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## The Microeconomic Mode

Jane Elliott

Since the late 1990s in North America and Britain, the field of contemporary aesthetics has been marked by the appearance and growing prevalence of what I call *the microeconomic mode*. This mode has proliferated across media and genres, as well as the demarcations between high and low culture; it gives form to some of the most celebrated recent literary novels, as well as some of the most reviled products of popular culture. Texts in this mode are characterized by a combination of abstraction and extremity, a fusion that we can witness everywhere from the *Saw* horror-film series (2004-10) to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2007), from the reality TV franchise *Survivor* (1997 to the present) to Steve McQueen's art-house film *Hunger* (2008). Abstraction results from a focus on delimited or capsule worlds in which option and decision, action and effect, have been extracted from everyday contexts and thus made unusually legible--for example, the life raft, the desert island, the medical experiment, the prison cell. Extremity registers in forms of painful, grotesque, or endangered embodiment, including deprivation, torture, mutilation, self-mutilation, and various threats to life itself. The combination of the two results in situations in which individuals make agonized choices among unwelcome options, options that present intense physical or life-threatening consequences for themselves or their loved ones. In its fullest manifestations, the aesthetic effect of this mode is brutal, in every sense of the word: crude, harsh, ruthless, unrelenting, and unpleasantly precise.

In order to suggest what this mode looks like in operation, I want to begin with a particularly stark and telling example: the film *127 Hours* (2011), based on the memoir titled *A Rock and a Hard Place* (2004) by rock climber Aron Ralston.<sup>1</sup> Aron, played by James Franco,

becomes trapped in a slot canyon when his arm is wedged between a falling boulder and the canyon wall; eventually, after nearly dying from exposure and deprivation, he cuts off his arm in order to escape the canyon and find help. Some of Aron's personal history appears in flashbacks, but it isn't presented as qualifying or shaping the life-or-death choice that confronts him. The few elements with causal significance in the canyon--the trapped arm, the lack of food and water, the number of hours--concern Aron's sheer existence as a conscious mind that inhabits a body with certain essential needs and capacities. It is difficult to imagine any human being with this sort of body experiencing Aron's situation very differently, whatever the specifics of his or her personal psychology or place in the social order. Not only does Aron's decision to cut off his arm appear detached from any external processes that would render it something more than an expression of sheer individual choice, but the horrible nature of the act simultaneously throws into relief the fierce determination with which his choice is enacted. I refer to this experience of highly consequential, utterly willed, and fearsomely undesired action as *suffering agency*.

In animating interest in this way, I argue, works such as *127 Hours* offer a searing incarnation of the microeconomic model of human behavior. Often described via Lionel Robbins's now canonical description of economics as "the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses," this model combines methodological individualism, the foreclosure of interpersonal utility comparison, and the presumption that the choosing individual operates according to the parameters of allocative choice, weak rationality, and utility maximization.<sup>2</sup> There are significant disputes regarding the meaning and parameters of each of these terms even among contemporary orthodox economists, but these differences have not invalidated this definition so much as given shape to various schools and approaches within mainstream economics as a discipline. In

practice, microeconomics relies on this axiomatic foundation to produce elaborate mathematic descriptions for the aggregate phenomena guided by consumer behavior--for example, demand curves and price points. My focus instead is on the designation of agential allocative choice as an absolute, which emerges most visibly via the granularity of microeconomics as a subdiscipline even as it functions as an unquestioned and unquestionable foundation for the mainstream of the discipline as a whole.

We can get a sense of the conceptual power of this model by turning to the work of Chicago school economist Gary Becker. Because of its movement into areas normally associated with sociology, his work represents a methodologically radical edge of microeconomics, but it is for this reason that his approach is especially revealing. When he applies the microeconomic view of choice “relentlessly and unflinchingly” to areas formerly consigned to other disciplines, Becker distills what he calls “the economic approach to human behaviour” from its usual content and makes its self-reinforcing nature apparent.<sup>3</sup> For Becker, what makes the economic understanding of human behavior unique is precisely its universality: not only is there no act of human choice to which the model cannot be said to apply, but also the model renders every choice by definition equally rational and allocative. Becker’s overarching methodology depends on aggregate presumptions of market efficiency and equilibrium, but his description of the individual as a “decision unit” functions without reference to such aggregate factors. Instead, it emerges from the tautologies that make up the model alone (167, 7). Because allocative choice necessarily takes place in conditions of scarcity, resources distributed in one area are necessarily not available for distribution in another. In effect, that is, every benefit comes with a cost, and vice versa. Add to that closed system the definition of choice as the expression of individual preference, and any choice that at first glance appears irrationally costly can be understood to

meet preferences that are not immediately apparent. If an individual choice does not yet appear to us to maximize utility, then that is only because we have not yet identified the evaluation of cost and benefit, means and end, that guided the choice in question.

When combined with methodological individualism, this tautological account transforms every human action into an expression of individual agency.<sup>4</sup> Not only does methodological individualism strip out contextual factors that might determine or mitigate individual choice, but also the factors that do remain in play become transposed into the closed system of costs and benefits. In this way, the very existence of constraints becomes the vehicle through which we enact our capacity to act in our own best interests. For example, in his analysis of life expectancy, Becker posits that every death must be considered in some sense a suicide, since it “could have been postponed if more resources had been invested [by the subject] in prolonging life.”<sup>5</sup> Even seemingly self-destructive behavior becomes the logical result of the pursuit of some goal other than that of prolonging life. And once the existence of that goal is taken as proven by the presumption that it was chosen, the choice can retroactively be determined to be an expression of interest since it led to this end. By foreclosing the importance of any contextual factor that does not function as either a resource to be distributed or an end to be met, this model turns even the negotiation of profound constraints--for instance, the finitude of life itself--into the rational enactment of sheer individual will. In this model, taking action in one’s own best interest is not a measure of true liberty or full personhood but rather an inescapable feature of human life itself.

In *127 Hours*, we witness a relentless, nearly unbearable literalization of this conviction that, for human beings, to be alive is to be interested. From the geographical reproduction of methodological individualism in the stark emptiness of the canyon to the binary nature of the

decision Aron confronts, the film incarnates the microeconomic imagination of choice in near-algorithmic form. Through his serial and evolving enactment of the choice between life and limb, Aron endures a nightmare version of the comparison process that underlies the presumption of rational allocative choice: 127 hours of weighing the benefit of his life against the cost of cutting off his arm. Moreover, as his example demonstrates so viciously, the intrinsic quality of interest in life doesn't take away the subject's capacity for choice; instead, to borrow Becker's terminology, Aron postpones his death by choosing to put his every resource, including the determination required to amputate his arm, toward life. Aron's experience manifests at the forcible intersection of profoundly agential choice and his existence within a container of living flesh. Yet, as the film's title also suggests, Aron's fierce attachment to life registers not only in his final decision but also in his sheer endurance of his circumstances. With each hour that passes, the effects of exposure and deprivation on Aron increase, so that the progression of time itself becomes a measure of both his torment and his commitment to survival. As he nears death, Aron's every breath signals that he is still clinging to life, with all the grasping desperation that the phrase suggests. When being alive transforms from a largely background, involuntary function to a profoundly important feat of individual will, the unfolding of life becomes both the object of interest and the moment-by-moment demonstration of that interest. Aron's interest is in life, and his life expresses his interest.

As a manifestation of a shift in the imagination of political subjectivity that has thus far escaped cognition even if it has not escaped perception, the microeconomic mode both registers and fills a gap in our understanding of the present that has not yet been traversed by the important body of work on neoliberal governmentality. In Michel Foucault's reading of Becker, he famously defines the neoliberal form of governance as one in which "action is brought to bear

on the rules of the game rather than on the players, and . . . there is an environmental type of intervention instead of the internal subjugation of individuals.”<sup>6</sup> In the microeconomic mode, however, it is the perspective of the player rather than the view of the field as a whole that takes center stage, and that player is necessarily facing life-and-death choices. What emerges as a result is not adequately explained by either the microeconomic model of human behavior or the forms of governance associated with that model, and that is why I need recourse to an unfortunate number of neologisms to describe its central concerns. If apt terms were already in existence--if the transformation in question were either less radical or more established--then this mode would likely not exist in its same ubiquitous form. That my central terms here--suffering agency, life-interest, the microeconomic mode--seem to embody or unfold across seeming contradictions indicates something of the stress this shift places on our usual ways of comprehending political experience. By treating the microeconomic mode as a form of compressed knowledge about this ongoing transformation, I aim to uncover what it is that this mode seems to know about the transformations associated with neoliberalism that has otherwise remained unthought.

In this essay, I offer one segment of this analysis by interrogating the form most consistently associated with the microeconomic mode: the survival game. Although it has appeared intermittently throughout the twentieth century, the survival-game form has boomed since the late 1990s, giving shape to works as diverse in tone, ambition, and audience as Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games* (1997), postapocalyptic video games such as *Left 4 Dead* (2008), and the Discovery Channel’s reality TV show *Naked and Afraid* (2013), in which two contestants find themselves stranded in the wild and exposed, so to speak, to extreme weather conditions. Survival-game texts participate in the microeconomic mode almost by definition; not only is the

survival game created from the intersection of the necessarily abstracted game form and extreme life-and-death consequences, but it also requires, propagates, and harnesses each contestant's seemingly ineradicable interest in life. I focus first here on Gillian Flynn's novel *Gone Girl* (2013) and unpack the arguments it makes about the situations in which survival games come to be constituted. Unlike the majority of survival-game texts, *Gone Girl* interrogates the utility of the survival game as a response to the circumstances evident in its created world; it attempts to identify not only how the survival game functions but what its function is. In its exploration of this question, *Gone Girl* offers an opportunity to evaluate the purposes served when life-interest is manifest, over and over, across the field of contemporary aesthetics.

One of these purposes, I will argue, is to model and test a set of transformed relationships among interest, sovereignty, and the biological status of human being. Although this model resonates in certain ways with contemporary theorizations of affective labor and the biopolitical, it cannot be mapped against our existing assumptions about these categories, which may explain why the microeconomic mode has unfolded in a critical blind spot. When we assume we will find the tide of the multitude, the dispersions of affect, or the inertia of bare life, it is difficult to know what to make of all these visions of a single subject's insistent, agential, agonized embodiment, which, despite deviating from theoretical accounts, still register as a defining feature of twenty-first-century aesthetics. In what follows, I document the way in which the microeconomic mode requires us to think very differently about what is meant by the political capture of life itself in the present. In order to track this thinking, I read the survival game not as an object of existing theoretical discourse, but rather as the theory that it is.

Survival Games and Sovereignty



The plot of *Gone Girl* centers on a young wife, Amy, who has gone missing, and her husband, Nick, who is suspected of having murdered her. Although the opening clearly designates the novel as a thriller, the account of what has led Nick and Amy to this pass is closer to social realism in tone, with a specific emphasis on the social effects of contemporary capital. We learn that Amy's character has been shaped by the fact that, since her early childhood, her parents have been cowriting and publishing books for children based on her life, called the *Amazing Amy* series. Rather than cherishing her for her own sake, they seem to have taken Becker's infamous microeconomic analysis of parental motivations as their instruction manual: they treat Amy's existence as an investment, and they reap the financial rewards accordingly.<sup>7</sup> When Amy uses her trust fund to bail out her parents after the 2008 stock market crash, she can no longer support Nick, who has lost his job as a writer owing to the casualization of journalism in the Internet age, and they move from Manhattan to Nick's hometown, North Carthage, Missouri. The town's status as postindustrial backwater is neatly signaled by the fate of the local mall: having gone bust, it now houses an encampment of men who became homeless after they lost their jobs when the local plant shut down. In sum, Amy and Nick's arrival in North Carthage is determined by a confluence of monetization, flexible employment, financialization, and Web 2.0--in other words, by the real subsumption of the most ephemeral, minute, and personal aspects of human behavior by capital.<sup>8</sup>

What makes *Gone Girl* revealing is that it turns this canny if familiar account of immaterial labor in America into fuel for a mystery-thriller potboiler, complete with bizarre twists, misplaced trust, and a killer on the loose. And that generic shift gives the novel an imaginative reach quite different from what we find in contemporary Marxist theory. Tellingly, the hinge between *Gone Girl's* social-realist and thriller registers is another feature of the social

landscape associated with the regime of immaterial labor: the gamification of dating.<sup>9</sup> By only slightly exaggerating the approach recommended by dating manuals such as *The Rules*<sup>TM</sup>: *Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* (1995), *Gone Girl* skewers the expectation that women can find love provided they understand what men really want and have the discipline to play the game accordingly. After meeting Nick at a party, Amy intuits that he is looking for what she calls “the Cool Girl.” Self-confident but undemanding, a gorgeous Size 2 yet addicted to hot dogs and burgers, the Cool Girl can be easily identified by her professed love of football, poker, cheap beer, threesomes, and anal sex.<sup>10</sup> Winning Nick requires that Amy convince him that she is the Cool Girl of his dreams, who, of course, would never be so uncool as to modify her behavior to catch a man. Once Amy successfully embodies the Cool Girl and captures Nick’s affections, however, she comes to the outraged realization that playing love like a game is an inherently self-canceling project. Transforming herself into someone to whom Nick will commit turns out to mean that Amy has foreclosed the possibility that she will be loved for herself, since it is not Amy that Nick has chosen but the Cool Girl she has been impersonating. Not only is winning in this scenario indistinguishable from losing, but it is specifically Amy’s capacity to game the system that has caused her to wind up with the booby prize. Precisely because it creates such a clear and instrumental path to the goal of love, the power of Amy’s will turns into a source of self-injury. When capturing Mr. Right is just another form of rational action in one’s own best interest, as *Gone Girl* suggests, it becomes a form of suffering agency for the woman involved.

This realization sparks the novel’s thriller plot because, as readers discover in the novel’s central twist, Amy is actually a psychopath who cannot bear to have her will thwarted or her amazingness denied. In part 1 of the novel, we read a series of diary entries by Amy cataloguing

her relationship with Nick from their first meeting in Manhattan to his gradual shift to selfish indifference and finally violent outbursts. At the start of part 2 of the novel, however, narrator-Amy gleefully informs the reader that “diary-Amy” is a fake, created to cast suspicion on Nick. Instead of being a victim of forces beyond her control, Amy turns out to be a monster whose villainy is directly tied to her creepy but not at all supernatural capacity for goal-directed action, from secretly crafting her faux diary over months to slicing into her own arm to leave her blood at a staged crime scene. As she advises readers, “You just have to decide to do it and then do it. . . Discipline. Follow through. Like anything.”<sup>11</sup> What infuriates her about the results of her Cool Girl initiative is not that she has missed out on real love, but rather that her feat of discipline and follow-through somehow failed to garner the results it should have. Amy’s ultimate interest is in coming out on top, in having her will always and everywhere recognized as superior to everyone else’s, and the prizes that accrue along the way are welcome but largely superfluous. As a villain, Amy embodies microeconomic interest taken to a ludicrous yet logical extreme, and that is why her capacity for evil emerges full-blown when she encounters the problem of suffering agency. Suffering agency belies the inherent benefit of successful action in one’s own best interest, and Amy rightly understands herself as that principle incarnate. She figures the outraged, spiteful energy of a person betrayed by a system whose dictates she has followed with unimpeachable fidelity.

In order to reverse this defeat, Amy does something only a villain could do: she forces Nick to play a survival game that she designs. She fakes her own death in a fashion that will cast suspicion on Nick, and then leaves a series of clues for Nick to solve seemingly based on details of their relationship, which he can solve provided he has been paying attention to their interactions. Not only does Nick have no choice but to “*play the Missing Wife game,*” as he

describes it, but he also reminds readers that, given that Missouri is a death penalty state, this game is life-or-death for him.<sup>12</sup> In order to humble Nick on the same ground where her victory turned to defeat, Amy designs her survival game to resemble the gamification of love as viewed from a heterosexual male perspective. Familiar from countless sit-coms and rom-coms, this is the narrative in which women baffle men by turning communication into guesswork and minor interactions into symbolic relationship landmarks. Amy's sly twist is that, in this case, the clues actually refer to Nick's affair with a much younger woman, and with each riddle he solves he digs himself in deeper with the police. When she gets Nick to play the survival game she has created, Amy successfully traps him in an all-consuming structure that threatens to be fatal for him but is a voluntary and delightful fabrication for her. She uses the survival game to materialize a division between those with the power to legislate a self-contained realm governed by rules of their own design and those who cannot help but treat these manufactured, artificially delimited worlds with all the seriousness reserved for matters of life and death.

This division is what makes the survival-game designation more than simply a category error. In the survival game, the game form's characteristic distance from necessity persists for the game's designers even as it is eradicated for the game players, who must inhabit the game whether they like it or not. As Amy's example suggests, survival-game designers demonstrate their power by ensuring that others must pursue tremendously important ends through inexpedient means--that contestants will play out their real lives in a fabricated world, like lab rats running a maze. Yet, because these contestants are playing for their lives, this form of power over others specifically requires that subordinated subjects also take agential action of the most consequential kind. Amy proves herself the ultimate microeconomic agent not only because of her supreme capacity to act in her own best interest but also because her revenge depends on

Nick's lesser capacity to do the same. She doesn't take away Nick's ability to choose; she *captures* his capacity for choice, and that is how she performs her dominance over him. She relocates his will inside a set of life-and-death parameters whose very existence expresses her will, and, in so doing, she proves that hers is the meta-will. Or, to put it in more familiar terms, she proves that her will is sovereign. But what the survival-game designer decrees is not who lives or dies, but rather the terms by which players may either win or lose their lives. Sovereign is he--or she--who decides on the rules of the game.

Because it locates the survival game within a mystery-thriller plotline that centers on the real-world game of love, *Gone Girl* creates a through line from the ubiquity of gamification to the imposition of the survival game. As the title of *Gone Girl* suggests, Amy's successful disappearance from the field of play is what indicates her triumph--not only over Nick but over gamification at large; it is by decisively exiting the fray in favor of the game designer's spectator seat that she aims to prove her superiority. Of course, we might doubt Amy's assertion that being thwarted in the game of love is what drove her to create the Missing Wife Game, especially given that her critique of heterosexual romance appears in the second part of the novel, voiced by Amy as unmasked psychopath. Yet, even if it is clearly insufficient motivation for the specific action she takes, Amy's sneering dissection of contemporary dating mores in this section is too well observed and resonant for it to read as merely her insanity talking. Women readers may not go as far as Amy in attempting to capture the heart of Mr. Right, but there is a reason that "the Cool Girl" became a media buzzword after the novel's publication. In skewering a recognizable dating dynamic, Amy's assessment of the gamification of love still participates in the novel's social realism even as her insane response to her defeat becomes the primary engine of the novel's genre-fiction status, both authorized and pathologized by its mystery-thriller

conventions. Amy's takedown of the Cool Girl provides the conceptual switching point between the novel's two generic and epistemological registers--the one that purports to represent the world as it is, and the one that features the shocking acts of individuals who interrupt everyday life with their evil machinations.

One result of this nexus is to undercut the reader's identification with the feminist ire in the novel's satire of heterosexual dating habits, by making it the motivation for an over-the-top form of revenge that readers cannot be expected to endorse. More importantly for my specific purposes here, however, this structure suggests that the survival game in *Gone Girl* is not a meditation on or metaphor for the process by which each human life becomes a locus of capital, but rather an example of the profound, outsized measures required to set oneself outside--above--that process. The survival game is Amy's answer to the question, what does it take to achieve sovereignty over the countless games in which everyone acts in their own best interests? It can provide this answer because, as Nick learns to his peril, the survival game captures life in a very different way than gamification does. The assumption that underwrites gamification, the perception that everyday life activities operate and are best approached as games, emerges from a regime of immaterial labor that codifies and monetizes the sum total of human behaviors as constantly shifting flows of affect and action. The survival game works in the opposite direction. By activating each player's interest in life, it forcibly locates each individual agent inside the container of its single, irreplaceable human organism. Amy knows that Nick will play her game because, short of science-fiction measures, even a man who subsists on his protean charm cannot charm his way to inhabiting a second living human body should his first be taken by lethal injection. The human organism is where the buck of exchangeability stops--not for capital, but for the individual who necessarily has one and only one body, and who can usually be expected

to act to preserve it. If the survival game stages a form of sovereignty particular to the present, then this is a power that guarantees that the same aggregation of human being expressed as countless shifting streams of interfused data will also be spooled up into individual life-forms, piloted by conscious agents who have no choice but to keep making choices.

From one sort of Deleuzian perspective, this insistence on the individual agent as a unit of domination may seem out of keeping with contemporary forms of control, but *Gone Girl* also brings to mind Deleuze and Guattari's insistence that the molecular and the molar operate simultaneously.<sup>13</sup> Precisely through its crude distortions, the novel crystallizes a world in which the same subject who dissolves into various monetized flows of information can also be an individual whose one and only life is irreversibly blighted by a felony conviction or a bad credit score or the closing of the local plant--that is, by permanent consequences that attach to a single, identified human life. This, I want to suggest, is what life-interest is for: it constitutes the reterritorialization that accompanies the deterritorialization of the subject in contemporary capital. Although biopolitics and immaterial labor have been frequently understood as elements of the same process, the microeconomic mode thus represents their interaction quite differently. Instead of the mass populations we find in Michel Foucault's account of biopower, life-interest concerns the singularity of each living human body; instead of legislating a boundary between full persons and mere life as in Giorgio Agamben's theorization of biopolitics, sovereignty over life-interest fuses the capacity for agential action with human being itself, whether that human life has been recognized as possessing political personhood or not. Life-interest is a biopolitical category, but it is one that scrambles our usual ways of thinking about the term.

The Subject of Life-Interest

Before gesturing toward some of the implications of this shift, I want to step back for a moment and consider this conceptual gap between life-interest and contemporary theorizations of life itself. Although there are also important distinctions to be made between life-interest and the approach to the politics of life associated with biophilosophy, I will concentrate here on a theoretical trajectory that is more revealing in terms of locating life-interest: that emerging from Michel Foucault's argument regarding the relationship between the subject of right and the subject of interest. Foucault suggests that the development of the liberal subject of right has a parallel accompaniment in the subject of interest as envisioned by English empiricist philosophers. Whereas the subject of right accepts limits on his liberty in order to preserve a negotiated, continued access within the state to what were once original, nonmediated rights, the subject of interest "is never called upon to relinquish his interest." Instead, this subject is expected to pursue interest to the utmost and must be allowed and encouraged to do so. Rather than a negotiation or dialectic with the powers of the commonwealth, interest unfolds as a form of immediately and absolutely subjective will. Because of their heterogeneous relationships to the application and reach of power, the subject of right and the subject of interest remain unassimilable to one another, with the latter operating as substrate and guarantee for the subject of right: "The subject of interest constantly overflows the subject of right. . . . He overflows him, surrounds him, and is the permanent condition of his functioning."<sup>14</sup> For Foucault, "liberalism acquire[s] its modern shape precisely with the formulation of this essential incompatibility between the non-totalizable multiplicity of . . . subjects of interest and the totalizing unity of juridical sovereignty."<sup>15</sup>

Although Foucault does not directly relate the subject of interest to the genealogy of biopolitics that occupies him elsewhere, a fundamental connection between self-interest and the



preservation of life has been noted by another thinker whose work has become foundational to biopolitical critique: Hannah Arendt. In her excoriating account of what she calls “life philosophy,” Arendt argues that the fixation on self-interest in the era of modern political theory arises from the presumed importance of preserving life. As she puts it,

Hidden behind . . . the sacredness of egoism and the all-pervasive power of self-interest, which were current to the point of being commonplace in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, we find another point of reference which indeed forms a much more potent principle than any pain-pleasure calculus could ever offer, and that is the principle of life itself. What pain and pleasure, fear and desire, are actually supposed to achieve in all these systems is not happiness at all but the promotion of individual life or a guarantee of the survival of mankind. . . . In the last resort, it is always life itself which is the supreme standard to which everything else is referred, and the interests of the individual as well as the interests of mankind are always equated with individual life or the life of the species as though it were a matter of course that life is the highest good.<sup>16</sup>

For Arendt, governance through interest of the kind associated with utilitarianism rests on and aims for the reference point of life itself. We can see the defining nature of this interest in the modern approach to suicide: “If modern egoism were the ruthless search for pleasure (called happiness) it pretends to be, it would not lack what in all truly hedonistic systems is an indispensable element of argumentation--a radical justification of suicide.”<sup>17</sup> When we render suicide illegal in order to protect what we assume is any sane person’s interest in life, we make clear the conviction that individual interest can never truly be against survival.

With such life philosophy in place, Arendt argues, the protection and advance of the life

of the species become the unifying and authorizing aim of good government. We can recognize in this account something akin to Foucault's well-known description of modern biopolitics as that which governs in relation to the life of the species at large. In Foucault's account, biopolitical regimes treat human life en masse as something to be actively either preserved or abandoned, as serves ends regarding the national population. Yet, Arendt ties individual self-interest to modern life philosophy in a fashion that cannot be explained in terms of the sovereign power to foster or consign to death large-scale human populations. In pinpointing the fundamental, necessary function that self-preservation serves in doctrines of self-interest, Arendt's analysis indicates that the liberal individual possesses a fundamental *interest* in life alongside its more famous right to life.<sup>18</sup> If, as Foucault argues, the yoking together of rights and interests is characteristic of liberalism, then this pairing includes the essential combination of the individual right to life and the individual interest in life. Individual self-preservation thus occupies a specific intersection between governmental power and life itself that arises alongside but is distinct from both the liberal right to life and sovereign decision over life and death. Even when biopolitical regimes stimulate and rely on the individual self-preservation to foster the health of mass populations, interest in life cannot be acted on directly by juridical will, since it unfolds within the radically subjective and inaccessible realm occupied by the subject of interest.

Tellingly, it is an expansion of the sphere of economic rationality that leads Foucault to explore the role of the empiricist subject of interest in grounding contemporary forms of governance. In Foucault's oft-cited description of the emergence of ordo- and neoliberalism, he argues that in the postwar period we witness a shift to the "use of the typical analysis of the market economy to decipher non-market relationships and phenomena which are not strictly and specifically economic but what we would call social phenomena."<sup>19</sup> When economics becomes a

“principle of intelligibility and a principle of decipherment of social relationships and individual behavior,” the result is the “application of the economic grid to a field which since . . . the end of the eighteenth century, was defined in opposition to the economy, or at any rate, as complementary to the economy.”<sup>20</sup> Although this expansion means that governmentality must shift to accommodate the subject of interest, the result is an approach to politics that itself appears to be an instantiation of economic reason. In effect, the subject of interest swallows the liberal subject of right. Rights remain but are lodged within the comprehensive logic of interest as found in the microeconomic imagination, which treats every choice or action as an outcome of interest. Any actions undertaken in the sphere of rights become contingent on and activated by interests.

From one widely circulated Marxist perspective, this transformation appears as an aspect of capital’s increasing incorporation and valorization of all of human life, understood here as the totality of human behavior. For example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe this process as one in which “capital has become a world. Use value and all the other references to values and processes of valorization that were conceived to be outside the capitalist mode of production have progressively vanished. Subjectivity is entirely immersed in exchange...”<sup>21</sup> In this view, the application of what Foucault calls “the economic grid” of rationality to formerly “opposed or complementary” fields is part of this progressive disappearance of what were once values and modes exterior to capitalist valorization. However, another side to this process becomes visible when we attend to the role of self-preservation in constituting individual interest. From this perspective, the same expansion of capital that is seemingly poised to engulf all of life itself brings with it the apotheosis of individual interest as an explanatory regime, and that regime is based on self-preservation--on a relationship of individual self to individual life that is essentially

immune to direct interference. And once rights, normative values, and even vulnerability to juridical will become mere data to be fed into this calculus of interest, the politics of life in each of these realms is reimagined in terms of this individual interest in life. Rather than a liberal subject with a right to life, we find a subject with an interest in life; rather than a subject who is the object of a sovereign decision over life and death, we find a subject who actively pursues self-preservation, such that acts of juridical will become mere factors to be weighed in the course of this individual pursuit. Although this subject of life-interest does not appear to be recognizably political in the liberal sense of having rights and obligations as a citizen, it now occupies--with all the sense of forcible displacement that word can imply--the position formerly inhabited by the liberal individual. The result is a political category keyed to the expansion of capital it accompanies: the subject of life-interest.

### The Ticking-Time Bomb

I want to conclude by turning very briefly to a survival game that has an express connection to American geopolitics, in order to suggest something of the permeation of life-interest as a biopolitical category. Usually referred to as the “ticking-time-bomb scenario,” this game has been the subject of political debate, as well as being famously and frequently incarnated in the television series *24*. Its central features are a hidden bomb that will soon go off, a tortured terrorist who knows where the bomb is, and an American who must decide whether torture is justified in these extraordinary circumstances.<sup>22</sup> In its archetypal form, torture in general offers what might be the ultimate version of the abstraction and extremity that characterize the microeconomic mode: through the stripped-down confrontation between the torturer and the tortured, it aims to produce interests in the torture victim so profound that they

white out and render irrelevant everything else in the world.<sup>23</sup> In the ticking-time-bomb scenarios through which American torture has been most frequently fictionalized and debated, however, more attention has, if anything, been paid not to the painful interests of the tortured, but to those of the torturer, who must steel himself to withstand the moral agony of undertaking horrific actions in order to serve the greater good. Whereas in Elaine Scarry's famous account the eradication of agency via torture serves to turn the victim's pain into the torturer's power, torture in the ticking-time-bomb scenario instead transforms the victim's pain into the torturer's pain. That is, in facing an unbearable choice that requires subordinating one profound interest to another, the torturer manifests his or her own version of suffering agency.

Although there is an obvious political utility in imagining the torturer as an even greater victim than his victim, I think this depiction suggests that the ticking-time-bomb scenario also has a more specific function, which may explain some of its more puzzling features. Numerous commentators have noted a mismatch between the ticking-time-bomb scenario and the historical context in which it emerges. Not only does this scenario appear as a feature of public debate almost immediately after the destruction of the World Trade Center, well before there is any official acknowledgment of the United States as engaging or needing to engage in so-called enhanced interrogation techniques, but also the torture that was eventually revealed to be perpetrated by the United States in the War on Terror bears very little resemblance to the dynamic that drives the ticking-time-bomb scenario.<sup>24</sup> However, the early, repeated, and erroneous recourse to the ticking-time-bomb scenario makes a different kind of sense if we understand its purpose otherwise: not as a means of mediating the actual use of torture in the War on Terror, but instead as a way to negotiate the uncanny, powerful, and disturbing

resemblance between the act of the suicide bomber and the form of individuality guaranteed by life-interest.

The dangers become evident if we consider the suicide bomber's decision in the light of the model of choice I have been examining here. Not only is microeconomic interest by definition nonfalsifiable and incontestable--it is unquestionably in my interest to blow myself up if I decide that it is--but the suicide bomber also pays for his or her choice in the very currency that underwrites agential action in the present, the embodiment of life-interest. Considered from this perspective, it is difficult to refute the logic that leads one individual to judge the benefit of making a fatal strike against one's enemies to be worth the cost of his or her life. In fact, once self-preservation operates as the clearest sign of interest, acting against self-preservation in order to achieve another objective becomes a profound expression of suffering agency, of the commitment to attain one interest at the expense of another held almost equally dear. And, unlike the self-sacrifice of the soldier who flings himself into the breach to save his comrades, the premeditated nature of suicidal terrorism puts the focus on the calculated trade-off that brings a person to see something else as more valuable than continuing to live. When the confluence of life and choice operates as the medium of individual will, deliberately and consciously turning suicide into a weapon may come to seem one of the most cogent and agential acts a subject can take.

To be clear: my point is not that this logic has any bearing on the actual motivations of those performing so-called enhanced interrogation or those labeled as terrorists within the context of twenty-first-century geopolitics. Rather, I am suggesting that the ticking-time-bomb trope is in part an attempt to engage and revalue a perceived resemblance between the deployment of life-interest by the figure of "the terrorist" and the experience of life-interest that

guarantees political subjectivity within post-Fordist capital. If the suicidal terrorist appears to triumph through an ingenious renegotiation of this fusion of life and will, then it becomes imperative to imagine an American victory over this particular form of power. In order to both activate and overcome the life-interest of the terrorist, it is not sufficient in this version for the torturer to force the victim to subordinate one profound interest for another, since it is the terrorists' profound capacity to do exactly this that constitutes the threat to be eliminated. Rather, in order to prove his power, the torturer must demonstrate that he can best the victim on the same ground that the terrorist has gained the advantage: the enactment of suffering agency. That is why the reluctant torturer is not outside the game, a sovereign designing its rules, but inside of it, a player fighting to win; that is why he must be both torturer and self-torturer. In order to stage the defeat of an enemy who has found a way to weaponize life-interest, the ticking-time-bomb scenario proves that its American hero can withstand more suffering for his agency than the terrorist can.

Taken together, the texts and tropes I have examined begin to suggest the potent elasticity of life-interest as a biopolitical category. On the one hand, *Gone Girl* demonstrates that life-interest can function as a reterritorialization of the subject because of its presumed status as a feature of each human body. On the other hand, the ticking-time-bomb scenario clearly indicates an anxiety regarding this very universality, which means that there can be no necessary, categorical distinction between humans who do and do not master life-interest. Even in survival-game texts that insist on life-interest as a stable site of sovereign power, the very frenzy of representation that has given us so many texts in the microeconomic mode points to the unfinished and inconclusive nature of these imaginative experiments. What a regime based on life-interest can enable, contain, or set loose is a question currently subject to near-constant

hypothetical extrapolation, in the innumerable forking paths of the narratives that make up the microeconomic mode. In its melding of the state of nature and sovereignty, living being with choosing subject, suffering with agency, the microeconomic mode registers a rethinking of contemporary political subjectivity whose reach and consequences are still being worked out around us.

## Notes

Jane Elliot, “The Microeconomic Mode: Survival Games, Life-Interest and the Re-imagination of Sovereignty,” forthcoming in *Novel*, Volume 51. Copyright, 2018, Novel, Inc. All rights reserved. Republished by permission of the copyright holder, and the present publisher, Duke University Press.

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<sup>1</sup> *127 Hours*, directed by Danny Boyle (Los Angeles: Fox Searchlight, 2011); Aron Ralston, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (New York: Atria, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (London: MacMillan, 1932), 15. On the gradual canonization of Robbins’s definition as a measure of shifts in the topics and methods of postwar economics, see Roger E. Backhouse and Steven G. Medema, “Retrospectives: On the Definition of Economics,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 23 (2009): 221-34.

<sup>3</sup> Gary S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 5, 1.



<sup>4</sup> Becker describes his method as tautological but defends it on the grounds of its predictive power. Ibid., 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 260.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Gary S. Becker, Kevin M. Murphy, and Jörg L. Spenkuch, “The Manipulation of Children’s Preferences, Old-Age Support, and Investment in Children’s Human Capital,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 34, no. S2 (2016): S3<N>S30.

<sup>8</sup> For key arguments describing this shift, see Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 3-7; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and Neferti X. M. Tadiar, “Life-Times of Disposability within Global Neoliberalism,” *Social Text* 31 (2013): 19-48. Although there are significant disagreements among these theorists in terms of the way they describe the form, reach, and global dispersion of this shift in contemporary capital, I focus on their general areas of overlap in order to illuminate the particular, overarching distinction that concerns me here: that between the subject of immaterial labor and the subject of life-interest. I use the term *immaterial labor* and not *affective labor* in this essay, but both terms circulate as a means to describe this transformation, and both have been subject to arguments regarding their limitations.

<sup>9</sup> In general, gamification refers to the creation or amplification of game-like features within a system that exists for reasons other than the experience of playing a game. See, e.g., Jane

McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York: Penguin, 2011). For a critique of such arguments focused on the relationship between neoliberalism and gamification, see McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel* (New York: Crown, 2012), 301.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 39; italics in the original.

<sup>13</sup> See Deleuze, “Postscript”; Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 157.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 274.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 284-85.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> For John Locke, for example, self-preservation is both the first law of nature and the foundation for liberty within the commonwealth; only with liberty can Man be sure of fulfilling the duty of preserving himself and other humans. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 270-71, 279.

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 240.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 386.

<sup>22</sup> On the ubiquity of and political and ethical problems with the ticking-time-bomb scenario, see, e.g., David Luban, “Liberalism, Torture, and the Ticking Bomb,” *Virginia Law Review* 91

(2005): 1425-61. I'm grateful to audience members at the ASAP/5 conference in October 2013 for questions regarding the relationship between the ticking-time-bomb trope and the microeconomic mode. At the time, I was unconvinced of the connection, but the discussion encouraged me to consider the issue further.

<sup>23</sup> For the classic account of this type, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> On the chasm between the scenarios through which we theorize torture and its current manifestations in the War on Terror, see Stephanie Athey, "The Torture Device: Debate and Archetype," in *Torture*, ed. Zalloua Zahi and Shampa Biswas (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 129-57; and Michael P. Vicaro, "A Liberal Use of 'Torture': Pain, Personhood, and Precedent in the U.S. Federal Definition of Torture," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 14 (2011): 401-26.

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