conceptually, this feedback loop—with its embedded competitions and ladders—seems so obvious because it seems to mirror its own explanations for how reality comes to be seen and known by persons.

Is there any way to mediate or perform outside this feedback loop, “through reason” or “beyond reason” some intense debates and concerns about lies, facts, truths, and objectivity? It seems that these debates and concerns, including both attempts to use Science or The Bible to objectively, once and for all, prove “the real good normal,” are as implicit as oppressor/oppressed, master/slave, and objective/subjective binary battles. How can we in-form and perform attempts to operate in considerate relationships with truth, norm, knowledge, value, and meaning-making processes, without perpetually reproducing the (em)powerment and authorization hegemonies which have always ensured that any instated and enforced “real good normal” has implications of death and suffering for those deemed “abnormal”?

For artists, perhaps our first counter-normalization effort (if we are, say, unable or unlikely to understand extreme forms of anti-normalization) is to stop competing. Especially where there is no “unitary” or “substantial” resource (i.e. in the case of “attention” or “respect,” these are unlimited resources, especially when we actively provide these ourselves, for each other³⁷) we can stop pitching our images and ideas in competition against one another.

Counter-normalizations otherwise may be historically sourced from “counter culture” movements. Back to the land and localization of food systems, focus on daily habitus and prefigurative models for social interaction and domesticity (co-operative living, consensus decision-making) are embodied forms of counter-normalization. While counter-normalizers may have hopes for a “spread” of their counter-norms, hoping to convert others to their ways, these ways tend to be elitist (inaccessible to the most politically endangered and precarious) and do little to reform capitalist bio-hegemony, instead blending seamlessly into lifestyle markets (drink this juice! Exercise this way! Give your child this toy! Sign this online petition! Identify as a radical by wearing these boots!) and other consumption-oriented cultural formations.

ANTI-NORMALIZATION AND DANGER



(left) political cartoon by John Jonik

While Palestinian youth organizations extend their revised realities through action and sanction, disrupting rallies and standing apart, Nadler and Trump largely share dependence on the same and similar forms of “mass mediation.” As individual politicians, they address their constituents via a posting to the internet, they propose legislature (presumably), they seek the endorsement of voters. Their supporters respond in similar ways (to each other), sharing their postings on Facebook, pausing their work to check how many Friends “like” their point of view as expressed in this competitively mediated way.

The clamor of individuals attempting to “feed” their views (counter-normalize) into a single/pluralist/universalist mass media distribution paradigm drowns any partial or small-scale (de)formative anti-normalization attempt.

Further, Trump and Nadler’s shared forms of mediation are not similar just as “types of vehicles” carrying messages between attentions. Mediation is not just movement between locations across

³⁷ Further essays on “substantiated” vs. “substantive” resources are needed

spectrums of points; processes and forms of mediation also involve aesthetics, dictions, associations, affects, affinities, authorities, coded self-presentations, and all other elements of communication. Between Trump and Nadler, many of these are also shared; they are both white straight cis men, they are both American politicians, they both write and speak in American English...similarities between mediation-forms are more common than differences when it comes to forms of mediation,³⁸ especially those involved in direct governance.

Power is held and debated by the same *types* of persons, languages are shared: vehicles carrying messages, modes of mediation, and rhetorical forms have also been seen to be homologizing in the US for some time.³⁹ One has only to visit the website of Turning Point USA (a right-wing youth organization) to find a traditionally “leftist” language of “liberation” and “freedom of speech” turned into copy for an “open-source watchlist” designed to “expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students, promote anti-American values, and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom.”

Through linguistic and picturing framing devices, i.e. those forms of mediation which position occurrences, persons, values (etc) as positive or negative (etc), both “individual” students and individual “masses” such as “student bodies” are compelled to action in alliance or resistance with divergent and conflicting political movements. Due to shared *forms* of mediation (i.e. websites designed in red white and blue, online petitions, TV ads, viral videos), the sources and implications of viewpoints are easily obscured; *forms and processes* of mediation, construction, and materialization of realities seem to be totally normative, thus disappearing behind the media presented, performed, portrayed, posted as an object of attention with greater or lesser value.

Perhaps the only forms of norm-mediation which *involve visible formations of their own forms* are artworkings, which have perhaps culturally evolved to de-normalize and de-legitimize invisible “normative mediation forms.”⁴⁰ These forms are anti-normal because they restructure attentions and mediations on a meso level, neither individually competing for attention paid to singular images (one to the many) nor participating in mass image-distribution systems which must then be consumed/selected by individuals, as within the film industry (producing positioned products to be consumed). Through social artworkings, anti-normal gatherings, communications, and relationships are created and practiced. At least, these artworkings maintain this ideation of themselves.

Such artworking processes can be seen (if we so choose) as successful “anti-normalization” campaigns with regards to mass media and mass-mediated mentality. Yet, clearly, these campaigns are not enough to anti-normalize the fossil fuel market, for example,⁴¹ or abolish the prison industrial complex. Even in large numbers of singular and particular gatherings and acts, these campaigns have not (so far) successfully de-colonized the globe or countered the rise of an authoritarianism that denies climate change, is willing to allow the deaths of millions of impoverished, displaced, starved, and de-hydrated persons, and continues to burn the very carbon matter of living and long-dead beings to fuel a level of luxury and “nonreality” divorced from what may seem like basic instincts to survive as a species.⁴²

Faced with such failure and fear, it’s not that radical to encourage the same sense of anti-normalization used by Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) activists regarding the existence and framing of Israel to Trump’s imagined “Made Great Again” America; Nadler is advising boycotts of corporations and entities backing Trump, we are practicing divestment strategies by leaving the major political parties and forming our own social services outside the government, gathering in the streets, and performing triage mutualism as we are forced to defend our lives and those of fellow citizens.

Perhaps in the near future Nadler will be carted away to prison for using a term that was coined by Arab nationalists, early Islamists and Marxists during the 1970s and was then used by Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine through the ‘90’s, even though he only

³⁸ the “contents” of their mediation strategies, however, could not be more different: Nadler is a somewhat left-of-the-middle neoliberal. He was the only male to be honored as “Assembly member of the Year” by the National Organization for Women and has been on the ACLU’s “honor roll” as one of two representatives introducing the “Respect for Marriage Act” (attempting to counter-normalize and repeal the Defense of Marriage Act and require the U.S. federal government to recognize the validity of same-sex marriages). He is also a member of the Congressional Arts Caucus.

³⁹ A tangentially-related text that can be found for free online, if you’d prefer a philosophical angle on this: http://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/6256/1/homogenising_difference.pdf

⁴⁰ The complex forms of mediation situated by artworking involve, perhaps most importantly, a sense of an “artificial” or “created” realities, thereby understanding that no language or image is ever “neutrally presented as fact.” No “artistic” imagination ever issues from a non-located source and no way of seeing is without political consequences, mediation forms and processes when seen as “intentionally” created or “designed” by persons. Here, senses of individualism and culture are different from those perpetuated by social and political sciences. And while it may seem “up to the individual” to research the sources and consequences of picturations, statements, viewpoints, and rhetorics, this necessary re-researching must also recognize non-normative forms of mediation as viable attempts to collectively communicate, if not “reasonably” then “emotionally” and/or “conceptually.”

⁴¹ as someone said, “Exxon doesn’t care if you raise chickens” or something like that

⁴² here is a terrifyingly insipid “folk science” article assuming a very common “individualist social Darwinism:” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-power-prime/201206/is-our-survival-instinct-failing-us>

seems to mean in his *HOW WE RESIST TRUMP AND HIS EXTREME AGENDA* is that we should not behave “as if” Trump’s behavior, rhetoric, and actions “are normal in the way we want.” Nadler aims for soft counter-normalization, at best.

Do we think such denormalization and counter-normalization attempts will change Trump’s actions so that they fit into *our* sense of “normal?” What would “our own normative” (ideal) behaviors, rhetorics, and actions be for a president, when every single president we’ve had has normally done nothing but normalize quite a few oppressive, extractive, and destructive behaviors, ways of seeing, and ideal models?

Are we forever obliged to insist *not this, no, no, not this way*, if we refuse to normalize any normativities due to the fact that all conceptions of normalcy are violent against inherently resistantly re-produced abnormals?

Reasons and causes for devising anti-normalizations usually involve states of extreme oppression and subjection and thus tend to be practiced by persons belonging to “minority” viewpoints, beliefs, identities, behaviors. In short, anti-normalization strategies belong to those who would like to see *extremely deep reformation and (de)(re)construction of normal paradigms for constructing normativities*, these strategies do not usually involve universal plans for law, government, resource-distribution, or how to re-make human existence (when they do, they tend to be seen as fanatical, dangerously fundamentalist, absurd, fringe).

Let us reiterate a particular aspect of what we’re discussing here: to a certain extent, *only* “extreme minority” groups in a Democracy can practice anti-normalization proper. When people are members of majority groups in a Democracy, the dominant laws and norms are supposedly “their own.” Members of majority groups are thus trapped by “democratic principles” in the binary between “negative” and “positive” forms of denormalization and counter-normalization; even the most dissenting of “majority members” are *by definition*, served and empowered by whatever norms and laws currently define what is normal (i.e. the very *forms and processes* constructing norms and laws against which the Others devise anti-normalization strategies).

We see this Democratic paradigm operating in the inability of “normal” (i.e. historically and currently defined as, white, straight, cis, middle class, “sane,” Western, able-bodied, adult, etc, etc, in an increasingly globalized array of norms) persons to even understand Native, Black, LGBTQ, cognitively different, differently abled, elderly and juvenile (etc, etc) experiences and positions. Dominant members of *demos* see their own thought and feeling revolving around normalized myopic debate between competing normalization campaigns. Even the most “allied” conversations lead and held by “majority” members seem limited to discussing how to “allow” “other” persons to be more “normal.” Concepts such as “freedom” are, of course, definitively bound to subjective/subjecting/subjected hegemonies.

“Ally” activists thus often respond very negatively to “segregationist” and “isolationist” movements and views, arguing instead for inclusion and unity, for discourse and reconciliation *via their own preferred and designed mediation modes*, within systemic and formalized normalization of binary divides and conflicts themselves as well as within ethics valuing, for example, the sharing of a singular, agreed-upon “normal” or even “counter-normal” designed in/via their own image(s). They do not understand that *forms* of mediation, collaboration and agreement-formation themselves are coercive, oppressive, and extractive, ill-suited to carrying the images and ideations of those disempowered by the modes of production and dissemination of media and other modes of norm-construction.

For example, no website with instructions for how to organize a student chapter of an organization which is not editable by students themselves (at the very least) which can’t be used by those without the internet, or by accessed by student-aged persons unable to attend a college or university (i.e. without student ID), can *radically* anti-normalize behaviors and actions regarding normal and lawful modes of operation for college-aged persons.



(above) student organization fair in Nevada, 2014. Photo from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas website.

In attempts to describe and imagine modes of anti-normalization which proliferate options and directions in particular for the right to design orders and models for civilization or even for governance and government of the USA (beyond Democrat vs. Republican, neo-liberal vs. alt-

right, etc), we identify areas of attack, at least when it comes to the cultural, conceptual, and emotional motives, beliefs, ideations, values, and conceptions which perpetually re-construct and re-produce the cycles of planetary demise.

First, anti-normalization is *lived in form*, and it must be *large enough* (read, somehow “collective” without becoming “universalizing,” “reconstructive” without becoming “instructive”) to re-make and overcome capitalist biohegemony. A tall order indeed, and a conceptualizing project with a global scope that must be researched and discussed beyond our individual perspectives and experiences.

Initially, strategies can and perhaps need to point out behaviors, actions, and ways of seeing which are *believed and experienced as causes of suffering*. Here, we deontically suggest that these ways *should not be seen as* “normal.” Beyond counter-normalization and denormalization however is *being abnormal*, which is and always has been far more dangerous.

THE ABNORMAL FUTURE

Nothing exists except atoms and empty space, everything else is opinion—Democritus



What follows is the somewhat panicky opinion of the authors of this essay, an exercise in imagination. We do not write the following as a call for agreement with us, rather as a cluster of “third option” proposals with some negative and positive overlap, as well as conflicting states of possibility. We do not fully endorse what we imagine, but we do imagine a lot of different ways of seeing. Beyond our (subjective) core focus on keeping our planet alive (which the authors of this text do indeed posit as a “universal,” despite the groans and cries of “no universalisms ever at all!”⁴³ we posit, perform, analyze, in cyclomythic practical attempt to locate a life of less suffering as defined by each of those alive.)

To live in form some anti-normalizations, we must anti-normalize wage slavery and life-form coercion that bends each day around the necessity of earning money. There is no freedom in a society where a single activity (money-earning) forms the locus of all experience.

We must de-value currency and re-value our planet’s water, air, soil, and biodiversity. “Cost” must come to mean “death.”

Capitalism, first, must be replaced; anti-normalized across all levels and spheres, by not just one “new” mass order for reality and value but by many non-competitive yet conflictual ways of operating, believing, and seeing. Thinktanks, research groups, coalitions, and theoretical bodies formed to generate alternatives to capitalism must be created and supported. Just as Pinochet’s reforms in Chile inspired Milton Friedman and others to develop and strategically instate neoliberal values, policies and economic reform by tying political orders to morals and beliefs (no surprise how they have thusly panned out), we must identify examples of (re)“forms” and ways of seeing practiced currently and historically which seem to challenge and alter capitalist forms and ways of seeing. Some of these might include particular communitarian, Occupy and Black Lives Matter groups and their strategies, post-labor/post-capitalist movements in Denmark, Namibia, India, and Mexico involving direct decision-making, basic universal income, automation, and work lotteries, the political philosophies of Emma Goldman, Timothy Thomas Fortune, Rosa Luxembourg, Robin Hahnel,⁴⁴ and the millions of other persons who are currently dedicating their time, energy, and mental powers to imagining post-capitalist futures, from the most “unauthorized” of bloggers through the most authorized scientists and academics.

In terms of concrete actions, getting disparate individuals in rooms together is a step we can perform right now: ivy-league schools must open their class and conference rooms to high schoolers, veterans, single mothers, and self-educated persons from across classes and walks of life and/or professors of economics, politics, and culture must leave their ivory towers to engage in discussions at community centers, hospitals, senior homes, shelters, and prisons. On micro and meso levels, we must act on the agency we have, while we still have it. Forms of

⁴³ We do live on this planet together. When and if humans colonize other planets, we will need to re-negotiate and anti-normalize this particular universal.

⁴⁴ “Are we being utopian? It is utopian to expect more from a system than it can possibly deliver. To expect equality and justice—or even rationality—from capitalism is utopian. To expect social solidarity from markets, or self-management from central planning, is equally utopian. To argue that competition can yield empathy or that authoritarianism can promote initiative or that keeping most people from decision making can employ human potential most fully: these are utopian fantasies without question. But to recognize human potentials and to seek to embody their development into a set of economic institutions and then to expect those institutions to encourage desirable outcomes is no more than reasonable theorizing. What is utopian is not planting new seeds but expecting flowers from dying weeds.” *Of the People, By the People: The Case for a Participatory Economy* (2012)

organization and meeting in person are already major aspects of our daily lives (church, beers with friends, board meetings) and can be transformed into practices that re-engineer our society directly. We must not be strictly afraid to propose new plans, even if these must involve “universalizing” demands, such as demands for universal healthcare and universal basic income.

Abnormality is prison abolition, including armed breaks if necessary, disruption of courts and advocacy and education about how to refuse to settle out of court. The individuals in jeopardy must be supported by teams of social workers and lawyers providing legal, emotional and psychological assistance. In an abnormal future, there are no “mandatory minimum” sentences and legal systems do not commercially produce sentences without regard for the particular circumstances and individuals involved in legal processes. In an abnormal future, the law is slow, dialectical, and public, not part of a commercial/corporatized prison industrial complex.

In an abnormal future, conceptual issues like *intention* and *opportunity* are discussed and defined by jury members, judges, lawyers, and defendants as aspects of due process; there is no pretense at a hard line between innocent and guilty, only collective ruling processes to determine how to respond to certain actions, behaviors, and events.

In an abnormal future, all and any drugs are legal, though they may be regulated by interpersonal values, beliefs, customs and norms.

There are no police, certainly no armed police, perhaps there are community service coalitions.

In an abnormal future, private property is reevaluated. Initially, being “abnormal” is mass rent strikes, occupation of buildings, movement into “public” spaces and camping out in big box stores and parkinglots. Abnormality is surrender of private property, farming the suburbs, sending homemade robots to raid pharmacies for medicine, liberation of agriculture from Monsanto and other agri-corps. We must sue and otherwise prosecute the corporations that have made our world unlivable in addition to supporting transitions movements around the world.

We anti-normalize mediation forms and mass-media consumption, proliferating contents and assuring open-source and private dissemination. Movie theaters show films and documentaries on topics proposed to communally-supported filmmakers, their projectors run by bicycle generator. VPNs and independent servers must be proliferated and established, we use enhanced-telepathic messaging and multiple postal systems for different kinds of items, we send a messenger on foot to tell our friend we’ll be late, in exchange for a bagel. Notices, pamphlets, billboards, and other spaces usually reserved for advertisements are overtaken and used for organizational meetings and planning sessions. Messages and plans appear in non-normal places: bathroom stalls, garment tags, public transit, announcements over the PA in grocery stores.

Towards an abnormal future, we anti-normalize “universal moralities” as deeply as possible, inquiring into points of view, opinions, and feelings of others to navigate our private and public behaviors. We do not seek sustainability and universality of “rightness” as an ultimate goal, we become comfortable in confusion and discourse.

In an abnormal future, we are “negatively liberated” at the level of our bodies. We are free to sleep when we want, to have consensual sex and masturbate in public, speaking openly and freely about our passions and desires. There is no “nuclear family,” we are free to legally adopt fellow adults, marry whomever we please, and/or remain “single” without fear of being abandoned or left without emotional care. In an abnormal future, we move from home to home as we are invited, we can live anywhere if we are willing and able to travel there (by boat, perhaps, or solar-powered glider).

An “abnormal” future is one with basic universal income, a normalization of barter, and/or a currency-ceiling that makes money meaningless when it accumulates beyond a certain tangible amount. An even more “abnormal” future is one in which value and value-assignment processes are reformed in different situations, by different persons, in consideration of complex and multiplicit factors configuring (e)valuation and relating exchange to other values and forms of value.⁴⁵

Equal distribution of resources and disarmament are global mandates (we would not mind, some days, a worldwide coalition, not a government but a committee, which is elected directly to define and ensure this. If some entities do not wish to participate, they must be allowed territory of sufficient size for self-sufficiency.) The materials needed to make nuclear armaments are the only locations heavily guarded and defended. All existing nuclear weapons and other WMDs are destroyed, dismantled.

Global committees become easy to form and disband over the internet and involve mass participation and forms of direct social democracy. Internets (plural) and other infrastructures which are currently fuel-dependent are powered by many forms of non-carbon-emitting energy

⁴⁵ To “valuation forms,” let’s say. As opposed to our current value-norms embodied by currencies, which include total quantification, total consistency of exchange rates, set costs for particular materialities, etc.

sources. Satellites may be directly used by publics, for free, they are maintained by artificial intelligences known and personally respected by their human and non-human colleagues.

An abnormal future is not just about “negative” liberation, the *removal* of regulations, laws, and norms. Rather, positive liberations are enforced (i.e. forms of protection and prevention of extraction and coercion, defense of all persons and their self-proclaimed rights) in conflict with one another, argued at length in public courts, laws reconfigured and re-determined at very regular intervals in time by temporary judicial juries. Monopoly and pollution laws (laws which apply to non-persons,⁴⁶ the largest organized entities) are the most severe, with laws relaxing in strength in comparison to size. In constant debate over what is “right” or “wrong,” the news covers all decisions made in courts of law.

Some very complicated issues, such as compulsory education vs. rights to education, taxation, and diversity of food options may involve periods of structural testing, with sequences of time periods set as experimental phases or trials for different configurations.

In the abnormal future, news sources and journalists do not claim “objectivity,” rather they acknowledge and involve personal experiences, biases, cultural values and conceptual ideals. Nobody claims to “know” anything, but “knowledge construction” is substantially valued and devised as projective and creative methodology-making.” Ways of doing things (methods, techniques, operations) are directly associated with reasons and causes for doing things, with contexts and conditions constantly (re)evaluated.

We are invested and interested in ourselves and each other. We have plenty of free time to think, plan, debate, and design our societies because we are not forced to sell our bodies/labor to survive. On the other hand, if we want something to happen or get done, we have to organize to do it, and do it ourselves, mustering in groups from very small to very large.

In terms of cultural norms, perhaps individuals come to refuse privileges when we have them, refuse to take advantages when we see them. We become less afraid of manual labor or getting hurt, as there is universal health care. Doctors and other health practitioners practice their practices like artists, like activists, like everyone else. We value all the skills, all the training, all the techniques, some more than others by some more than others, each compared in terms of their analyzed consequences and affects, via different (located) modes of comparison and contrast.

Hegemonies are mistrusted and dismantled, re-made, as soon as or even before they form. Our sense of the void, our nihilistic despair, and our fear of the future is transformed into core (personal) reflection and mind-body-driven self-determination.

We do not fear difference. We feel confident that there is “enough to go around,” we do not need to compete for nourishment, including attention and love.

In the abnormal future, the aliens feel like visiting because we are finally less likely to murder them.

The resources currently being used to extract oil from the earth and to maintain states of constant bloody warfare are reconfigured to create a non-invasive (benign) infrastructure for transportation, agriculture, and housing. In an abnormal future, all and any religious beliefs and customs are legal, though there are clear extraction processes through which any individual can remove themselves from situations and contexts where they are experiencing cruelty or oppression. Again, forms of positive liberation may be devised to protect and defend the vulnerable (for example, children) from forms of authorized violence against them (mutilation or harm of a child’s body, for example, may need to be defined by a global committee and then prevented by enforced laws). We value and consider “societal formations” of all different sizes, privileging in terms of affect-resonance individuals, families, collectives, communities, organizations, companies, incorporations, local, (inter)national, and global governmental bodies and states, species, biospheres, and so on.

Mediating performances between the particular and the universal are practiced, learned, alternated, and debated in constant conflux via a wider and wider array of mediation modes; proliferation of viewpoints rather than reduction into reproducible objective truth is sought; efficiency, speed, and mimetic capabilities are (as capitalism falls) increasingly devalued, replaced by valuation of thoroughness and multiplicity, process-qualification-to-matter, and viability for those involved in particular situations.

In an abnormal future, we are allowed to take pleasure in adjusting and inquiring into our very ways of seeing nature, human instinct, political order, “reality” and “normality.”

⁴⁶ debates about what and how “human persons” are defined must be reconfigured, remain open, and regard biotic suffering and death as unquantifiable in comparison to capital value

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