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V for Vendetta as vernacular critique: the exceptional state of liberal political
economy¹

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Abstract

This paper suggests that the liberal state in market society presents an inherent tension between liberalism and democracy. It shows how the tradition of liberal political economy provides for a constitutional form that supports specific and contestable values, relies on depoliticising the foundation of those values (especially in relation to private property and the bases of commercial society), and the exercise of authority—enshrined in the Rule of Law and backed by the force of law. The paper suggests that this has been poorly mediated in mainstream discourse, but that Moore and Lloyd’s *V for Vendetta* provides an astute vernacular critique of the liberal state by developing clearly recognisable allegories of Thatcherite political economy that illustrate the formal nature of justice and democracy under the liberal state form. The paper makes the specific claim that *V for Vendetta* can be read as a significant critique of the political economy of the liberal state, and the more general claim that cultural artefacts have the potential to develop important insights into the relationship between state, economy, and society in keeping with the traditions of the ‘new political economy’.

Key Words: the state; Adam Smith; Friedrich Hayek; Carl Schmitt; *V for Vendetta*; Depoliticisation; cultural political economy; vernacular theory; Thatcherism

Introduction

The notion that a liberal state facilitating market society through democratic processes presents an ideal constitutional form to be realised is widespread in popular consciousness. However, within the tradition of liberal political economy scholarship,

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the liberal and the democratic are frequently in tension. This tension is manifest in the fact that democracy takes a particular form that supports liberal values by depoliticising their foundations, and involves placing limits on democratic processes for certain people and in certain issue areas. This position and its implications are implicit in the liberal political economy of Adam Smith and the neo-liberal political economy of Friedrich Hayek, and rendered explicit in the authoritarian liberalism of Carl Schmitt. Where liberal values or the democratic form that support them are challenged, these values and democratic forms are depoliticised or defended through application of the Rule of Law backed by the force of law, and in exceptional circumstances, through a suspension of the Rule of Law in a state of exception. This paper shows how these tensions—often poorly mediated in other discussions of liberal political economy—have been well articulated in the context of Thatcherism through a popular cultural artefact, Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s (1988) graphic novel, *V for Vendetta*.² The paper argues that this artefact warrants consideration as a vernacular contribution to critical theory of the relationship between state, economy, and civil society, in keeping with the traditions of ‘the new political economy’.

The relationship between fiction and social theory is multifaceted. For instance, it has been argued that literary artefacts can form a significant part of critical pedagogy as an aid to the introduction of dense material to students (Weber 2010: 351), while simultaneously illustrating that theorising ‘is not something saved for elite social thinkers’ (ibid: 352). It is also argued that cultural artefacts can make up for the shortcomings of the principal ways in which political events are mediated, and through

² The paper does not consider the cinematic adaptation of the graphic novel. As Xenakis (2006) notes, Moore removed his affiliation because of disagreement about the way in which the themes of the graphic novel had been translated into the Bush era. In order to maintain sufficient depth of analysis within the bounds of an article-length contribution, this paper focuses on the narrative of the novel, however I acknowledge that an incorporation of the graphic elements of the novel may permit other readings, as well as contribute to a deepening and extension of the line of argument pursued here.

their narratives create ‘a body of “vernacular theory”’ as ‘those working in non-academic fields, such as authors or film-makers, are capable theorists of society who offer theoretical reflection in ordinary language’ (Randall 2011: 263-4). In other words, fiction is not just a medium in which social life is reflected; it is deeply involved in the interrogation of society by theorising in its own right (Beer 2016: 410), while ‘escaping the conventions of academic disciplines or established modes of thought’ (ibid. 411). Fiction is a vehicle through which we can see ‘detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we are like’ (Rorty 1989: xvi), and as a result it has significant power to act as an effective critique of extant theory as well as to theorise in its own right.

This paper considers how the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (Moore and Lloyd 1988) can be read as a significant vernacular critique of the liberal state in market society. It will show how the narrative arc of *V for Vendetta* can be read as an allegory of the neo-liberal political economy of Thatcherism in the United Kingdom, and argues that by virtue of the novel’s development of a particular representation Thatcherism, warrants consideration as a work of vernacular theory. The paper will suggest that the substantive content of this theoretical intervention highlights the fact that the liberal state defends a specific form of freedom. In particular, it is argued that *V for Vendetta* illustrates the extent to which the liberal constitutional settlement can be understood to be merely formal, with the institutions of justice and democracy protecting specific interests that relate to particular values, rather than general interests more broadly conceived, through particular forms of exclusion, depoliticisation, and acceptance of the state’s legitimate right to declare ‘states of exception’. In the process, it demonstrates the clear proximity of classical liberal and neo-liberal political economy and authoritarian liberal state theory, and how, as Walter Benjamin (cited in Bonefeld 2006: 248) put it, ‘the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but rule’ (see also Edkins and Kear 2013: 6).

The first section of the paper briefly outlines scholarly work addressing the relationship between fiction and social theory. This section frames the paper, argues that cultural

artefacts are able to both interrogate and move beyond academic theorisation, and outlines the method of the paper. The second section discusses the work of Adam Smith, Friedrich Hayek and Carl Schmitt. It illustrates the proximity between classical liberal and neo-liberal political economy, and Schmitt's authoritarian liberal state theory, and the extent to which this proximity is often poorly mediated in mainstream political and academic discourse. The third section argues, first, that by providing an allegorical representation of Thatcherism, *V for Vendetta* warrants consideration as a work of vernacular theory, and second, that the substantive content of this theoretical contribution illustrates the proximity between classical liberal and neo-liberal political economy and Schmitt's authoritarian liberal state theory, which represents a vibrant vernacular critique of the liberal state. The conclusion suggests that by asking difficult questions of the liberal-democratic constitutional form, like those posed in *V for Vendetta*, we might motivate more critical reflection on the form of the liberal-democratic state in the tradition of the normative discourse of the new political economy (Gamble 1995).

Cultural artefacts and vernacular theory

The relationship between cultural artefacts and social theory is multifaceted. This section reflects on the extent to which, on the one hand, *all* social theory might be considered works of fiction, and on the other, how cultural artefacts can be understood as works of vernacular theory. It argues that vernacular theorisation has significant semiotic power manifest in its ability to relate complex issues to the everyday, and to scrutinise and interrogate significant social processes in a critical fashion.

In so far as theoretical reflection is an exercise in abstraction that attempts to make sense of social reality broadly conceived, all social theory might be understood to involve the creation of works of fiction (see Savage et al. 2017). This is true in the sense that the aim of such projects is to move beyond the mere description of the social activity that gives rise to various institutional and organisational forms like state, economy, and society, and develop a more general understanding of their operation. Within the

discipline of political economy, for instance, Gamble's (1995: 518) description of the 'scientific discourse about the way in which a political economy conceived as a social system actually operates', can be understood to involve an act of imagination aimed at deriving schematic knowledge of institutions which in reality exist only in and through their socially constituted forms. Indeed, Cowan (1981: 114) notes that Walter Benjamin has contended that 'the form of philosophical writing is an allegory of truth', on the grounds that the method of philosophical writing 'is not proof, but representation' (ibid: 114). Following such an understanding of the character of academic social theory, it would be remiss to suggest that cultural artefacts—'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity' (Williams cited in Davies 2010a: 53)—through the representations they provide, should not be considered as works of social theory in their own right.

Best and Paterson (2010: 6) note that cultural artefacts have significance because they can display the authors' understandings about the significance of culture, and the presentation of those artefacts is imbued with political significance because they 'articulate [...] specific expressions of the semiotic character of social life—the various meanings that we ascribe to the world around us' (ibid: 7). Several contributions have emphasised the way in which such artefacts have contributed to the constitution of social norms, and in particular the way that 'the politics of culture' has been deployed strategically 'to obscure the political and economic stakes of contemporary practices' (ibid: 14). This emphasis is particularly resonant, for instance, in Davies' (2010a: 49) discussion of the way in which culture played a significant role 'in establishing and maintaining American dominance or hegemony in the post-Second World War era', and Aitken's (2010) examination of the use of poster art and film as vehicles through which people were able to situate themselves in the world.

The role of cultural artefacts, however, is not merely constitutive; they can also be critical and theoretical in their own right (Randall 2011: 264; see also Brassett and Sutton 2017). Sturken (1997), for instance, has argued that the films of Oliver Stone have played a role in the cultural construction of a critical history of the United States, while

Davies (2010b) has suggested that the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* addresses the absence of theoretical conceptions of work within the discipline of International Relations, and Grayson (2013: 379) has argued that the children's book *A Bear Called Paddington* 'is both complicit in and critical of dynamics underpinning contemporary bordering practices in the UK'. In Grayson's view, such artefacts have semiotic and performative power in the sense that they can make certain kinds of social relations 'appear timeless and normal or, conversely contingent and strange' (ibid: 380).

Such analyses do more than illustrate the way in which cultural artefacts might be understood as convenient metaphors for social, economic, and political life. These analyses show how the artefacts themselves can reach beyond their aesthetic appeal and advance critical thought. As Parker (2010: 493) has suggested, such artefacts contribute to 'opening up new "ways of seeing" [...] thereby creating different configurations of the social-spatial imagination.' They are therefore significant not only in their ability to communicate complex ideas through media with broad appeal, but to advance critical and progressive thought by developing critiques of contemporary social relations that are often not forthcoming from traditional modes of mediation (Randall 2011: 264). This also makes them vehicles which can build normative cases for progressive change; as Rorty (1989: xvi) put it: 'the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress.'

Such assessments necessarily pose the question of how we might read cultural artefacts as theory. In this paper I draw on two concepts to do so. The first is Walter Benjamin's concept of allegory, understood not as the mere presentation of a story with a sub-textual meaning, but as 'a form of expression' (Benjamin 2009 [1963]: 162) in which questions about the nature of human existence are raised as 'the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape' (ibid: 166). Benjamin (ibid: 182) suggests that it is 'the movement from history to nature which is the basis of allegory', and I will suggest that the context of *V for Vendetta*'s narrative—which the authors render recognisable as a representation of Thatcherite Britain as it

may have been experienced by some groups, without *describing* Thatcherite Britain in an empirically verifiable sense—can be read as an expression of the *facies hippocratica* of neo-liberalism, in which its nature is considered. The second methodological device used in this paper is Mike Shapiro’s (2013a; 2013b) conception of the ‘aesthetic subject’. Like Benjamin, Shapiro (2013a: 64-66) approaches the concept of ‘truth’ as a function of signifying practices derived from particular perspectives. ‘Aesthetic subjects’, he suggests, can provide these perspectives (Shapiro 2013a; 2013b) in narratives where the subjects’ ‘movements and dispositions are less significant in terms of what is revealed about their inner lives than what they tell us about the world to which they belong’ (Shapiro 2013b: 11). In the process they are able to mobilise ways of seeing and ways of thinking about the context in which they find themselves (*ibid*: 11). In this paper, I suggest that by reading *V for Vendetta* as an allegory of Thatcherism as navigated by its aesthetic subjects, Moore and Lloyd open up a different way of seeing the liberal state in market society and that as such it warrants consideration as a work of vernacular theory. It also suggests that the substantive content of this theoretical contribution illustrates the proximity that classical and neo-liberal traditions of political economy have to authoritarian liberal traditions of political theory. It is to illustrating this proximity, and the extent to which it is poorly mediated in more traditional forms of theorising and political debate, that the next section turns.

Democracy, authority, violence, and the political economy of the liberal state

Politicians and commentators frequently hold the liberal-democratic form of state as a normative ideal to be realised, a view derived from liberal theories that frame it as a guarantor of freedom for citizens. Far less frequently discussed in the mainstream canon is the extent to which the freedom that it defends also takes a particular form, which is arguably exploitative and reflects specific, rather than general interests. Also far less frequently discussed is the extent to which this particular form of freedom is defended through democratic processes and the Rule of Law in ways that ultimately depend on two counterintuitive things; first, a clearly qualified scope for democracy that accepts the necessity of excluding some groups or issues from debate if their inclusion

might threaten liberal values; and, second, authority and violence in order to enforce or defend the Rule of Law. This section of the paper illustrates the proximity between classical liberal and neo-liberal political economy, and authoritarian liberal conceptions of the state, through a discussion of the works of Adam Smith, Friedrich Hayek, and Carl Schmitt. Its aim is not to suggest that the liberal tradition is *un*-democratic or *intrinsically* authoritarian, but rather to show how democracy takes a particular form, which defends a specific conception of freedom that is idealised by liberals and based on the principles of market society. In the process, it shows how the tradition accepts the need for a strong state in order to defend that conception of freedom—with authority and violence where necessary.

Adam Smith is widely accepted to be one of the founding fathers of modern political economy, and in the popular consciousness is associated with concepts such as *laissez faire*, the free market, and the invisible hand. The use of references to some of his work, like his claim that when pursuing one's own gain, individuals are 'led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention' (Smith 2000 [1776]: 593), have been used in order to foster the view that it is individual rationality that leads markets towards equilibrium. The notion that the 'invisible hand', in concert with 'moral sentiments' (see Watson 2005: 114; Glaze 2008: 378-9), can lead markets towards equilibrium has made it possible to justify a particular constitutional settlement that emphasises the protection of individuals and their property, and presupposes the authority of the state.

This can be seen in the fact that Smith (2000 [1776]: 947) accepted that 'Civil government supposes a certain subordination' because civil government 'gradually grows up with the acquisition of valuable property', and 'It is only under the shelter of the civil magistrate that the owner of valuable property [...] can sleep a single night in security'. Smith (*ibid*: 946-7) argued that provision of such security to the propertied was necessary because 'avarice and ambition in the rich, in the poor the hatred of labour and the love of present ease and enjoyment' may provide motivations to engage in theft or fraud. On the basis of his view that the division of labour in a commercial society

founded on private property drives the wealth of the nation, such subordination appears justifiable on the grounds of necessity. Moreover, a case outlining the intrinsic fairness of such a position can be derived from Smith's suggestion that social relations in commercial society are fundamentally equal, with the constitutional settlement and legal framework designed to support that equality. This can be seen in Smith's belief that the difference between individuals is not 'so much the cause as the effect of the division of labour' (ibid: 32), and his conceptualisation of value, in which each receives their fair share of the contribution that they make to production. As Clarke (1991: 25) puts it, Smith believed 'that profit and rent did not represent deductions from the product of labour, but corresponded in some way to the original contributions made to the product by capital and land'. While 'Civil Government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is, in reality, instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all' (Smith 2000 [1776]: 953), it can be reasonably argued that a liberal state does not discriminate between individuals in the sense that rich and poor alike have the right and opportunity to acquire wealth, and equal recourse to the system of justice.

However, this equality rests on a problematic foundation since the deeply unequal historical development of property rights goes largely unquestioned. This represents an *a priori* acceptance of a fundamentally contested and contestable set of values as the basis of the liberal state's constitutional settlement. The implication is that this constitutional settlement relies on the authority of the law to enforce a set of values that are arguably of *specific* benefit to some social groups, rather than of general benefit to all social groups as first appears. Stemming from the liberal position's claims to defend a set of values in the general interest, historically it was possible to construct arguments against broad democratic participation on the grounds that the property-less would act in ways contrary to their own interest. As Clarke (1988: 62-3) has phrased it:

'Since the theory of political economy established that the working class had no distinct interest, it had no particular need for independent political representation. By the same token women had no need of independent representation since their interests were adequately represented by their fathers and husbands'.

In other words, as subjectively experienced by individuals without property, the constitutional settlement justified by liberal political economy is one that can be understood to have institutionalised inequality on the basis of gender, race, and class.

In the classical liberal political economy of Adam Smith, therefore, it is clear that the state is a prerequisite for market society, using its authority to maintain the institutions of justice to defend private property from acts of fraud and theft, and to support sociable moral sentiments. However, the issue of private property is fundamentally depoliticised because there is little questioning of its desirability in terms of either its foundations or the consequences of the way in which it is acquired and distributed. As a result, and following directly from beliefs about the desirability of property relations, we can observe acceptance of a qualified form of democracy which places the issue of property and the inequality it creates beyond the realm of political discussion. This has been legitimised by giving the property-less the same formal rights as the propertied while effectively excluding them because they lack the essential quality that the institutions of government and law in market society are designed to protect—that of being a property owner.

Such a qualified form of democracy, supported ultimately by authority, is even more prevalent in the neo-liberal tradition, which rose to prominence, particularly in the United Kingdom, following claims that democratic demands have a tendency to overload the capacities of the state (e.g. Brittan 1975; King 1975). The implication of these analyses was that it was necessary for the state to start ‘curtailing the democratic excess’ (Bonefeld, 2016: 2). The roots of these claims can be seen in the thought of Friedrich Hayek. It was Hayek’s contention that ‘market equilibrium’ required decentralised knowledge in order for market actors to effectively adjust their plans, (Hayek 1945: 521-4), and that relevant knowledge would be filtered through the price system in the process of competition (Hayek 2002: 10-11). In order for these processes to operate most efficiently, it would be necessary for economic actors to be able to go about their business in the knowledge that they would not be subjected to arbitrary action. This gives significance to the institution of the Rule of Law, since ‘under the

Rule of Law the government is prevented from stultifying individual efforts by *ad hoc* action' (Hayek 2001 [1944]: 76). 'The significance of the Rule of Law would also impose strict limits on the kinds of action government could take, and for Hayek (ibid: 79) this meant it should 'confine itself to establishing rules applying to general types of situations, and should allow the individuals freedom in everything which depends on circumstances of time and place.'

It is clear that Hayek believed that the Rule of Law would protect freedom, and it was his view that attempts by the state to plan represented significant impingements on freedom that displayed a tendency towards authoritarianism because planning involves ever greater interventions by the state in people's day-to-day lives: 'economic planning would involve direction of almost the whole of life' (ibid: 95). The implications for the state are that the sphere of its intervention should be strictly limited; since there is no widespread social agreement on the desirable ends of economic policy, 'Parliaments come to be regarded as ineffective "talking shops", unable or incompetent to carry out the tasks for which they have been chosen', and that if any planning is to take place 'the direction must be "taken out of politics" and placed in the hands of experts, permanent officials, or independent autonomous bodies' (ibid: 65). This advocacy of depoliticisation comes with important implications about the scope of democracy, as Hayek (ibid: 73) declares that 'It is the price of democracy that the possibilities of conscious control are restricted to the fields where true agreement exists'. Where there may be disagreement, he suggests democratic politics should have no reach.

It is with Hayek's emphasis on the need to depoliticise certain aspects of policy-making that neo-liberal qualifications on the legitimate scope of democracy become clear, because the form of democracy it imagines is designed to defend the market system based on competitive exchange regulated by the price system. Somewhat counter-intuitively, it is as the electoral franchise has grown that the state's defence of the market system has placed an ever more significant emphasis on the role of authority and violence, since the acceptance of voting rights also requires an implicit acceptance of the principles that the state and its institutions defend and legitimises the use of 'all the

means at the disposal of the state' to quell any opposition it may face (Clarke 1988: 141). Liberal-democracy and its neo-liberal form can therefore be interpreted as an ideological position that calls for the range of issues subject to democratic decision-making to be specifically limited, while in the context of the expanded franchise, the state's legitimate right to draw on its authority through the Rule of Law (enforced if necessary by the force of law) is extended rather than diminished.

The depoliticisation, authority, and violence that are implicit in liberal and neo-liberal political economy, are rendered explicit in the authoritarian liberal tradition. The notion of 'authoritarian liberalism' emerged in the context of discussion of the German Von Papen government of 1932 (Bonefeld 2016: 2) and the tradition is closely associated with the work of Carl Schmitt (ibid: 2)—the so-called 'crown jurist of the Third Reich' (Stirk 2005), who 'published several works, some of them anti-Semitic, in which he explicitly defended the politics of the regime' (Strong 2007: ix-x). In this tradition, Schmitt makes clear calls for the state to depoliticise many aspects of life in order to maintain its strength, and is explicit about the need for the state to exercise its authority through violence against those who challenge the values that the state defends. There is a clear proximity to the formal character of democracy advocated in the classical liberal and neo-liberal traditions, and the extent to which the maintenance of the Rule of Law is ultimately reliant on the force of law.

Schmitt's (1998 [1932]: 215) belief was that strong states inevitably faced challenges from 'heterogeneous friends' who 'join together to see that it does not become too strong', but argued that 'Every state is anxious to argue the power needed to exercise its political domination' and that 'The surest sign of a real state is that it proceeds in that manner' (ibid: 216). His belief in the need for the state to engage in the political process of depoliticisation was founded on his view that the expansion of state competencies in a quantitative sense was indicative of the state's weakness, not of its strength (ibid: 218-9). The state must be strong if it is to be considered a political entity, since Schmitt (2007: 26) argues that 'the specifically political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy'. The state is considered to be a

‘political entity’ only in-so-far-as it is able to make the distinction between friend and enemy, and ‘If it exists, it is the supreme, that is in the decisive sense, the authoritative entity’ (ibid: 44).

In the authoritarian liberal tradition epitomised by Schmitt, then, the principles of democracy are acceptable to the extent that they can ‘generate a state capable of acting, ruthlessly if necessary, in cases of emergency, a state that enjoys the unified agreement and consent of the entire people’ (Schmitt 1998 [1932]: 223). Or as Bonefeld (2006: 241) has phrased it, democracy is possible in so far as it is a ‘democracy of “friends”’. This raises clear questions about the character of democracy, since it implies that any dissenting voices can justifiably be identified as enemies of the state, with the attendant implications for legitimising the state’s use of violence against them. As Schmitt (1998 [1932]: 217) notes,

‘A state does not allow forces inimical to it, or those that limit or divide it, to develop within its interior. It does not contemplate surrendering new powers of coercion to its own enemies and destroyers, thus burying its power under such formulae as liberalism, rule of law, etc.’

Schmitt’s analysis therefore clearly illustrates a core contradiction in the liberal ideal: that full democratic debate and the Rule of Law are insufficient to guarantee liberal conceptions of freedom when that conception of freedom is challenged. The Rule of Law must be supported by the force of the law because ‘*laissez-faire* is “no answer to riots”’ (Bonefeld 2006: 242).

For the state to exist as a political entity therefore, it is not only necessary to engage in the politics of depoliticisation in order to establish the state’s strength; for it to exist as a political entity it must be able to distinguish between friends and enemies, and act against its enemies with ‘all *constitutional* means, but also of *all* constitutional means, which stand at its disposal and that prove to be necessary in chaotic circumstances’ (Schmitt 1998 [1932]: 231). The state should therefore have the legitimate right to suspend the Rule of Law in order to defend it from its enemies, and to eradicate the kinds of difference that make democracy ineffective, weaken the state, and undermine its

existence as a political entity (Wolin 1990: 403); Schmitt 'leaves it to the goose-stepping heirs of his political ideas to specify what form such "eradication of heterogeneity" will take' (ibid: 403). Whereas Smith's liberal political economy accepts the exclusion of certain groups on the grounds that he could not identify their specific interest, and the neo-liberal political economy of Hayek emphasises the significance of technical expertise in the absence of a clearly identifiable general will, Schmitt explicitly admits the possibility that it is the divergence of interests that justifies the exclusion of particular groups which may be labelled enemies.

The extent to which, by virtue of their acceptance of the need for particular forms of authority and exclusion, liberal and neo-liberal traditions of political economy have a proximity to authoritarian liberal traditions in state theory, has been poorly mediated in mainstream discourse. As Shapiro (2013b: 5-6) has noted, post-war political science as an academic discipline has been predicated 'on the assumption that the Hitler phenomenon (understood as racist and/or ethnocidal violence) was a historical aberration', which is typified by trends in political psychology and comparative politics geared towards attempts to discover the cognitive characteristics of a fascist personality on the one hand, and fascist-proof institutional designs on the other. Moreover, the possibility expressed by Benjamin, that the state of emergency is not the exception, but the rule (*cf.* 1 above) in liberal market societies, is one that is obviously problematic for politicians who have drawn explicitly on liberal traditions of political economy; as a matter of political statecraft, the acknowledgement of any proximity between a form of relationship between state, economy and society that privileges competition and the price system supported by the Rule of Law, and fascism, would prove politically disastrous for a party seeking to justify a broadly free-market economic program in the liberal tradition. As a consequence, however, critical thinking about the proximity of classical and neo-liberal traditions in political economy to authoritarian liberal political theory has arguably been somewhat limited.

Given the abhorrent form taken by historical experience of authoritarian liberalism, discussing its proximity to classical and neo-liberal traditions may be controversial.

However, the suggestion that critical thinking about the proximity between classical and neo-liberal traditions in political economy and authoritarian liberal traditions in political theory is necessary is not to render them equivalent or attempt to render them equivalent. Indeed, suggestions that ‘micro-fascisms’ have become pervasive in contemporary society may understandably seem ‘disturbing to those who are invested in their experience of the fascism associated with “the politics and economy of war”’ (Shapiro 2013b: 87). Nonetheless, thinking about fascism as an aberration may be problematic because it may also discourage critical thinking about the way in which it is the state’s sovereignty enshrined in the (liberal) Rule of Law that ‘designates which others are worthy of respect and which other others might be excluded from its remit’ (Edkins and Kear 2013: 7). As such, in the next section I will argue that the way in which *V for Vendetta* constructs an allegorical representation of Thatcherism warrants its consideration as a work of vernacular theory, the substantive content of which encourages critical reflection on the implications of neo-liberal political economy in terms of the way that its institutional forms may be subjectively experienced as violent or exclusionary by those who do not share or conform to the values it defends.

The critique of the liberal state in *V for Vendetta*

This section discusses the way in which *V for Vendetta* builds an allegorical representation of Thatcherism, and as a result warrants consideration as a work of vernacular theory. The section also illustrates the way in which the substantive content of this theoretical contribution provides a sophisticated vernacular critique of the liberal state, illustrating the proximity between contemporary liberal states—like the Thatcherite state in the United Kingdom—and the ideals of the authoritarian liberal tradition, in particular its acceptance of a qualified form of democracy and its ultimate reliance on violence. The section is developed in two parts. First, it considers *V for Vendetta* as a work of vernacular theory by considering the allegories of Thatcherism that the novel develops. Second, it discusses the substantive content of *V for Vendetta*’s theoretical contribution, which suggests that the edifices of democracy and justice do not defend

freedom unconditionally, but rather defend a specific form of freedom that reflects the values on which commercial market society is founded.

Friends and enemies: V for Vendetta and allegories of Thatcherite political economy

V for Vendetta was written between 1981 and 1988 (Moore and Lloyd 1988: 6) and is set in an imaginary near future. In this near future, a fascist government has risen to power in the United Kingdom in the context of chaos and confusion after the country had suffered a limited nuclear strike. The key protagonists are a vigilante—V—who was formerly interned at a state concentration camp and who covers his face with a Guy Fawkes mask, and his protégé, Evey Hammond, whom V saves from a life of prostitution and state-sanctioned brutality as the police enforce laws against it. Call (2008: 161) has noted that the book ‘offers a clever, insightful look at the rise of fascism’ as the ‘fascist “Norsefire” party takes advantage of the power vacuum which occurs as the liberal British state collapses in the aftermath of the nuclear war.’ This section goes one step further and suggests that the book does not simply discuss a hypothetical collapse of a liberal state and the rise of fascism. It argues that it uses allegories of Thatcherism to relate its fictional milieu to the prevailing social and political context, and in providing an allegorical representation of Thatcherism warrants consideration as a work of vernacular theory, the substance of which illustrates the proximity of classical and neo-liberal political economy to authoritarian liberal traditions in political theory.

The state’s reliance on the need to make a distinction between ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ to ensure order runs through *V for Vendetta*, both as a background trope in the recurrent presentation of propaganda posters declaring ‘Strength Through Purity, Purity Through Faith’ (Moore & Lloyd 1988: *passim*), and as an explicit part of the contextual description of *Norsefire’s* rise to power. As Evey describes the action of *Norsefire* paramilitaries:

‘They soon got things under control. But then they started taking people away ... all the *black people* and the *Pakistanis* [...] white people, too, all the *radicals* and the [...] homosexuals [...] Dad had been in a socialist group when he was younger, they came for him one September morning in 1993’. (Ibid: 28 original emphases)

Such a description bears a clear and obvious relationship to events under the Nazi regime in the 1930s and 1940s, but it also possible to identify resonance with the politics of Thatcherism. As Unsworth (1982: 64) has noted, the Conservative Party at this time had ‘a politics of hostility to an entire range of supposedly parasitic anti-social elements whose immunities count as an affront to their ideal of a meritocratic order based on the criterion of productive effort.’ This included ‘politically militant trade unionists, so called “coloured immigrants”, violent criminals and social security “scroungers”’ (ibid: 64), who were identified as resistant to the Conservative government’s program to restructure the relationship between state, economy, and society around market competition.

The state’s use of violence against such groups was manifest in the Southall riots of 1979, during which ‘the aggressive policing of protestors’ during a National Front meeting at the Town Hall ‘led to the death of Blair Peach, killed by a police officer’ (Jefferson 2012: 8). The rioting among Sikh populations that resulted was then followed in 1980 by a day of rioting in the St. Paul’s neighbourhood of Bristol, and in the summer of 1981 by rioting in Brixton in South-West London, as well as Toxteth in Liverpool (ibid: 8). These events all occurred in areas with large black and minority ethnic populations, and can be related to the increasingly arbitrary nature of policing against minority groups in the context of social hardship exacerbated by economic and social policy. As Jefferson (ibid: 8) notes, throughout the 1970s, ‘poor, young black youths in deprived inner city locations began to be seen as troublesome and potentially criminal’, which was met with ‘aggressive policing using ancient stop and search powers’ and ‘sus’ laws, which provided the ability to secure a criminal conviction on the basis of suspicion that an individual was about to commit a criminal act (ibid: 9). In other words, the Rule of Law in the United Kingdom had an in-built provision in which an individual deemed to be a threat to the prevailing order by an agent of the state—the police—could be punished. Self-referentially, to be perceived as being a threat to the law *was* to break the law.

The kind of authoritarian and discriminatory policing practices that contributed to rioting in Britain in the early 1980s should not simply be dismissed as exceptions, or considered functions of Conservative social policy, distinct from its political economy. This is because the political economy of Thatcherism was one that emphasised the importance of individual responsibility and acceptance of the market doctrine, and where non-conformity with those values was explicitly referred to in terms of enmity, in the process justifying disciplinary action. As Margaret Thatcher stated prior to her election:

‘All right, there may be poverty because people don’t know how to budget, how to spend their earnings, but you are left with the really hard fundamental character—personality defect [...] Why do people turn to drugs? Why do some terrorists come from really good backgrounds in the sense that they were taught the right things [...] there’s good and evil in everyone’. (Thatcher 1978: n.p.)

This statement makes it clear that Thatcherite political economy invoked the notion that individuals who do not conform should be considered socially deficient, and through its emphasis on poverty, simultaneously others those facing social hardship, which frequently included members of working class and migrant communities that were later subject to the kinds of policing described above. More significantly, in constructing an image of certain political subjects as somehow ‘defective’, there is an allusion to the idea that these individuals or groups could justifiably be subject to discipline or punishment. This impression was made even more explicit in Thatcher’s (1984: n.p) speaking notes for a speech to the 1922 Committee:

‘Since Office
Enemy without—beaten him
& strong in defence
Enemy within
Miners’ leaders
Liverpool & some local authorities
—just as dangerous in a way more difficult to fight
But just as dangerous to liberty.’

In this passage, the explicit reference to certain social groups—especially those resistant to the process of marketisation—in terms of enmity could not be clearer, and the implication that they should be eradicated as holders of values anathema to the conception of freedom held by the Conservative Party, follows naturally.

The way in which Moore and Lloyd (1988) contextualise the narrative in *V for Vendetta*, and in particular their description of paramilitary action against minority social groups, presents more than a fictionalised account of the fascist regimes of the 1930s. It is telling that in setting the scene for *V for Vendetta*, Moore and Lloyd (1988: 9 original emphasis) have the state broadcaster—‘the voice of fate’—announce that ‘The people of London are advised that the Brixton and Streatham areas are *quarantine zones* as of today’ and should ‘be avoided for reasons of health and safety’. This text immediately renders the context of *V for Vendetta* recognisable as Thatcherite Britain—without describing Thatcherite Britain in any other empirically verifiable sense—with its reference to the experience of rioting in that period. It is by virtue of its construction of an allegorical representation of Thatcherite Britain that *V for Vendetta* can be understood to deploy a philosophical method (Cowan 1981: 114, cf. 5 above), and warrants consideration as a work of vernacular theory, the substance of which considers questions about the nature of the neo-liberal form of political settlement as subjectively experienced by its excluded aesthetic subjects, V and Evey. In particular, it provides a perspective that shows how attempts to construct the relationship between individuals and the state demanded by the values of commercial market society can be subjectively experienced as exclusion and disciplinary by those who do not conform to those values.

The formality of freedom: The edifices of democracy and justice

Alan Moore (in Moore and Lloyd 1988: 6) has since reflected that the context in which *V for Vendetta* was set shows ‘a certain amount of political inexperience’ because of its assumption that ‘a nuclear war, even a limited one, might be survivable’. It is also possible to detect naiveté, he stated, in his ‘supposition that it would take something as melodramatic as a near miss nuclear conflict to nudge England towards fascism’ (ibid: 6).

This statement suggests a clear cognisance of the connection between the world that he fictionalised and the world in which he lived:

‘The new riot police wear black visors, as do their horses, and their vans have rotating video cameras on top. The government has expressed a desire to eradicate homosexuality, even as an abstract concept, and one can only speculate as to which minority will be the next legislated against’. (Ibid: 6)

The resonance between the context of Thatcherism and *V for Vendetta* has therefore been clearly acknowledged by the author. However, *V for Vendetta* is not just a morality tale relating to a specific period; crucially for its significance as vernacular theory developed through allegory, having located its fictional milieu in relation to the neo-liberal state, it then moves beyond this milieu to scrutinise the nature of the edifices of democracy and justice within the liberal state, as subjectively experienced by its aesthetic subjects. In this sense, *V for Vendetta* moves beyond analyses that have conceived of authoritarian regimes as historical aberrations. Instead, *V for Vendetta* provides a representation of the way in which the edifices of democracy and justice can be understood to defend freedom as specifically conceived by liberal market society, and to be experienced as authoritarian or exclusionary by subjects who do not share these values or fit comfortably with this ideal. This critical scrutiny of the formal character of democracy and justice is clearly evident in two of the most significant events in the book—V’s demolition of the Houses of Parliament (Moore & Lloyd 1988: 14) and The Old Bailey (ibid: 41).

The first of these significant demolitions occurs in a way that is straightforwardly reminiscent of Guy Fawkes’ gunpowder plot of 1605; V not only recites the now traditional rhyme ‘Remember remember the 5th of November...’ as the explosion takes place, but has the explosion create fireworks as well as demolish the buildings themselves (ibid: 14-5). In the demolition of the institutions best representing British democracy, Moore and Lloyd allude to beauty and possibility. For instance, Evey declares ‘Fireworks! Real Fireworks! Oh God, they’re so *beautiful*’, while the narration tells the reader ‘...and all over London windows are thrown open and faces lit with awe and wonder gaze at the omen scrawled in fire on the night’ (ibid: 15). V himself

entrenches the notion that the destruction of the Houses of Parliament represent a beginning rather than an end in his own declaration at the conclusion of the fireworks: ‘we must prepare *for the first act*’ (ibid: 14, my emphasis). The notion that the destruction of the seat of British democracy might represent a beginning rather than an end is indicative of a view highlighting democracy’s qualified character in the subjective experience of V and Evey, conceived as aesthetic subjects.

The critique of democracy as a purely formal set of institutions is developed and entrenched further in the *Norsefire* leader, Adam Susan’s, declaration that incompetence of the state’s surveillance apparatus ‘has cost us our oldest symbol of authority and a jarring propaganda defeat’ (ibid: 16)—a statement that emphasises the symbolic rather than substantive importance of the institutions. V also engages in a substantive critique of the effectiveness of democratic forms of participation in the context of depoliticised modes of government. In the second act, V’s take-over of the state’s broadcasting arm leads to him giving an address to the English people, in which he chastises the population for their lack of civic engagement:

‘To be sure, the management is very bad. In fact, let us not mince words ... the management is terrible! We’ve had a string of embezzlers, frauds, liars and lunatics making a string of catastrophic decisions [...] but who elected them? It was you. You who appointed these people! You who gave them the power to make your decisions for you! [...] You have accepted without question their senseless orders.’ (Ibid: 116-7)

There is an allusion here to the notion that democratic processes should not begin and end at the ballot box, but involve much more thorough and ongoing processes of deliberation between governors and those whom they govern. By accepting without challenge the broad tenor of political rhetoric—in particular rhetoric that advocates logics of no alternative—V suggests that the quality of democracy is fundamentally undermined and that the potential for authoritarian and unaccountable action to be taken increased.

In contemporary liberal states, the institutionalisation of formal limits to the power of democratically elected politicians is extremely familiar. The transfer of competencies from government to independent and technocratic agencies has been justified both on the basis of the supposedly time inconsistent-inflationary preferences of political actors, and of Arrow's Impossibility Theorem, which asserts that the rational choices of individual agents cannot be aggregated in a way that produces a collectively rational outcome without infringing on democratic principles. This position 'is usually taken to imply that democracy, understood as the just aggregation of all (unconstrained) societal preferences, is impossible' (Hay 2007: 101). Through strategic actions by policy-makers to 'place at one remove the political character of decision-making' (Burnham 1999: 47), which have included the introduction of systems of fixed rules, delegation relationships, and attempts to shape preferences through the deployment of particular discourses about supposed structural constraints (see Flinders and Buller 2006), the liberal state has constructed and legitimised a bureaucracy in which 'The great bulk of state agencies are not subject to democratic election and control' (Gamble 1979: 7).

V's address to the English people through his seizure of the state broadcasting apparatus is therefore prescient in terms of its illustration of the formality of democratic processes: while we may still vote in order to return elected members to parliament, the range of issues on which those politicians are willing to engage in debate is often limited. The politics of depoliticisation, in this sense, presupposes ambivalence towards deepening democratic deliberation among politicians, while relying on an acceptance that certain issues should not be subject to political debate among citizens. V suggests that it is the failure to significantly question these arrangements that allows the authoritarian character of the state to expand under the auspices of democratic procedure and process. In this sense, the novel's characters subjectively experience the demolition of the Houses of Parliament as an assertion of real freedom, in contrast to the formal freedom of liberal-democracy, which is reliant on a qualified form of democracy expressed through exclusion and the politics of depoliticisation.

In a similar fashion, *V for Vendetta* develops a critique of the role of the Rule of Law, and its function in protecting the specific freedoms of liberal market society, rather than any conception of the general interest. The context of the high-surveillance state in which the book is set is also one in which police are entitled to dispense justice, as Evey is told when confronted by police officers for solicitation: ‘You know the laws on prostitution. That’s a class-H offence. That means we get to decide what happens to you’ (Moore and Lloyd 1988: 11); the context is one in which the economically deprived individual in desperate circumstances is to be punished rather than assisted. Similarly, as the order imposed by the *Norsefire* regime begins to crumble, it is decreed that ‘Looters are to be shot’ (ibid: 190) and the police force is extended through the recruitment of ‘some extra *muscle* [...] a few dozen hard cases, looking for night work, cash in hand’ (ibid: 198). The mechanics of enforcing law and order in the name of justice are shown to be fundamentally outside the Rule of Law, with Moore and Lloyd (ibid: 198) noting: ‘Authority, when first detecting chaos at its heels, will entertain the vilest schemes to save its orderly façade ... but always order without *justice*, without *love* or *liberty*’. The Rule of Law and the institutions of justice, it is argued, defend justice as conceived from a specific standpoint. Any action that questions the values on which the state is founded justify repression, either through the Rule of Law, or its ultimate tool of enforcement, violent repression in a state of emergency. These ideas come through quite clearly during the prelude to V’s destruction of The Old Bailey, as he explains the reasons for his anarchism: ‘Very well, so you stand revealed at last, you are no longer *my* justice, you are his justice now’ (ibid: 40). Just as the demolition of the Houses of Parliament juxtaposes physical destruction with the potential for an ideological new beginning, so does the destruction of The Old Bailey: as it burns, V declares, ‘The flames of freedom. How lovely’ (ibid: 41).

The narrative arcs of *V for Vendetta* that comment on the way in which the institutions of democracy and justice are edifices supporting particular and contested understandings of freedom therefore offer critical insight into the character of liberal states more generally. Moore and Lloyd, through their aesthetic subjects—V and Evey—express the view that the institutions of democracy and justice defend a particular form of freedom.

Moreover, through the allegorical construction of the context these subjects mediate, they show that the liberal form of freedom ultimately depends on democratic processes providing for the politics of depoliticisation and institutions enforcing the Rule of Law and supported by the force of law. *V for Vendetta* therefore aptly suggests that it may be because of the failure to acknowledge and question the nature of liberal forms of political economy that liberal authoritarianism has emerged historically, and that it is by addressing this failure that we might effectively think about preventing its re-emergence.

Conclusions

This paper departed from the point of view that, if the philosophical method is considered one of representation rather than proof (Cowan 1981: 114, cf. 5 above), cultural artefacts may make meaningful contributions to theory in vernacular form. It then showed how the classical liberal, neo-liberal, and authoritarian liberal traditions have a proximity to each other in terms of the extent to which they defend a specific form of freedom which reflects the values of the commercial market society, and rely ultimately on qualified forms of democracy and force or the threat of force for its defence. Finally, the paper argued that, through its construction of an allegorical representation of Thatcherism which is mediated by aesthetic subjects, *V for Vendetta* warrants consideration as a work of vernacular theory, the substantive content of which illustrates the proximity between liberal, neo-liberal, and authoritarian liberal traditions.

The contribution of *V for Vendetta* to developing a critique of the liberal state in market society is significant in a context where liberal-democracy has an established hagiography that often presents it unquestionably as an ideal form to be realised and defended. *V for Vendetta* offers an insightful analysis of the extent to which that ideal might be contested, and the way in which its defence is reliant on processes that may not always accord with our conception of liberty conceived more broadly in terms of a concept like ‘the general interest’. This is particularly significant in the post-Brexit, post-Trump political context, in which all sides laud ‘democracy’ as an institutional form to be robustly defended, while those with opposing views and/or calling for greater or further deliberation are

simultaneously castigated for undermining democracy or attempting to undermine it. It is significant that in both cases, political programs that ostensibly began as ways of dealing with the social and economic problems of deindustrialisation and the crisis of financialisation—unemployment, regional decline, debt, etc.—have taken on strong and explicit anti-immigrant sentiment which is justified by virtue of having been endorsed by democratic process. By treating democracy as a moment that produces an outcome that cannot subsequently be discussed or challenged without ‘undermining democracy’, democracy as a process of inclusive deliberation ceases to have effective meaning and increasingly justifies othering and exclusion. As such, it is through the process of asking provocative questions about the character of the liberal state and its democratic institutions, like those posed in *V for Vendetta*, that political action by people can prevent the proximity between the classical, neo-, and authoritarian liberal traditions in their theories of the state from collapsing, *de facto*, into each other in practice.

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