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Machines that can substitute for humans –notes on the boundaries of humanity

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Abstract: Inspired by the surrealist methodology Milan Kundera has described as the "density of unexpected encounters," this essay attempts "to reach out ... to ... distant realities and bring them together to create a spark" (André Breton). The distant realities involved are three historical moments (Northern England during the industrial revolution; Czechoslovakia between the two world wars; and Britain and America in 2016) and associated literary texts (Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Karel Čapek's R.U.R., and journalistic narratives making "sense" of the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election). The aim is to use these apparently unconnected materials to shed light on the shifting and fragile boundaries of what societies consider human and the processes of exclusion through which they are sustained.

The poor lone impossible monster abhorr'd

They learn to speak, write, and do arithmetic. They have a phenomenal memory. If one read them the *Encyclopedia Britannica* they could repeat everything back in order, but they never think up anything original. They'd make fine university professors.

—Karel Čapek, *R.U.R.*

Karel Čapek introduced the word *robot* to the languages of the world in his drama *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*), which premiered on 25 January 1921 at the National Theater in Prague. The word itself was coined by Karel's older brother Josef, a cubist painter who created the stage-sets for the play. Etymology indelibly links robots with unfree labor, since *robot* comes from *robota*, the Czech word for the labor services Bohemian peasants owed their lords until 1848, when servile tenancies were abolished. A robot, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is "a machine with a human appearance or functioning like a human," but the term has also come to be used inversely, to describe "a person who works mechanically and efficiently but insensitively." The permeable boundary between the human and the mechanical doubtless explains why robots are such perennial objects of fascination. They are *uncanny*, in the sense given by Sigmund Freud in his famous essay of that title inspired by E.T.A. Hoffman's story "The Sandman," whose narrator falls in catastrophic love with the animated doll Olympia. Mass-assembled in factories from organic components, Čapek's robots were no clunky mechanical monsters but precursors of the Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica*, the hosts in

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HBO's *Westworld*, and Tima, the heartbreaking heroine of Rintaro's 2001 film *Metropolis*, all of whom are indistinguishable in appearance from human beings. Čapek creates some sly humor when Helena Glory, an undercover activist for the League of Humanity who has come to Rossum's factory to free the robots, refuses to believe that the secretary Sulla, who has beautiful hair and knows four languages, can possibly be one. "Sulla, you are a young woman just like me, aren't you? Tell me you are!"[1] But *R.U.R* also gave name and shape to a fear that has haunted modernity from its beginnings. *Wikipedia* defines *robotics* as "the interdisciplinary branch of engineering and science that ... deals with the design, construction, operation, and use of ... *machines that can substitute for humans*."[2] Isaac Asimov was unaware that he was creating a neologism when he was the first to use the word "robotics" in print in a short story published in May 1941. He was sure it already existed.

R.U.R. was not the first literary work to fantasize the creations of modern science and technology turning against their makers. That honor probably belongs to Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, which was published anonymously in 1818. The subtitle should be noted. Victor Frankenstein's monster was a rougher beast than Karel Čapek's robots Primus and Helena—who fall for each other at the end of the play, redeeming a doomed humanity by becoming the new Adam and Eve—but there is more to *Frankenstein* than a B-movie horror story. Shelley began her novel in 1816 at the age of eighteen, when she spent a rainy summer on the shore of Lake Geneva with her lover (and later husband) Percy Bysshe Shelley, their infant son William, the poet Lord Byron, and John William Polidori, a writer and physician who is credited with publishing the first vampire story, "The Vampyre," in 1819. William Blake's dark Satanic mills were by then casting their long shadows over England's green and pleasant land, and the Shelleys moved in circles that were determined to build the New Jerusalem. Mary was the daughter of the political philosopher William Godwin and the feminist icon Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Percy would soon gain notoriety with "The Mask of Anarchy," a poetic call to arms in response to the Peterloo massacre of 1819, when cavalry drew their sabres and charged a crowd of 60-80,000 people demonstrating for electoral reform at St Peter's Fields in Manchester, killing fifteen protestors and injuring hundreds more. Many years later Leigh Hunt introduced Mary to Apollo in *The Blue-Stocking Revels* (1837), an elegant satire celebrating England's abundance of female writers, as "Shelley, fourfam'd,—for her parents, her lord, / And the poor lone impossible monster abhorr'd / So sleek and so

[1] Karel Čapek, *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, in Peter Kussi (ed.), *Toward the Radical Center: A Karel Čapek Reader*, North Haven, CT: Catbird Press, 1990, p. 43.

[2] "Robotics," *Wikipedia*, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robotics (all websites cited in this paper accessed at 16 February 2017 unless otherwise noted).

smiling she came, people stared / To think such fair clay should, so darkly have dared;—"[3]

So darkly indeed. *Frankenstein* was written in the aftermath of the epidemic of machine-breaking that broke out in Nottingham in November 1811 and spread like wildfire through the industrial districts of Yorkshire and Lancashire before being brutally suppressed. "Luddite" has nowadays become a byword for mindless resistance to technological progress, but the movement's defenders then and since have pointed out that matters were more complicated than that. The original Luddites were hand-loom weavers, whose crime was to attack the mechanical means used by their employers to replace them with unapprenticed, unskilled, low-wage laborers, leaving the artisans "in consequence ... to starve" in an economy that was already depressed by the endless Napoleonic Wars. "The work thus executed," according to Lord Byron, "was inferior in quality, not marketable at home, and merely hurried over with a view to exportation. It was called, in the cant of the trade, by the name of Spider-work." Four years before he met Mary Shelley, Byron had spoken passionately in his maiden speech to the House of Lords against the Nottingham Frame-Breaking Bill, which made the destruction of machinery a capital crime. "Is there not blood enough upon your penal code!" he demanded of their lordships. "Will you erect a gibbet in every field, and hang up men like scarecrows?"

"The perseverance of these miserable men in their proceedings," Byron went on, "tends to prove that nothing but absolute want could have driven a large and once honest and industrious body of the people into the commission of excesses so hazardous to themselves, their families, and the community." His sarcasm is vicious:

> The rejected workmen, in the blindness of their ignorance, instead of rejoicing at these improvements in arts so beneficial to mankind, conceived themselves to be sacrificed to improvements in mechanism. In the foolishness of their hearts, they imagined that the maintenance and well doing of the industrious poor, were objects of greater consequence than the enrichment of a few individuals by any improvement in the implements of trade which threw the workmen out of employment, and rendered the labourer unworthy of his hire.[4]

[3] Leigh Hunt, "The Blue-Stocking Revels. Or, The Feast of the Violets." Canto 3. At https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/blue-stocking-revels-or-feast-violets-canto-3

[4] *Recollections of the Life of Lord Byron*, London: Charles Knight, 1824. The manuscript of the speech is given in full on pp. 205-18.

The world we have lost

And so Sally can wait, she knows it's too late
As we're walking on by
Her soul slides away, but don't look back in anger
I heard you say

—Oasis

Two hundred years to the month after Mary Shelley put pen to paper that damp Swiss summer, the Luddites seemingly rose from the dead. British voters went to the polls in a referendum on 23 June 2016 to decide whether the United Kingdom should remain in or leave the European Union. Against the overwhelming weight of establishment opinion—among others, the UK government, most major political parties (the Tories were officially neutral), big industry, trade unions, universities, professional associations, writers, creative artists, broadsheet newspapers, a raft of celebrities from Lily Allen to Idris Elba, and all twenty football clubs in the Premier League—the public thumbed its nose at the great and the good and voted narrowly (52-48%) in favor of Brexit. On the other side of the Atlantic Donald Trump pulled off an even bigger upset a few months later when he was elected President of the United States. Just how inconceivable *that* prospect had been is indicated by the fact that only twenty daily newspapers (of which just two had circulations above 100,000) had endorsed Trump's candidacy, while 243 supported Hillary Clinton. *The Tulsa World* and the *Dallas Morning News* endorsed a Democrat for the first time since F. D. Roosevelt; the *Cincinnati Inquirer* and *Columbus Dispatch* endorsed a Democrat for the first time since Woodrow Wilson; and the Palm Beach *Desert Sun*, the *Arizona Republic*, and the San Diego *Union Tribune* endorsed a Democrat for the first time in their respective 90-year, 126-year, and 148-year histories.

Speaking to his jubilant followers at 4.00 a.m. on the morning after the referendum, UKIP leader Nigel Farage hailed the outcome as "a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people" against "the multinationals ... the big merchant banks ... big politics ... lies, corruption and deceit."[5] Theresa May, who was the principal beneficiary of the ensuing Tory bloodbath, swiftly jumped the good ship Remain and reinvented herself as *vox populi*. Surfing the populist wave at the 2016 Conservative Party conference, she attacked "the way a lot of politicians and commentators ... find your patriotism distasteful, your concerns about immigration parochial, your views about crime illiberal." She assured delegates of her sympathy for "those people who lost their job, who stayed in work but on reduced hours, took a pay cut as household bills rocketed, or—and I know a lot of people don't like

[5] "EU referendum: Nigel Farage's 4am victory speech—the text in full," *Independent*, 23 June 2016, at http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/eu-referendum-nigel-farage-4am-victory-speech-the-text-in-full-a7099156.html

to admit this—someone who finds themselves out of work or on lower wages *because of low-skilled immigration.*" She made sure to remind her audience that it is not only ethnic minorities who suffer injustice, because "*White working class boys* are less likely to go to university than any other group in society."[6] Later she used the Prime Minister's annual speech to the Lord Mayor of London's banquet to highlight "the tensions and differences between those who are gaining from globalisation and those who feel they are losing out." Moving seamlessly from economics to identity, she acknowledged the "very real and deeply felt concerns of ordinary people" who not only "see their jobs being outsourced and wages undercut" but also "*see their communities changing around them* and don't remember agreeing to that change."[7]

Perhaps more surprisingly (but perhaps not, given its historic bromance with the working class), the left bought into this narrative, too. For the veteran campaigning journalist John Pilger, the Brexit vote was overdue revenge on "an insufferably patrician class for whom metropolitan London is the United Kingdom. Its leading members see themselves as liberal, enlightened, cultivated tribunes of the 21st century zeitgeist, even 'cool.' What they really are is a bourgeoisie with insatiable consumerist tastes and ancient instincts of their own superiority."[8] "People who did not feel they had been heard have not just spoken," wrote the distinguished journalist Gary Younge the morning after the referendum in the *Guardian*; "given a one-off chance to tell the world what they think of how they are governed they have screamed a piercing cry of alienation and desperation."[9] "In this Brexit vote, the poor turned on an elite who ignored them," agreed Ian Jack, former editor of *The Independent on Sunday* and *Granta* magazine, writing in the same newspaper the next day.[10] How times change! The *Guardian* was founded (as the *Manchester Guardian*) in 1821 after the police closed down the more radical *Manchester Observer*, which was established in response to the Peterloo massacre. Back in the day the working-

[6] "Theresa May's conference speech in full," *Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 2016, at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-mays-conference-speech-in-full/. My emphases.

[7] "PM speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet: 14 November 2016," at https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-to-the-lord-mayors-banquet-14-november-2016

[8] "John Pilger: Why the British Said No to Europe," *Telesur*, 25 June 2016, at http://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/John-Pilger-Why-the-British-Said-No-to-Europe-20160625-0022.html

[9] Gary Younge, "After this vote the UK is diminished, our politics poisoned," *Guardian*, 24 June 2016, at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/24/eu-vote-uk-diminished-politics-poisoned-racism

[10] Ian Jack, "In this Brexit vote, the poor turned on an elite who ignored them," *Guardian*, 25 June 2016, at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/25/brexit-vote-poor-elite

class *Manchester and Salford Advertiser* accused the *Guardian* of being "the foul prostitute and dirty parasite of the worst portion of the mill-owners."[11]

Ian Jack counts the cost of globalization in the decrepitude of Britain's manufacturing districts, whose "settlements strung along smoky valleys and perched on the oily river's edge ... began to look as abandoned as gold rush towns"—an image that foreshadowed the "American carnage" of "rusted out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation" in Donald Trump's inauguration speech.[12] Jack mourns not only the "spinning, weaving, stitching, hammering, banging, welding and smelting that went on in the manufacturing towns" but the loss of "much of the country's former character" that "was also owed to them—non-conformist chapels, brass bands, giant vegetable championships, self-improvement, association football." John Harris is another whose laments for the world we have lost bring to mind Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations*, a classic novel of Victorian social conscience published in the same year as Friedrich Engels ethnographed Manchester in *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. Then the concern was the evils wrought by the monster abhorr'd of industrialization, now it is the evils wrought by its long agonized withdrawal, but the locations and dramatis personae have remained much the same. Harris is perhaps best known for his writings on that most Mancunian of musical genres, Britpop. "We were in Collyhurst, the hard-pressed neighbourhood on the northern edge of Manchester city centre last Wednesday, and I had yet to find a remain voter," he relates. "The woman I was talking to spoke of the lack of a local park, or playground, and her sense that all the good stuff went to the regenerated wonderland of big city Manchester, 10 minutes down the road. Only an hour earlier, I had been in Manchester at a graduate recruitment fair, where nine out of 10 of our interviewees were supporting remain, and some voices spoke about leave voters with a cold superiority ... Not for the first time, the atmosphere around the referendum had the sulphurous whiff not just of inequality, but a kind of misshapen class war."[13]

Trumpery

trumpery ... *n.* (*pl.* -ies) 1 a. worthless finery. b. a worthless article. 2. rubbish *adj.* 1 showy but worthless (*trumpery jewels*) 2 delusive, shallow (*trumpery arguments*). [Middle English from Old French *tromperie*, from *tromper* 'deceive']

—*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*

[11] *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 21 May 1836, as quoted in *Wikipedia* article "*The Guardian*," at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Guardian

[12] "Donald Trump, Transcript of Inauguration Speech, Jan. 20, 2017," *Time*, at http://time.com/4640707/donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript/

[13] John Harris, " 'If you've got money, you vote in ... if you haven't got money, you vote out,'" *Guardian*, 24 June 2016, at https://www.theguardian.com/politics/commentisfree/2016/jun/24/divided-britain-brexit-money-class-inequality-westminster?CMP=share_btn_tw

"Will the 'Brexit' mark the end of the age of globalization?" asked Don Lee in the *Los Angeles Times*, explaining that this "backlash stems from a growing realization that the biggest winners of globalization have been international corporations, wealthy families, skilled and educated workers and those with easy access to capital. Older, working-class families in many Western nations have instead struggled with stagnant wages, job losses and staggering debt."[14] Michael Moore was one of the few commentators who ignored the cognoscenti and saw Brexit as the writing on the wall for America too. "Trump's election," he warned two weeks before the US vote (and at a point where the *New York Times* was still giving Hillary Clinton a 92% chance of victory), "is going to be the biggest 'fuck you' ever recorded in human history," because "voting for him is a giant message that disaffected Americans will be happy to send to media and political elites who they see as not caring about them." Trump's promise to impose a 35% tariff on cars made in Mexico to protect American jobs, Moore added, was "music to the ears of people in Michigan and Ohio and Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, *the 'Brexit states.*"[15]

It was a prescient parallel. Just as mass desertions by white working-class voters in the Labour Party's traditional heartlands in the midlands and north of England may have tipped the balance in favor of Brexit, it was believed to be the defection or abstentions of white working-class Democrat voters in exactly these rust-belt states, long thought of as bricks in an impregnable blue firewall, that gave Trump his majority in the electoral college despite being almost three million adrift of Clinton in the popular vote—a record deficit for a winning president. That victory in turn appeared to vindicate Moore and others' reading of Brexit as a virtuous class struggle. Glenn Greenwald acknowledges that "revolts against corrupt elite institutions can ... create a space for the ugliest tribal impulses: xenophobia, authoritarianism, racism, fascism," but directs his sharpest anger at the "unreflective rage, condescension, and contempt toward those who voted wrong" of the "political, economic, and media elites," who "demonize those with little power, wealth, or possibility as stupid and racist." "Economic suffering and xenophobia/racism are *not mutually exclusive*," he goes on; "the former fuels the latter, as sustained economic misery makes people more receptive to tribalistic scapegoating."[16]

[14] Don Lee, "Will the 'Brexit' mark the end of the age of globalization?" *Los Angeles Times*, 24 June 2016, at http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-brexit-globalization-future-20160624-snap-story.html

[15] Matthew Sheffield, "Michael Moore: People will vote for Donald Trump as a giant 'F**k you' — and he'll win," *Salon*, 26 October 2016, at http://www.salon.com/2016/10/26/michael-moore-people-will-vote-for-donald-trump-as-a-giant-fk-you-and-hell-win/. See also Michael Moore, "5 Reasons Why Trump Will Win," at http://michaelmoore.com/trumpwillwin/

[16] Glenn Greenwald, "Brexit is only the latest proof of the insularity and failure of western establishment institutions," *The Intercept*, 25 June 2016, at

The racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia surrounding the Leave campaign, we are to infer, are secondary phenomena. Forget Nigel Farage standing in front of a billboard showing an endless line of refugees with the caption: "BREAKING POINT: The EU has failed us all. We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders."[17] It's the economy, stupid.

I have shown elsewhere[18] that this sentimental story of everyday folk giving the finger to their distant betters belongs squarely in the realm of alternative facts. The Leave campaign and Donald Trump both owe their victories not to a groundswell of popular dissent, but to winner-take-all electoral systems that rewarded them with political clout out of all proportion to their numerical support: in Britain a single-question, one-off referendum, in the US an electoral college that was not bound by the popular vote. UKIP, the only political party on the British mainland to have had Brexit as its policy before the referendum, had just *one* MP in the UK's 650-member parliament at the time. In the United States eleven million more people voted against Trump than voted for him and 29.9% of eligible voters did not vote at all. The election "was effectively decided by 107,000 people" in three states, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin.[19] The 52-48 margin by which Britain voted to leave the EU was likewise dwarfed by the no-shows (turnout was 65% of the voting-age population and 72% of eligible voters). Just 27% of the UK population actually voted for Brexit, a slightly higher figure than the 19.5% of the US population that elected Trump—which hardly amounts to a revolt of the masses. When the people were given the opportunity to say "fuck you" to liberal elites, overwhelming *majorities* did not do so.

Deindustrialization may have been a factor affecting voting in some places, but there was no overall correlation between social class and voting patterns in either the UK referendum or the US election. There *are* clear associations, on the other hand, between voting patterns and kinds of community (urban, suburban, rural) and (especially) their levels of ethnic diversity, and the age, educational qualifications, race, and social attitudes of individual voters. For all

https://theintercept.com/2016/06/25/brexit-is-only-the-latest-proof-of-the-insularity-and-failure-of-western-establishment-institutions/

17 Heather Stewart and Rowena Mason, "Nigel Farage's anti-migrant poster reported to police," *Guardian*, 16 June 2016, at https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants

18 Derek Sayer, "White Riot—Brexit, Trump, and Post-Factual Politics," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2017, 92-106 (text available online at http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/johs.12153/full).

19 Tim Meko, Denise Lu and Lazaro Gamio, "How Trump won the presidency with razor-thin margins in swing states," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2106, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/2016-election/swing-state-margins/

the handwringing over "those left behind by globalization" the British Election Study, which asked around 24,000 people their voting intentions in the referendum, found that support for public whipping of sex offenders and restoration of the death penalty were much stronger predictors of leave voting than class or income.[20] If there is such a thing as a typical Brexit voter—and of course there is not—he (or she: unlike in the US, there were no significant differences in voting patterns between men and women) was not driven by anything approaching Byron's "absolute want." He may be a one-time miner or steelworker "just managing" on benefits on a council estate in Bolsover, Hartlepool, or Blaunau Gwent. He may equally be a retired bank manager living on a decent pension in a seaside bungalow whose mortgage is long paid off in Clacton or Weymouth or Herne Bay. But the statistical odds are he will be white, British, over 50, left school at 15, and doesn't like blacks, queers, London, women in hijabs, and hearing foreign languages on his High Street. Such are our latter-day Luddites.

Had it not been for Trump's victory in the United States, the UK referendum might have remained a historical footnote of purely local interest. Britain would have slipped into a genteel fascist poverty, completing her long post-imperial decline, and Europe would have gotten along fine without her. Instead, Brexit mutated into a full-blown Barthesian myth—a fulsome, self-sufficient sign that "abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is a world without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: *things appear to mean something by themselves.*"[21] Theresa May answered all questions as to what, exactly, the British people voted for on 23 June 2016 with repetitions of the serene mantra "Brexit means Brexit." Pushed for clarification, she said it would be a red, white, and blue Brexit. Everybody invoked Brexit as a good-luck charm for their own xenotopias, from Donald Trump to Geert Wilders to Viktor Orban to Marine Le Pen. The myth became a truth self-evident, providing a new moral compass for navigating a future in which all the old landmarks have been swept away.

20 Alex Burton, "The link between Brexit and the death penalty," BBC website, 17 July 2016, at http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36803544.

21 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1991, p. 143.

The Fascist Longings in Our Midst[22]

So then young Rossum said to himself: A human being. That's something that feels joy, plays the violin, wants to go for a walk, and in general requires a lot of things which—which are, in effect, superfluous.

—Karel Čapek, *R.U.R.*

Contrary to Theresa May and Donald Trump, the real killer of manufacturing jobs in Britain and America today is neither outsourcing nor immigration but robotics. One recent study found that while over five million factory *jobs* have been lost in the US since 2000, industrial *output* grew by 17.6% between 2006 and 2013. Unfavorable terms of trade accounted for just 13% of the lost jobs, while "88% of the jobs were taken by robots and other factors at home."[23] Covering the same story, the *Financial Times* quoted Mileya Solís, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, who explains that "automation has transformed the American factory, rendering millions of low-skilled jobs redundant. Fast-spreading technologies like robotics and 3D printing will exacerbate this trend." While "a human welder today earns around $25 per hour, including benefits," estimates the Boston Consulting Group, "the equivalent operating cost per hour for a robot is around $8."[24] When Karel Čapek's Helena asks why Rossum's make robots without souls, she is told: "For work, Miss. One Robot can do the work of two-and-a-half human laborers. The human machine, Miss Glory, was hopelessly imperfect. It needed to be done away with once and for all."[25] This is Marx 101 (though Čapek was far from being a Marxist): "Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks," explains *Capital*.[26]

If this really were a cry of pain by workers who conceived themselves to be sacrificed to improvements in mechanism, like the Luddites of old, the Brexit and Trump supporters would be targeting the machines that are taking their place. But it is not and they are not. They are gunning instead for human others—the Mexican fruit-picker, the Polish plumber, the Filipina caregiver, the Caribbean nurse, the Bangladeshi cook. In Lord Ashcroft's Brexit referendum exit poll of 12,369 voters, which is the largest sample we possess, 81% of Leave voters saw multiculturalism and 80% saw immigration as "a

22 Rey Chow, "The Fascist Longings in Our Midst," *Ariel*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1995.

23 Wolfgang Lehmacher, "Don't Blame China For Taking U.S. Jobs," *Fortune*, 8 November 2016, at http://fortune.com/2016/11/08/china-automation-jobs/

24 Federica Cocco, "Most US manufacturing jobs lost to technology, not trade," *Financial Times*, 2 December 2016, at https://www.ft.com/content/dec677c0-b7e6-11e6-ba85-95d1533d9a62

25 Čapek, *R.U.R.*, p. 49.

26 Karl Marx, *Capital*, volume 1, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 35, New York: International Publishers, 1996, p. 239.

force for evil," while only 51% thought the same of capitalism—the same percentage, as it happens, as of remain voters.[27] Nativist opponents of globalization should not be confused with economic victims of globalization. These are culture wars—even race wars—dressed up as class struggles. What is being defended are not disappearing jobs but nostalgic visions of community, rooted in blood and soil and kith and kin. Since we are talking of the Great Powers of the last two centuries, who successively took up Rudyard Kipling's "white man's burden" of civilizing "new-caught sullen peoples / Half devil and half child,"[28] this nativism is bound up with dreams of national exceptionalism and racial supremacy. The nostalgia is for an *imperial* past, which is why in both Britain and the United States race remains so salient an axis of identity and difference. The working classes supped at the imperial table too, even if all they got was the crumbs and leftovers—*Carry On Up the Khyber* and *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*, the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, and the chance to shit in Whites Only bathrooms and sit at the front of the Montgomery bus.

It is the migrant, the refugee, and the Muslim that have become the *poor lone impossible monsters abhorr'd* of our time, the nameless figures of terror against whom we must circle our wagons and strengthen our walls. It is salutary how quickly Helena's sympathy for the robots turns to disgust once she learns they are *not* "just like me"—once, that is to say, they have been convincingly Othered, cast outside the pale of the League of Humanity. "Oh, stop! At least send them out of the room!" she begs.[29] *R.U.R.* is a more pertinent text for our times than *Frankenstein*, because of its grasp of this dialectic of resemblance and alterity, attraction and repulsion, fascination and fear. We can send *them* out of the room but the suspicion of their humanity can never be exorcized. It eternally returns to haunt us, pricking the collective conscience—in the image of a three-year-old Syrian boy in blue shorts and red top lying face down, drowned, on a Greek beach, for instance, or in the blank, uncomprehending face of a black man who cannot believe he lost all his fingers to frostbite while trying to walk from North Dakota to Manitoba. The more we can't get them out of our heads, the more we wish they would just *go away*. *Make it stop!* Do I hear murmurings of a Final Solution? We have been here before, and it wasn't in 1816.

27 Lord Ashcroft, "How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday… and why," *Lord Ashcroft Polls*, 24 June 2016, at http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/.

28 Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden," at http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_burden.htm

29 Čapek, *R.U.R.*, p. 44.

Citizens of the world

If you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere.
—Theresa May, Speech to Conservative Party Conference, 18 August 2016

Theresa May would not have seen eye to eye with Karel Čapek. He regarded himself (to quote his own description of his predecessor, the nineteenth-century writer and journalist Jan Neruda, author of *Prague Tales*) as a "national citizen of the world" (*národní světoobčan*). "To us," Čapek wrote in a brief article in the liberal newspaper *Lidové noviny* on 8 July 1934, "the real Neruda was a man who seeks and finds his home; he finds it in among the wild thyme, where he collects cool ribwort and strawberry leaves for a burning pain; under the tiled roofs of his ancestral home; in his mother's work-worn and solicitous palms; and finally, as an aging and ailing man, in celebration of the nation to which he gives himself up." But though "this search for home is the leitmotif of Neruda's life and work," at the same time he had "the strong longing of a world-citizen for the great and entire world ... This isn't a tourist, but a human being who prodigiously and intensively experiences the world ... He returns home, comparing it to the world; this is Neruda's local patriotism, which is always reached via the detour of world-citizenship." Čapek commends Neruda as "an ageless living example for members of a young nation: neither to sit by the stove, shut up in their narrow little local horizons, nor to timidly and ploddingly imitate at home what we have seen somewhere else, but to feel and think home through seeing and knowing the world."[30]

Čapek practiced what he preached. His comments on the nineteenth-century Czech artist Mikoláš Aleš, beloved illustrator of the Czech *Mother Goose*, apply equally to his own writing: "Father Aleš has everything all together in one little bundle: national idyll and national epic, the beetle in the grass and the knights in combat, nature and history, children and kings, animals and elements, present and prehistory; for all this echoes together when we say and feel the word home ... To him the Hussite commander was as much a piece of home as the boy whittling a penny-whistle, as a butterfly, as the seasons of the year, as the rippling of a field."[31] Čapek's work drips with that indefinable quality Czechs call *českost* (which translates as Czechness, but that tells us nothing). But this eminently patriotic man, a close friend of Czechoslovakia's founder and first president Tomáš Masaryk, was also the author of the travel books *Italian Letters* (1923), *English Letters* (1924), *A Journey to Spain* (1930), and *Pictures from Holland* (1932), as well as the editor of *Modern French Poetry* (1920), an anthology of French poets from Baudelaire to Soupault in his own Czech translations. In a nice exemplification of Jan Neruda's dictum that one discovers home only through exploring the world, Milan Kundera believes

30 "Národní světoobčan," in Karel Čapek, *Spisy*, vol. XIX, O umění a kultuře III, Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1986, pp. 582-3.

31 Karel Čapek, "Starý mistr," in *Spisy*, vol. XIX, pp. 363-4.

that modern Czech poetry starts with Apollinaire's "Zone," which Čapek first translated in the proletkult magazine *Červen* in 1919. Without this translation, Kundera argues, the interwar blossoming of Czech modernist poetry—including such works as Jiří Wolker's "The Holy Little Hill" (Svatý Kopeček, 1921), Konstantín Biebl's "The New Icarus" (1929), and Vítězslav Nezval's "The Wonderful Musician" (1922) and "Edison" (1928)—would have been "inconceivable." "Probably in no other literature," he writes, "was the stimulus of Apollinaire's 'Zone' as splendidly and creatively developed as in ours."[32]

In a note to the second edition of *Modern French Poetry* written in 1936 Čapek explained that he made most of the translations in 1916, "thus in the middle of the war [World War I]; and they came into being really under the pressure of the war, as a literary act of solidarity and spiritual alliance with the nation that was then bleeding before Verdun for the cause which was also the cause of our heart and of our faith."[33] Two years later Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier sat down with Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler in Munich and agreed to sacrifice Czechoslovakia on the altar of *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*. Ferdinand Peroutka, editor of the review *Přítomnost* (The Present, 1924-39), later described how "Karel Čapek sat among us and monotonously repeated: 'How is it possible, that treaties are not kept; it is the end of culture.'"[34] A broken man, Čapek gave up the ghost on Christmas Day 1938, aged just 48. "If you like," wrote the journalist Milena Jesenská, "you believe that he died of bronchitis and pneumonia."[35]

On 15 March 1939 Germany occupied Bohemia and Moravia (Slovakia became a puppet state under Father Jozef Tiso). The Gestapo arrested Peroutka within days and he spent the war in Buchenwald. Jesenská then ran *Přítomnost* until she herself was arrested in November 1939. She died in the women's concentration camp at Ravensbrück in 1944. Her remarkable articles for *Přítomnost* in 1938-9 are classics in the literature of resistance. "The Czech Mom" celebrates the "trifles" that "become big symbols ... Czech song and the Czech book. Czech hospitality. The Czech language and old Czech customs. Czech Easter eggs, little Czech gardens and clumps of Czech roses." "And since it is woman, who wields in her hand the trifles," Jesenská adds, "she reigns also over the big symbols."[36] But when complimented by a right-winger with the words "Let your opinions be what they may, I see that above all, you

32 Milan Kundera, in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Alkoholy života*, Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1969, p. 9.

33 Karel Čapek, *Francouzská poesie a jiné překlady*, Prague: KLHU, 1957, p. 194.

34 Ferdinand Peroutka, "Osud Karla Čapka," in his *Budeme pokračovat*, Toronto: Sixty-Eight Publishers, 1984, pp. 39-40.

35 "Poslední dny Karla Čapka," in Milena Jesenská, *Zvenčí a zevnitř*, Prague: Nakladatelství Franze Kafky, 1996, p. 28.

36 Milena Jesenská, "Česká maminka," *Přítomnost*, Vol. 16, No. 16 (1939), pp. 238-9.

are a Czech," Jesenská responded: "I am *self-evidently* a Czech, but I try *above all* to be a decent human being."[37] As for Peroutka, he offended many of his compatriots with his "polemics against some popular ideas about the Czech national character" in *What We are Like* (*Jací jsme*, 1923), which concluded that Slavic peoples had no monopoly on "humanity" (or humaneness; *humanita*) because "it is a thing as civil and international as the telegraph and telephone."[38] But it was not by choice that Peroutka became a citizen of the world. He was driven into exile by the communist coup of February 1948. The communists had no more time for rootless cosmopolitans than the Nazis. Peroutka's description of Karel Čapek's last days was written in America on Boxing Day 1953.

The Gestapo also arrested Čapek's brother Josef, the scenographer for R.U.R. and inventor of the word *robot*, on 1 September 1939. He had gotten under the Nazis' skin with three series of caricatures titled "Modern Times," "The Dictator's Boots," and "In the Shadow of Fascism."[39] Anticipating the much-quoted line in George Orwell's *1984* ("If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—for ever"), the grimly surreal "Boots" series related the adventures of a pair of bright shiny jackboots tramping the world underfoot. After his arrest Josef was transported first to Buchenwald, then to Sachsenhausen, then to Bergen-Belsen, where he died, probably of typhus, probably in April 1945. His body was never found.

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[37] Milena Jesenská, "Jsem především Češka?" in *Přítomnost*, Vol. 16, No. 19 (1939), pp. 283-4.

[38] Ferdinand Peroutka, *Jací jsme/Demokratický manifest*, Prague: Středočeské nakladatelství, 1991, p. 122-3.

[39] These are reproduced in Josef Čapek, *Dějiny zblízka: soubor satirických kreseb*, Prague: Borovy, 1949.

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নৃবিজ্ঞান পত্রিকা, সংখ্যা ২২, পৃ. ১৭-২৯

বালক বিয়ে: বাংলাদেশের গ্রামীন সমাজ বাস্তবতায় বাল্যবিয়ের উন্নয়নবাদী ডিসকোর্সের পুনর্পাঠ

মোসাব্বের হোসেন*
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Abstract: Literature on Bangladesh child marriage is mostly associated with dominant development discourse that identifies the practice as a social malice, and focuses primarily on its causes and consequences. Attention also is given to its medical, educational, legal and human right dimensions. Within the discourse certain assumptions are taken as givens. Little has been published that attempt to analyze the discourse critically. This article is an attempt to critically engage with dominant narratives as regards child marriage especially by taking the perspectives of the child grooms and their social agency into account. By highlighting how legacy of colonial constructions still continue to shape developmentalist understanding about marriage and other social institutions in Bangladesh, and by drawing on work of critical theorists, here we take an effort to deconstruct the popular ways in which child marriage is viewed. By ethnographically examining social relations and considerations that inform early marriage decisions of boy grooms in particular, wehighlight the limitations of 'right' based perspective that underpin most of the contemporary development thinking and practice. We contemplate here to show that a person may exercise his/ her agency in ways that are not uniform and contingent to social relations and cultural ethos.

ভূমিকা

এটি ২০১৬ সালের ঘটনা। এ প্রবন্ধের সহ-লেখকদের একজন (হোসেন) ঢাকা থেকে তাঁর গ্রামের বাড়ি ফিরছিলেন। বাস থেকে নামার পর সিএনজিতে করে বিশ মিনিটে বাড়ি পৌঁছানো যায়। যে সিএনজি-তে তিনি উঠেছেন তার চালক বারবার পেছন ফিরে তার দিকে তাকাচ্ছিলেন। ছিপছিপে গড়ন, মাদ্রাসায় পড়ুয়া ছেলেদের মতো পোশাক পরা, রোদে পোড়া চেহারার ছেলেটিকে হোসেন-এর চেনাই মনে হচ্ছিল। আনুমানিক বছর কুড়ি বয়স তার। বেশ কিছুক্ষন আলাপের পর তিনি চিনতে পারলেন রফিককে, ৮ বছর আগে তাঁর এক গবেষণায় ছেলেটি ছিল উত্তরদাতা। সিএনজি চলতে চলতে কথা এগুলো এবং আলাপের এক পর্যায়ে জানা গেল রফিক এখন দুই ছেলের বাবা। হোসেন-এর মনে পড়ে পূর্ববর্তী গবেষণায় উত্তরদাতা হিসেবে নিজের বিয়ের অভিজ্ঞতা নিয়ে সুন্দর গুছিয়ে কথা বলেছিল ছেলেটি। লজ্জাতে কাগজের ফুল দিয়ে ভ্যান সাজিয়ে নিয়ে সে বিয়ে করতে গিয়েছিল। মাইকে গান বেজেছে, বন্ধু-বান্ধব আত্মীয়-স্বজন অনেক মজা করেছে। মেয়ের বাড়িতে ভাত, মাসকলাইয়ের ডাল ও গরুর মাংস দিয়ে মেহমানদের আপ্যায়ন করা হয়েছে। অবশ্য তার নিজের জন্য - মানে বরের জন্য - আলাদা করে পোলাও ও মুরগীর মাংসের ব্যবস্থা ছিল। গ্রামে অন্যদের যেমন আয়োজন করে বিয়ে হয় তারক্ষেত্রেও সেটি হয়েছে। বাবা-মা সম্বন্ধ করে তাকে বিয়ে দিয়েছিল। বয়স কম বলে সমাজের কেউ কোনো আপত্তি তোলেনি। 'বিয়ের দিন তাকে অনেক সুন্দর লাগছিলো'- স্মৃতি হাতড়ে প্রথম দেখায় নিজের স্ত্রীকে কেমন লেগেছিল সে অনুভূতি

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