

## A worker's consciousness: The psychology of class in Peter Currell Brown's *Smallcreep's Day*

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Terry Eagleton in his book *Why Marx Was Right* begins by informing his readers that he is not trying to say Marx was perfect in all his ideas but that those ideas are plausible and worthy of contemporary examination and application (Eagleton 2011: ix-x). I think this is true for the dialectic contained within this paper. I make no assertions of hermetic perfection for my ideas, merely that my proposed dialectic is plausible and offers a perspective related to selected issues and imagery appearing in Peter Currell Brown's only novel, *Smallcreep's Day*. A narrative stream within Brown's novel interrogates, amongst other issues, the socio-cultural milieu of a major economic and metaphorical driver of Western capitalism throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the factory. With this essay I have chosen to focus upon how capitalism and work space affect worker consciousness within the novel. Brown's text offers a trenchant vehicle for exploring class via concepts such as abjection, class consciousness, cognitive dissonance, and false consciousness within an industrialised space governed by capitalist ideology. The factory is itself a more complicated machine created to produce other machines; with human beings as the most complicated machines in the productive chain. These concepts find their intersection in a sort of class symptomology; specifically, that of the working-class or in Marxist terms the 'proletariat'. This class toils physically and psychologically within the miasmatic space of the factory.

*Smallcreep's Day* tells the tale of Pinquean Smallcreep, an assembler of pulleys in the slotting section of a large factory. Smallcreep lives a seemingly dreary working class life of pale consumerism, factory toil, family, and insufficient wages. One day Smallcreep decides to leave his work station to find out exactly what the final product is at the end of the assembly line. This quest becomes a surreal narrative of almost Carrollian, Orwellian, or even Swiftian proportions, making use of Brown's experience as a factory worker in Gloucestershire. On his journey Smallcreep meets various denizens of the factory, from sewage

worker to managing director. Smallcreep in essence is the everyman condemned socio-economically to factory labour, while being ideologically convinced that the status quo is for the best. Ultimately, Smallcreep comes upon 'the great machine', the product for which the entire factory labours, and is overwhelmed by its alien(-ating) power. Humbled by his vision he returns to his work area, without affect or hope, to continue assembling pulleys. Throughout the novel Smallcreep functions as a point of intersection for issues related to class and the factory. The Smallcreep character fulfils an interrogatory role as well; an exploration of socio-cultural and socio-economic conceptions. As such, Brown's fictive account of alienated workers in the novel illumines some of the pervasive class issues occurring in 20<sup>th</sup>-century industrial capitalism.

The traditional Marxian classes of bourgeoisie, petty bourgeois, and proletariat are represented within the factory space of *Smallcreep's Day*. The proletariat in *Smallcreep's Day* is composed of labourers/piece-workers, line workers/assemblers, and production workers; all are without conventional wealth, except in the biological lottery that is their children. With the exception of management, the workers of the factory are equal in their inequality. The petty bourgeois is represented by the engineers (white lab coats), foremen, sales manager, and managing director. No members of the bourgeoisie appear in the novel directly, but politicians and royalty as mediated constructs are mentioned in passing by various characters. Confrontation between these classes seldom occurs in the novel; intra-class confrontation is much more frequent, especially amongst the workers. Workers often compete or fight with each other over status (Brown 1965: 40, 41, 62-73, 94-95, et al.) or as catharsis (Brown 1965: 41, 62-73, et al.). The petty bourgeois frequently serves as vector for worker control techniques, at the behest of the distant bourgeoisie. Control is exerted in part through consumerism and institutional law, while the psycho-social effects of capitalism itself ensure an atomised and anxious populace. Time is used as a way of controlling the workers both directly (e.g., piece work, artificially dividing the work day, wages, etc.) and indirectly (e.g., dissociative behaviour, obsessive-compulsive disorder, paranoid personification of time as an entity, etc.). Survival is linked directly to accurate timekeeping; if work hours are not 'registered', wages are not paid (Brown 1965: 13). A traditionally Marxist goal of the proletariat, dis-

placement of the capitalist system, has been replaced in the novel with a narcissistic and pervasive consumerism. This consumerism shifts the workers' energies away from collective political (union/class) action towards an ever-shifting mirage of capital accumulation (Brown 1965: 51-52, et al.). Union power is almost non-existent or at best highly ineffective (Brown 1965: 139-150). Newspapers and other media exist only to obfuscate (Brown 1965: 69) or offer fantasies of escape (Brown 1965: 16, 62, 64, et al.). A sort of socio-economic Darwinism seems rampant; competition, as opposed to communality and mutuality, permeates the atomised proletariat. The psycho-social matrix of the workers is one of anger, confusion, fear, frustration, and self-loathing; it is a matrix of abjection.

Abjection may be conventionally defined as “degradation” or as “a low or downcast state” (“Abjection”). It may also be viewed as a condition of body-sickness; a horror of the body and the impact of its ‘reality’ upon the mind. An object body is liminal and numinous; it exists uneasily between the objective and subjective. An object body is a body without clear definition. The factory is a space of abjection.

Smallcreep and the other denizens of the factory inhabit and toil within an abjective space. This space confronts its inhabitants almost constantly with death, both literally and symbolically, on many levels. Abjection, according to Julia Kristeva, may be defined as a response to the disintegration of the boundaries between object and subject. In the *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva offers the view that in terms of the subject “abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (Kristeva 1982: 9). Such a response is one of disgust and horror; meaning collapses causing a visceral reaction. The factory encourages an abjected state in the workers. Factory workers become abjected because they cannot become one with the object (product of their labour). Often they are not confident in their self/role, thereby entering into a state of horror at their predicament. That predicament is an abjected state which possibly encourages narcissism and even infantile behaviour. This parallels the competitiveness central to capitalism as well; to ‘succeed’ the workers must focus only upon themselves, seeing others as impediments to achieving such success. Success may be seen as the (illusory) ability to keep chaos/decay/death physically or psychologically at bay. Workers are convinced this may be achieved by obtaining surplus value or through consumer items which function as totemic objects. Late in the

novel the managing director, when speaking of the factory's product, reveals a truth about all products consumed: "I am forced to the conclusion that its consumption does not, and indeed will not ever, give the satisfaction attributed to it" (Brown 1965: 169). Yet, no matter how much is acquired, the gulf between subject and object cannot be closed; this is the conundrum of consumerism.

Consumerism embodies a sort of withdrawing from the communal or collective where the individual is totally focused upon (an unstable) self, thereby living in an abject state. Consumerism almost begins functioning as a sort of ersatz religion within the broader context of western capitalism. Abjection under such conditions becomes trans-class; occurring even in the upper classes, though their relative success in capital accumulation lessens the magnitude of abjective horror. With sufficient power and wealth individuals could easily delude themselves into believing that the mere accumulation of capital may actually mitigate the inevitable corruption of the body. In Freudian terms, the object is the mother, to whom which the individual (child) wishes to return; undoing that primal separation which led to the creation of 'I'. But such a return also results in dissolution (death) of the self, which the individual seeks to prevent by capital accumulation and commodity fetishism; creating conflict at a basic level. Under such circumstances, the individual remains in an indeterminate or abject state. In the most simplistic terms, the abjective degree of a class in a capitalist, industrial economy is proportional to its wealth and power. The working class therefore may be seen as a class of great dis-ease and abjection in *Smallcreep's Day*.

Smallcreep is an abjected state within the factory because the barriers between his notional self and work have collapsed. Kristeva states the abject draws her to "the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982: 2). If meaning collapses for an individual it may be that such a person is more easily persuaded to accommodate conditions that may be against their best interests. Such a situation implies a blurring of the inner and outer worlds, such as in Smallcreep's narrative of his journey. In this fashion, he has become the quintessential 'unreliable narrator'. Disintegration is reflected in his narrative; it is a surreal, dream-like tale that is neither strict reportage of the factory milieu (objective) nor a total withdrawal into interiority (subjective). Or, as Kristeva simply states it in her essay: "abjection is above all ambiguity"

(Kristeva 1982: 9). The process whereby this all happens is not only due to the imposition of an unnatural external order (capitalism), but also by the colonisation of Smallcreep's consciousness by consumerist ideology. Smallcreep's work is an abstraction inasmuch as he has no idea what function it serves within the greater whole or final product. Or, as Smallcreep puts it "I think that life will have no meaning for me until I have found exactly where my particular effort fits in, what service it performs, who eventually uses it, for what purposes" (Brown 1965: 35). Eventually, this alienation is expanded to the point where he is not only alienated from his labour, but from co-workers and family as well. In Smallcreep's world there is no communality, only separate individuals who are merely parts within a distantly immense capitalist machine which creates more and more surplus value. The demesne of the factory is given order by the model of the machine, with individual humans becoming their machine roles with varying levels of efficacy. In a sense, the worker and their consciousness cannot truly be understood unless the factory itself and the surrounding cultural paradigms are understood as well.

Abjection as it appears in *Smallcreep's Day* aides and abets what a Marxist would term 'false consciousness'. The concept may be simply explained as a state where "people are unable to see things, especially exploitation, oppression, and social relations, as they really are; the hypothesized inability of the human mind to develop a sophisticated awareness of how it is developed and shaped by circumstances" ("False Consciousness"). Furthermore, academic and author Daniel Little states "Members of a subordinate class (workers, peasants, serfs) suffer from false consciousness in that their mental representations of the social relations around them systematically conceal or obscure the realities of subordination, exploitation, and domination those relations embody" (Little n.d.). Capitalism's economic and ideological processes distort working class consciousness and class relationships. Daniel Little also observes that if "consciousness-shaping mechanisms did not exist, then the underclass, always a majority, would quickly overthrow the system of their domination" (Little n.d.). False consciousness is encouraged and maintained in society because, in a sense, it furthers the aims of consumerist/ capitalist institutions while assuring their continued hegemony, as well as that of the bourgeoisie. The desires of the workers in part result from an arrangement which actually does not address their

desires or interests; ultimately, even working in contradiction of them. Human desires are not only defined by societal forces and ideologies, but also by the individual no matter how colonised. These conditions affect and help to define what is 'class consciousness'.

For most workers, 'class consciousness' is something rarely achieved, if at all, within Brown's novel, at least as Georg Lukács would define it. Lukács felt class consciousness was related to a strictly causal historical perspective unfettered by any universalising (transcendental) notions (which according to Lukács result in false consciousness). In essence, class consciousness is an awareness of history as on-going process, not a belief in capitalism as totalising entity. In more common parlance, class consciousness is more generally viewed as an awareness of one's place within the socio-economic matrix. In terms of Lukács' definition of class consciousness, Smallcreep seems to possess little 'class consciousness'; his sense of history does not seem to extend beyond what has been mediated by his father. For Lukács, an abjected worker would be divided from history, therefore a victim of false consciousness. Approached in terms of the more generalised definition Smallcreep seems to possess a greater awareness, although such knowledge is more vertically-oriented (hierarchical) as opposed to a mutual and horizontal equality (heterarchical). This verticality is illustrated most glaringly in his exchanges with the sales manager (Brown 1965: 158-166) and managing director (Brown 1965: 168-180); Smallcreep is polite and deferential. At one point he momentarily self-identifies with the bourgeoisie, stating "In a very short time, however, I learned something of the difficulties which members of the royal family must face when appearing in public. Rejecting the idea of a fixed smile, I resolved to look ahead of me, so that I should offend none by preference." (Brown 1965: 10). Later in the novel, Smallcreep plays at the role of manager and finds he enjoys it (Brown 1965: 73). Those of his own class, the proletariat/workers, he describes as animals (Brown 1965: 11, 17, 18, 40, 87, et al.), dead (Brown 1965: 5, 38), 'irresponsible loiterers' (Brown 1965: 8), machines (Brown 1965: 10, 16, 37, 38, et al.) and animated body parts (Brown 1965: 11, 15). Smallcreep also alludes to "lower orders" of workers (Brown 1965: 16, 34) and wonders why an 'intelligent' man would be a labourer (Brown 1965: 33). Even later in the novel Smallcreep is accused of being a 'traitor' to his class (Brown 1965: 147). Throughout the novel Smallcreep journeys through the factory

interacting with workers and petty bourgeoisie yet seems to have only minimal class connections or empathy.

If *Smallcreep's Day* is in part a meditation upon the factory and the effects of capitalism it is also in part a meditation upon class, specifically the working class. Within Smallcreep's journey can be found a wealth of anecdotal information concerning the life of the working class. A major conflict for such a worker is attempting to reconcile two opposing imperatives: individual survival versus communal action. Because of their limited access to the means of production as individuals, workers must band together to acquire the political and economic power to challenge both the bourgeoisie and institutional repression. Yet, this can immediately affect a worker's ability to accumulate capital and ensure personal happiness or survival. Communal actions and values represent a set of transcendental ideologies which extend beyond the life of any individual; community extends beyond the quotidian, demanding an individual to hold two almost mutually exclusive sets of values. Such a condition results in a perpetual need for escape, on some level, from living and working in such a conflicted state. Escape may be something as simple as obsessing upon media minutiae (i.e., spectacle) or bodily necessities (e.g., food, sex, etc.), to something as profound as a hallucinatory or religious experience (i.e., Smallcreep's adventure, his confrontation with the 'great machine'). This can all lead to a sort of cognitive dissonance that not only results in anxiety but also in socio-cultural confusion.

Cognitive dissonance may be simply defined as "anxiety that results from simultaneously holding contradictory or otherwise incompatible attitudes, beliefs, or the like, as when one likes a person but disapproves strongly of one of his or her habits" ("Cognitive Dissonance"). Often individuals in such a state are motivated to rationalise away any dissonances and ignore internal conflicts, allowing for a less subjectively stressful personal existence. This may be applied to how a worker perceives inter and intra class relations. In terms of the petty bourgeoisie, Smallcreep looks to them for guidance or knowledge of the factory's (world's) workings while at the same time finding them and their communications difficult to understand. Though reluctantly participating in what seems to be a union negotiation, Smallcreep opines that a management representative "spoke with such an incredibly educated accent that I couldn't make out a word" (Brown 1965: 140). A short

while later Smallcreep observes that “his accent was so incredibly correct that it didn't sound like the English language at all” (Brown 1965: 142). Education is theoretically supposed to bring understanding, yet for Smallcreep it seemingly brings alienation. Later in the text Smallcreep has an encounter with the managing director of the factory. The managing director in an attempt to communicate his perceptions concerning his role within the factory finds Smallcreep confused (Brown 1965:178), depressed (Brown 1965: 178), ‘puzzled’ (Brown 1965: 171), and sad (Brown 1965: 178). At the end of the encounter Smallcreep assures the managing director that he “hadn't really understood much of it anyway, at least, not enough to be able to relate it to anyone else (Brown 1965: 180). It can be inferred that at least some of Smallcreep's anxieties result from an inculcated ‘trust’ of authority figures conflicting with his actual experience of such figures. It is difficult to trust when there is no understanding, yet the hierarchical structure of the factory and society demand it.

In the factory where Smallcreep toils, the workers' labour power is so thoroughly alienated from the production of the ‘commodity’ and its value that they have become the definition of exploited. In fact, the workers are not only alienated from the fruits of their labours but they are alienated from each other, their families, and ultimately themselves.

The consequences of the interdependent issues of abjection, class, cognitive dissonance, and false consciousness play out amongst the workers within the context of Brown's fictional factory. Smallcreep is a ‘slippery’ character and narrator due to his ability to move between, or occupy, spaces associated with differing classes or pathologies. Ostensibly a line-worker assembling pulleys, Smallcreep becomes more by leaving his station (in terms of work and class). In his journey Smallcreep moves both horizontally (i.e., within his class and worker-role within the factory) and vertically (i.e., travels upwards and downwards in class/worker-role). Smallcreep's journey is a journey of existential crisis, as well. When referring to a case study of Freud's named Hans, Kristeva describes him as wanting “to know himself and to know everything” including what “could be lacking in himself” (Kristeva 1962: 34). This description could easily be applied to Smallcreep as well.

But in the novel there is another major character besides Smallcreep: the factory. As a space and economic engine the factory becomes the ultimate institutional refinement of the labour theory of value. Yet, when

value may be created without physicality (merely by logos) labour itself becomes tinged with the ‘unreal’ and therefore the worker as well. The factory is both a transformational engine and dream machine; by reinforcing and reifying capitalist precepts the factory inscribes them upon the consciousness of all workers to some extent. Smallcreep refers to the factory variously as church-like (Brown 1965: 29), a forest/jungle (Brown 1965: 14, 15, 41, et al.) and as a museum (Brown 1965: 13, 83, 84); the factory space interacts with workers on multiple psychological and socio-cultural levels. Humans live and work in the factory space, but the factory also lives through the workers by colonising their subjective space; a socio-economic symbiosis that favours the factory and those who own it. Capitalism is a parasite that not only feeds upon this symbiosis, but also injects its own ideological DNA into the factory/worker relationship.

In Brown’s novel capitalism not only functions as an instrument for creating surplus value, but as way of atomising the individual into a cloud of competing dichotomies: mind/body, individual/family, immaterial/material, etc. There is no functional unity except in the ultimate creation of excess value. A worker is more easily manipulated when he/she has competing desires as well as being in competition with other human beings (including family and friends) and cultural/institutional forces. Competition is further encouraged by the bourgeoisie because it generally drives prices down, especially in terms of workers’ wages (a significant portion of any business’ costs). Competition not only becomes about survival but also the creation of surplus value; workers struggle with each other for survival while the bourgeoisie benefits economically and politically.

The bourgeoisie also use time as a way of controlling workers and distorting their perceptions; time becomes bent by the exigencies of capitalist economics. In his journey through the factory Smallcreep encounters a press operator who discourses upon time and work (Brown 1965: 47-54). The press operator feels “surrounded by enemies”, with a large clock overlooking the workshop being “the number one enemy round here” which “watches us all the time” (Brown 1965: 49). The press operator shouts *at* the clock, saying “You wouldn’t move at all if we didn’t watch you, would you, you creeping bastard” (Brown 1965: 49). He then quietly informs Smallcreep that “Clocks can hypnotise, you know – make you lose your sense of time” (Brown 1965: 49). Another

worker later in the novel sadly observes "It's torture to look at the clock" (Brown 1965: 80). The clock has become just another entity working for the bourgeoisie, destabilising an individual's personal sense of time so that the only time is *factory* time. It is time distorted by capitalism's hand.

The elevator sequence in the novel (Brown 1965: 129-139) may be seen as a commentary upon the 'verticality' of capitalism, as opposed to the 'horizontal' nature of socialism. The factory itself seems to be a sort of westernised cultural representation of the world: the barren land of sewage and waste as 'hell' (with its own Charon and river Styx), the factory floor as a (wage/piece-work) 'purgatory', and the upper levels as a sort of 'heaven' (godly power and normally unattainable rewards). The sewage worker informs Smallcreep that "right at the top, is a place where they do nothing but shovel money about, just as I shovel shit" (Brown 1965: 129). Smallcreep is also informed that the elevator operator has told the sewage worker that "everything's solid gold" and the "carpets are mink" (Brown 1965: 129) at the top as well. The 'top' indeed sounds like a sort of (mythologised) petty bourgeoisie heaven. It is interesting to note that the elevator operator begins at the lowest level in shabby clothing and with a coffin in the lift, but as the elevator rises the coffin disappears from the narrative and the operator's uniform becomes progressively more elaborate (and militaristic). Ovine Fudge, the elevator operator, also explains to Smallcreep how human beings and machines have almost become one (Brown 1965: 132). Yet throughout his surreal journey from 'low' to 'high', Smallcreep remains unchanged.

Pinquean Smallcreep may well be viewed as a narcissistic by-product of capitalism's incessant, hedonistic drive; a self-obsessed consumer/worker whose locus is tied to socio-corporate ideology. Nothing is liberating because everything has become consumable 'product'. Constant competition for items both physical and symbolic, have created an existence where he is in an almost continuous state of anxiety. Under such conditions the communal is atomized, except as a method for gaining the power of ever greater acquisition (Brown 1965: 31). Whatever social glue, be they democratic ideals or tribal loyalties, they are weakened to the point of irrelevancy by the hegemony of capitalist and consumerist ideologies. Dissent is not suppressed but dissipates like a morning fog before the noontime sun. It is the profound power of the capitalist narrative; the linking of the survival drive to the

acquisition of money that has allowed capitalism to not only colonise public spaces but also the personal *interiority* of consciousness. By transforming the capitalist narrative into basic human need or aspect of individual/familial/ tribal survival, the narrative is no longer a matter of (conscious) choice; capitalism becomes an inevitable, life necessity. All social classes become emotionally and intellectually dominated by this narrative, but only do the elite profit by it. The proletariat is alienated and the abject individual becomes a vector for capitalism.

Indeed in such a world it is truly a state of war on an individual level; the social transmuting into the (competitive) anti-social. In this way, becoming a 'good' consumer/worker is akin to manifesting pathological behaviour. The anti-social bears a relationship to the abject. Brown's book has been referred to as 'surrealist'; its primordial irruptions are the redirected and thwarted desires of the subconscious given liberation through a dreamlike narrative. The abject and the role of factory worker/consumer create, by their proximity within the text, a third presence which is the liminally surreal dreamscape through which the character of Smallcreep moves. In a sort of dialectical relationship, these two positions bracket another space: the factory as 'dreamspace'. The 'factory dream' is a response to the physical and psychological horror of the actual capitalist workspace. The dream becomes a way of working through contradictions and enabling Smallcreep to interrogate his work environment. And if, as Marx theorizes, economic forces shape character then the currents within the factory are as much about re-directed desire as they are about the penetration of capitalism into all psycho-social levels.

What texts like *Smallcreep's Day* remind us of is that there are thousands of voices lost in the economic and narrative margins of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism. These are the voices of the late-night gas station workers feeding a fast-food car culture, the assemblers of consumer commodities who die ever younger and penniless, immigrants mowing and tending to green bourgeois vistas of moneyed purity, workers cleaning toxic ink residue from robotic presses, and myriad others. These voices are purposely obscured or silenced because their stories illumine inequities inherent in western capitalism and interrogate its purported 'economic inevitability'. On the other hand, to limit the novel's *raison d'être* to exemplifying a 'worker's text' is horribly constraining for such a rich novel which operates in multiple genres. It is

a text that almost immediately severs any obvious connections to realism or sociological reportage. The novel additionally offers a distortion and interrogation of capitalist spatialisation as it relates to the region of the factory. It is a text which illuminates the inherent falsity of Western confidence in 'progress'. Capitalism is revealed as a trauma which violently overwrites/rewrites subconscious desires in service of economic and ideological profit, to the detriment of all. The capitalist narrative is so pervasive that alternatives cannot even be conceived, so intimately has it become conjoined with basic mammalian instincts, such as survival. Consumer capitalism becomes an expression of, or runs in parallel with, primordial drives such as seeking nourishment or shelter. Also running through the novel is a nostalgic ache expressed in discarded narratives and post-card consumerism. The future is just more of the present, but the past is malleable and warm to the touch; an escape into a womb that never was. The novel's parody, surrealism, and unreliable narrator offer evidence of an indeterminate postmodern opacity, uneasily wavering between subject and object. What the reader can take from the novel is a sense of how class, the industrial factory, and capitalism affect worker consciousness. These effects warp behaviour and values in favour of production to the point where workers, in order to survive, slowly become analogues of the machines they assemble. Workers are manipulated into being consumers where 'choice' is in all actuality no choice at all; as consumers they generate even more surplus value, in addition to their production work. For the workers in the factory of *Smallcreep's Day* the industrial process has become both the message and model for all, with the worker fashioned into just another tool ultimately benefitting the upper 'one percent'.

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