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Settling Accounts: On The Subject of Economic Confessions

ABSTRACT

This article traces the modern history of the “economic confession”—first person accounts of financial markets—in relation to the proliferation of confessional forms in contemporary popular culture. It is argued that the way these confessions position themselves as personal narratives of impersonal social forms like financial markets are important for understanding how the social relations that underwrite contemporary financial capitalism are maintained. The article concludes by placing the genre of the economic confession in the context of the modern confessional regime in which the techniques for speaking out have been structured in a way that preserves rather than transform the established social order.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article suit l’histoire moderne de la “confession économique” – les récits racontés à la première personne des marchés financiers – par rapport à la prolifération des formes confessionnelles dans la culture populaire contemporaine. Nous avançons que la façon dont ces confessions se positionnent, comme des récits personnels des formes sociales impersonnelles, tels que les marchés financiers, est importante afin de comprendre comment les rapports sociaux qui sous-tendent le capitalisme financier contemporain sont maintenus. L’article se conclut en plaçant le genre de la confession économique dans le contexte du régime confessionnel contemporain dans lequel les stratégies pour se faire entendre sont structurées de façons qui préservent au lieu de perturber l’ordre social établi.

KEYWORDS: Wall Street; confession; stock markets; speculation; finance



Many responses to *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Winter 2013), a film based on Jordan Belfort’s autobiographical book of the same name (2007), praised director Martin Scorsese for his technical ability while deploring the film’s seeming lack of conscience. Concerns that the film lacked a “moral center” (Maltin 2013) were accompanied by disgust at the exuberant response that greeted the film’s reception

by “Wall Street dudes” (Perlberg 2013). Many of these concerns focused on Belfort himself, and whether transforming this man’s life story into a film glorified the self-serving and criminal behaviours he displayed during his days running ‘boiler room’ Stratton Oakmont. What these reactions reveal, however, is not so much whether the film achieved its aesthetic aims, but rather a set of popular expectations about what such narratives *should* accomplish. While Scorsese described the film as a “dark comedy,” and sought to anchor it in the ethical certainty of satire, critics and commentators were disappointed that the film did not offer a more explicit moral message in the manner of *Boiler Room* (Younger 2000), an earlier film account of Belfort’s career.

The Wolf of Wall Street does not stand alone in the public imaginary as an example of this type of narrative. First-hand accounts of the excesses and errors of financial markets have frequently drawn upon the established generic norms of the confessional narrative and expectations regarding its capacity to bring about individual and social transformation. In this article, it is argued that economic confessions stand as a subgenre of the confessional narrative, but that it differs from other kinds of confessions in that it forecloses rather than facilitates the transformative potential commonly associated with such narratives. While circulating within a moral economy marked out in popular culture as particularly suited to confession, these narratives of speculative markets draw our attention to the limits of established cultural forms to provide a satisfactory accounting of responsibility and agency in financial capitalism.

This article focuses on two periods in the development of the economic confessional that have coincided with distinct configurations of financial capitalism. In the first of these periods, economic confessionals from the years leading up to the 1980s represented market players as rational subjects. The portrait of the rational stock trader that emerges in these texts is one that compliments the centralized institutions and social relations that defined the Keynesian compromise between the state and the market that emerged in the wake of the economic and political instability of the early 20th century. Since the 1980s, however, confessional narratives have emphasized market players as moral agents. This turn to moral responsibility during the second period considered here is interpreted as belonging to the modes of governance that have emerged since the collapse of Keynesian policies and their replacement with the neoliberal deregulation of markets. It will be argued that this shift towards the moral subject reflects the processes of responsabilization that have long been discussed as a key characteristic of neoliberal culture by other scholars (for an early and influential discussion see, Burchell 1996). Common to both periods, however, is the contradictory and conflicted nature that such narratives present. More than just expressions of dissent or celebration, economic confessions perform the complex relationship between modes of critique and structures of exploitation that have developed as bulwarks against the radical unworking of capitalism.

The Confessional Form

Defined as first-hand accounts of financial markets, the ‘economic confessional’ is a genre that developed slowly over the course of the 20th century before expanding rapidly since the 1980s. Early examples of the economic confessional include *Confessions of a Former Customer’s Man* (1932) by Bowers and Salmon, and Charles Ponzi’s self-published *The Rise of Mr. Ponzi* (1936). In the 1970s, a number of insider accounts of the market boom and bust of the late 1960s were published, primarily for the paperback market (Brutus 1971; Hazard 1972; Smith 1968). Since the 1980s, these types of books have appeared with increasing frequency, beginning with Michael Lewis’s *Liar’s Poker: Rising Through The Wreckage on Wall Street* (1989), as markets lurched from crisis to crisis. The financial crisis of 2008 produced a small library of titles, such as *How I Caused the Credit Crunch* (Ishikawa 2009), *Confessions of a Subprime Lender: An Insider’s Tale of Greed, Fraud, and Ignorance* (Bitner 2008) and *Why I Left Goldman Sachs* (Smith 2012). The genre had become so common by 2007 that a reviewer of the book, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, lamented in the *New York Times* that, “The confessional Wall Street memoir has become a tired literary medium” (Thomas, *New York Times*, September 11, 2007).

These texts share a few characteristics in common with other examples of the confessional in popular culture. First, they are relational in nature, involving interaction between the narrator and an interlocutor. Sometimes this interlocutor is a specific individual; other times the role of confessor is occupied by a more amorphously-defined notion of the general public. Second, these confessional narratives reveal a hidden or hard-to-speak truth about how markets operate. However, this relationship to truth is performative rather than descriptive as narratives about the market serve as both constitutive descriptions and justifications for the behaviours of participants. This point is consistent with Jo Gill’s statement that “confessional writing is poetic not mimetic, it constructs rather than reflects some pre-textual truth” (Gill 2005: 4). Finally, building on its relational structure and performative function, these confessions can be read as documenting the constitution of particular forms of capitalist subjectivity. This is a claim that builds on Michel Foucault’s analysis of how “the truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power” (Foucault 1978: 59).

While useful, this list of generic characteristics should be seen as heuristic rather than exhaustive; adhering too strictly to such lists runs the risk of flattening out the variety and variation of confessional practices. Indeed, the broad historical sweep that characterizes some discussions of confessional practice, moving in a seamless manner from the Middle Ages to the present moment (Aho 2006), should give us reason to pause. As Barry King notes in an otherwise sympathetic reading of Foucault, such transhistorical approaches to confession risk overstating the continuity in practices across time and place (King 2008). Concerns about how to capture the variable nature of the confession are common in recent discussions

of the confessional practices in literary and cultural studies. Peter Brooks, in his discussion of literary and legal confession, describes the genre as “difficult and slippery” (Brooks 2000: 11). Similarly, Gill begins a collection on modern confessional writing by drawing attention to “its complexity, its indeterminacy and its apparent incomprehensibility” (2005: 1). Even as the confessional mode of discourse has proliferated in contemporary popular culture, a phenomenon Foucault summed up in his observation that the West has become “a singularly confessing society” (1978: 59), it has become ever more elusive. It is perhaps in response to the slippery nature of the confessional that David Tell (2012) has recently argued that the only way to study the genre is by regarding as a confession anything that claims to be a confession. Taken together, these claims regarding the confessional are a reminder of the need to read the confession as contingent and contextual. The subject who confesses is a product of the context in which the confession takes place, and the narrative that results speaks to and from this context rather than some essential human need to speak the truth.

The analysis that follows does not resolve the ambiguities of the confessional form, but does draw inspiration from the emphasis other scholars have placed on its variable forms. The analysis of economic confessionals that follows builds on the claim that confessions about the economy are as much about the economy as they are about the subject who confesses. I seek to make sense of the relations within which economic confessions circulate, recognizing that the confessional genre traces a complex geometry of forces in its relationship to subjectivity, cultural norms, textuality and truth. The most significant component of the economic confessional, then, is not the accounts of the activities of traders or the narration of catastrophic failures of the market, but what they tell us about how the uncertainty of speculative risk has been managed in different periods when treated as both the outcome of individual action and a problem for society as a whole. In this regard, the analysis draws inspiration directly from Foucault’s elaboration of the relationship between confessional practice, the formation of subjectivity and the institutionalization of power relations (Foucault 1978). However, it develops an argument that Foucault was unable to address, suggesting a possible intersection between his discussion of confessional practice in relation to the formation of subjectivity, and the analyses of neoliberalism he developed as part of his examination of biopolitical governance (Foucault 2010).

Economic Confessions and Rational Markets

Sir Ernest Benn’s *The Confessions of a Capitalist* (1925) is one of the earliest explicit invocations of the term “confession” in the context of economic matters. While a few examples of first person narratives that address financial speculation circulated prior to the 1920s, most of these were explicitly fiction. For example, Latham Smith’s *Ye Outside Fools! Glimpses of the London Stock Exchange* (1877), published

under the pseudonym Erasmus Pinto, adopts the first person narration of travails common to confessions. Yet, it presents itself as a satirical account of the opinions of a trader supposedly speaking to his ‘brother’ traders, advising average investors who might stumble on the text (the “outside fool” of the title) to “learn how the game is played, or give it up” (1877: xi). As John Reed notes in his survey of speculation in Victorian literature, the book “is in the guise of a novel in the guise of a confession, but it is actually a satirical extravaganza that begins with the sins of the stock exchange and extends them to the community at large” (1984: 191).

Two other early texts are notable for their departure from the narrative style and subject position common to accounts about markets of this period, A.W. Dimock’s *Wall Street and the Wilds* (1915) and Edwin Lefevre’s *Reminiscences of a Stock Operator* ([1923]1994). Neither of these texts is truly confessional in its style. The first draws heavily on personal memoir, using techniques Dimock would adopt in later books to describe his time among the “lumber men” and the people of the American southwest (1910). Like Smith’s *Ye Outside Fools!*, Lefevre’s book is a fictionalized autobiography, and even though Lefevre wrote elsewhere about Wall Street (1901; 1925), *Reminiscences* is his only text written in the first person that purports to be non-fiction.

The rarity of first person narratives detailing life in the stock market prior to the 1920s is noteworthy because even in the 19th and early 20th centuries there was a growing recognition of the necessity to explicate and better understand the dynamics of stock trading and financial speculation. Yet, among the polemical pamphlets, instructional guides and even long poems about speculation and financial markets, few accounts take up or adapt any of the characteristics of the confessional. For example, Walter Bagehot notes the absence of explanations of market failures at the beginning of *Lombard Street: A Description of the Money Market* (1874), yet takes pains to make clear that his account is not simply a personal description. Much like contemporary accounts that offer objective explanations for the failings of the financial industry (Johnson 2011; Sorkin 2010), these early texts provided overviews of significant events, of the functioning of the market as well as of prominent individuals. However, they presented these revelations from a position of detached analysis, and in the voice of established expertise.

Indeed, the novelty of using the confessional form to discuss capitalism and the economy is on full display in *Confession of a Capitalist* (Benn 1925). While ostensibly recounting the story of how he came to be a businessman, Benn offers a defense of capitalism in the guise of a confession at a time when socialism was gaining popularity, repeatedly highlighting the unusual practice of using his own story to make his arguments. He begins the preface to his text by touching on the unlikely topic of his book; a subject of “bad taste, dealing as it does with matters which, by common consent are not usually written or talked about.” The innovative approach of this text, however, not only breached decorum by discussing a “private” manner

in public, but also threatened to compromise the validity of his defence of capitalism itself by presenting it as something other than objective fact. “In venturing to discuss my private affairs as I do in the following pages,” Benn writes, “I am fully conscious of the grave risk that I run of failing to explain myself properly” (22).

Benn openly admits that the decision to outline his beliefs about capitalism as a personal story was inspired by his desire to reach a popular audience. Distinguishing his writing from formal economic analysis, he writes in the “Introductory Apology”:

Sound economic literature makes...no appeal to the passions or desires of the people as a whole. The poor do not read it, and the rich, as a class, make no effort to understand it.... It seems to me just possible—and this has weighed very heavily with me in the writing of this book—that the unattractive character of sound economic theories may find some compensating balance in the personal interest...of such autobiographical details as I may be able to introduce. (17)

This gesture toward popular appeal points the way to new forms of discourse circulating in popular culture at the time that were coming to be known as ‘confessions.’ Even though it is possible that Benn had no first-hand knowledge of these publications, the closest analog to his own text may be found in the pages of newly minted confessional magazines such as *True Stories*, which began publication in 1922. This and similar magazines featured articles in which primarily female narrators detailed their struggles to overcome adversity. In the words of Maureen Honey, a historian of the popular confessional genre,

Confession stories are a nightmarish litany of abuses inflicted on innocent people by fate and human perfidy. Automobile accidents maim or kill those closest to the narrator, children die suddenly, babies are born dead or disabled, the heroine’s need for love is exploited for personal gain, narrators are afflicted with disfiguring and fatal diseases. Set against this stygian backdrop is a woman who is struggling to keep body and soul together amid numerous assaults on her dignity and sanity. While the reader understands that this figure is a victim of circumstance and that her mistakes flow from an incomplete or immature perspective, the narrator herself is haunted by shame, guilt, and a debilitating sense of inadequacy as she blames herself for her difficulties” (1984: 306).

Insofar as they involve a first-person account of activities and events hidden by shame or social pressure, it is possible to see a connection between the confessional narratives presented in these magazines and the adaptation of the form to discuss the changing structure of stock markets.

The connection to the confessional magazine is more explicitly apparent in *Confessions of a Former Customer’s Man: Being The Inside Story of How Wall Street Separates a Sucker and his Money*, which tells the story of David L. Salmon “as told to” Dr.

Edwin F. Bowers (1932). Salmon's ghostwritten confession is situated at the intersection of progressive social critique and the confessional magazine. Published by the left-leaning Vanguard Press, Salmon's story details "my initiation into this unsavory and generally disreputable order.... which serves to substantiate in my mind the old adage 'Easy is the descent into hell'" (11). After following the transformation of the author from a cultured college graduate and amateur musician to a "financial parasite," the book concludes that "if we will remember to dread—as a scalded child dreads a hot tea-kettle—any further intercourse with the stock market, and speculation generally, the price we have paid for this devastating experience [the Great Depression] will not have been too high" (251). Here, the narrator expresses remorse for allowing himself to be led into temptation by the promise of easy money, often expressed in terms of his decision to abandon a promising career as a musician, echoes the arc of the confessional magazine heroine struggling to come to terms with their personal shame by warning others about worldly dangers.

Yet, the economic confessional did not borrow the form of the confessional magazine wholesale. In the development of a narrator who straddles subjective experience and objective exposition, these confessions are clearly distinguished from the tone and subject matter of popular confessional narratives of the time. While the appearance of the first-person in these narratives is presented as unseemly because it lays the self bare for others to see, the "I" of the economic confessional is not one who risks being overwhelmed by circumstances. The separation of experience from engagement develops as one of the defining characteristics of the economic confessional. For example, one finds at the beginning of Benn's confession an attempt to distinguish his apologia for capitalism from other personal narrative accounts of the economy when he states that "The Matter of [this book] has been dictated in the manner of commercial correspondence and no attempt has been made to shield bald fact behind art or style" (1925: Preface). And even the more salacious narrative of Salmon's fallen *Customers' Man* ends with a series of sober recommendations for reforming the market. In this way, the economic confessional possesses a tone and perspective quite different from that of the confessional magazine, whose articles were written in a style that mimicked the "warm breathlessness of a girl confiding to a friend across the kitchen table" (Gerbner 1958: 34).

The confessional genre, in both the confessional magazine and the economic confessional form, permitted revelations regarding difficult subjects through the authenticity of personal experience. However, the economic confessional developed around a very different sort of exchange between the author and the confessor. For Benn, the confessor is reduced to stenographer rather than friend or confidant. Benn's confession provides a series of lessons about why individual freedom and liberal capitalism are the foundations of society. Unlike the popular confessional form, he remained in control of the 'secrets' revealed rather than haunted and hunted by the threat of public shaming. The economic confessional is an act of masterful revelation and instruction. Texts that appeared during or shortly after the Great

Depression, such as Bowers and Salmon's *Confessions of a Former Customer's Man* (1932) or Fred Schwed's *Where are the Customer's Yachts?* (1940), took a decidedly different position from Benn with regard to market speculation. Yet, as different as these texts are from *Confessions of a Capitalist*, they share the same narrative position Benn had staked out. Retaining a balance between the personal and the descriptive, they present themselves as fair-minded and disinterested assessments of the promises and dangers to be found on Wall Street, offered for the instruction of others. In order to achieve this goal, the author must contain the danger posed by the confessional form of reducing the narratives to the merely personal.

We see this attitude in Schwed's description of his own position with regard to other books about Wall Street, and in his diagnosis of how best to approach a description of the market. He writes,

Books about Wall Street fall into two categories which may respectively be called the admiring, or "Oh my!" School, and the vindictive, or "Turn the rascals out!" School.... Neither school assays more than a few pounds of open-mindedness to the ton, and that noble occupation, Deep Thinking, continues to be, as ever, mostly second guessing. This book will try to avoid being classified in either school. The writer has no warm emotional regard for any set of economic theories, and I am not in the pay of either Moscow or The Interests. (1940:8)

While personal, Schwed's approach is neutral in its assessment; the objective character of the analysis containing whatever partiality might result from speaking in the first-person. And, like Bowers and Salmon (1932), Schwed concluded his book with a section on ways to reform the market and avoid future problems (1940: 153-170).

This mixture of personal experience and impersonal insight remained one of the defining characteristics of the economic confessional during the decades that followed. Breaking with established ways of displaying knowledge with authority, the narrators retained the power to speak with expertise while not being cast aside for documenting 'merely' personal experience. This narrative voice remained in place when the economic confessional reappeared in the wake of the collapse of the stock market and economic slowdown between 1968 and 1971. By the time John D. Spooner published *Confessions of a Stockbroker: A Wall Street Diary* (1971) under the pen name Brutus, and C.C. Hazard (also likely a pseudonym) wrote *Confessions of a Wall Street Insider* (1972), the economic confessional had become a familiar genre form in popular culture. There was no longer a need to explain differences from other kinds of economic writing. Structured around the personal histories of individuals, the main purpose of both books was to instruct the reader about the functioning of the market and the character types that inhabited this world.

Confessions of a Stockbroker: A Wall Street Diary is presented as journal entries for the period between June 1970 and April 1971, documenting the clients and market developments that filled the daily life of an average broker. “One of the points of this book,” the author writes, “is to instruct you in making money decisions in the stock market by knowing some tricks of common sense and by learning to have a sense of humor about what makes stocks go up and down” (Brutus 1971: xiii). Taking a similarly instructional approach to the confessional form, Hazard describes a variety of character types that people his vision of Wall Street, such as the odd-lotter, the chart-maker and the tape-watcher. He seeks solace from the irrationalities of the market in the writings of Descartes, explaining his agnosticism as a manifestation of Cartesian doubt. He writes:

There is no universally accepted market theory. And, as Descartes pointed out, there is not even the comforting hope that the most popular theory might be the most nearly correct or workable.... We can suspect, as Descartes did, that the opposite might be the case. (1972: 175-176)

Remaining above the fray, he is able to explain the market’s operation through the distance provided by Cartesian rationalism. Since the book was published as a part of the “Playboy Press Executive Library,” it is possible to infer that Hazard’s confession was intended to be an irreverent contribution to the education of young men according to established norms of professional and personal behaviour. In both the Hazard and Brutus cases, the instructional and the personal are once more integrated as a way of situating the “I” at the centre of the story as one who experiences events, but is not overwhelmed by them.

The economic confessional as it developed in the early 20th century belongs to debates about the accountability and morality of financial speculation. Ann Fabian (1990) has traced the history of attempts to distinguish speculation from gambling in the United States during the 19th century. David Itzkowitz (2002) outlines a similar process in the United Kingdom. Urs Stahéli (2013) argues that the goal of these debates was to discursively secure and fully legitimize financial speculation by separating the rational market from the irrationality of individual and collective action. This separation, however, remained incomplete. It was plagued by the inability to fully extricate finance from noneconomic factors. Ultimately, he argues, the speculator continued to be viewed as an agent of instability in the market; a figure that straddled the line between the rational economy and the irrational play of social forces. In the economic confessionals discussed so far there is an attempt to produce a subjective position that is at once personal, part of the market, and rational. The emergence of such a subject position can be interpreted attempt to resolve the contradictions and tensions outlined by Stahéli. Appeals to rationalism, whether cynical (Schwed) or Cartesian (Hazard), grounded the market in a system of thought and a code of behaviour impervious to the instabilities caused by individual wants and desires.

The relationship between these narratives and the popular genre of the confessional magazine is not insignificant, however, because it indicates the cultural forms through which the logics and practices of financial speculation were grounded in the fabric of popular culture. This relationship should not be understood simply as a matter of reducing anxiety about finance by embedding it in forms that were more familiar to people, a sugar coating for a bitter pill. Rather, the rational market player presented and performed in the economic confessional is an exemplary expression of the ways in which popular culture was imbricated in ideologies of common-sense rationalism that attempted to resolve the fundamental contradiction of financial speculation, both justifying the necessity of speculation while attempting to contain the instability inherent in such activities.

This rational trader, however, should not be confused with the isolated, calculative subject that would emerge at the heart of rational choice theory in the work of Chicago School economists Milton Friedman (1957) and Gary Becker (1976) — a theoretical figure whose significance would grow as this mode of the economic confessional started to change. Rational choice theories are based upon an individual rational actor who maximizes gain with no sense of the social beyond the market. In the economic confessional of the mid-20th century, however, the adoption of a rational framework was the means through which broader social forces in the form of behavioural and logical norms mitigated unpredictable and idiosyncratic individual behaviour. The protagonists of these narratives were office workers, not the lone wolf or rogue trader that we see in later incarnations of the economic confessional discussed in the next section. In this way, the place of rationalism in these earlier texts can be understood as articulating what Foucault describes as governmentality, or that set of discursive and institutional modes through which the unpredictable individual can be made manageable through the social (Foucault 2010).

The Modern Economic Confession: Morality and Revelation

The period during which the economic confessionals discussed above appeared roughly coincided with the first stage of the global development of financial capitalism. It ended with the transition from an economy primarily centred on production and exchange to one in which investment and speculation played an increasingly significant role in the generation of wealth. Reflecting the increasing instability in financial markets that resulted from these changes, subsequent confessional narratives tended to focus on large-scale catastrophic market crashes caused by increasingly deregulated market speculation. Different subject matter, however, was not the only change that took place in the economic confessionals that emerged during this period; a different kind of narrating subject developed in response to the relations between the individual and speculative markets that were taking shape. The appeal of the confessional form remained the ability to present simultaneously both a personal and an objective account of the market. Yet, these more recent texts relocate

the grounds for maintaining functioning markets from a universal code of rational expectations to an individualized process of moral reflection and self-realization.

Michael Lewis' *Liar's Poker* (1989) is a key text for mapping the moral turn in the economic confessional. Often cited by critics and subsequent authors as setting the tone for the genre to the present day, the book details Lewis's time as a bond trader at Salomon Brothers during the 1980s. While Lewis does not foreground the book's confessional nature, he commented at the time of its publication that it "was supposed to be a warts-and-all confession" (Schwartz 1989: 62). Similar to earlier confessional narratives, the author does not take an explicitly moral position. Speaking of his decision to leave investment banking, Lewis explains that, "I wasn't even suffering from growing disillusionment (it grew to a point, still bearable, then stopped). Although there were many perfectly plausible reasons to jump ship, I left, I think, more because I didn't need to stay any longer" (1989: 307). The cumulative effect of Lewis' account may amount to a scathing critique of the excesses and errors that he encountered in his time working at the bank, although the text never explicitly condemns what it describes. The only indication of a broader personal investment comes at the very end of the text's preface, where he writes: "I set out to write this book only because I thought it would be better to tell the story than go on living the story" (1989: 10). This is a position that he would reiterate two decades later when casting an eye back on his experiences from the vantage point of the financial crisis of 2008:

When I sat down to write my account of the experience in 1989... it was in the spirit of a young man who thought he was getting out while the getting was good. I was merely scribbling down a message on my way out and stuffing it into a bottle for those who would pass through these parts in the far distant future. Unless some insider got all of this down on paper, I figured, no future human would believe that it happened. (Lewis 2008)

It is tempting to impose a more explicit moral agenda onto *Liar's Poker* in light of Lewis' later writing on the subject (Lewis 2011), yet a final judgment on the market is barely present in the text itself. Although Lewis would suggest years later that the book might serve to raise awareness about the excesses of financial markets, he admitted that having such an effect on his readers is only something he would have suggested "if you got a few drinks" into him (Lewis 2008).

Lewis, however, is unusual in his refusal to launch a broader moral attack on financial markets. Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, it became common for economic confessionals to present narratives of both social and personal transformation. Walter Pavlo Junior, one of the co-authors of *Stolen Without A Gun: Confessions from Inside History's Biggest Accounting Fraud—The Collapse of MCI WorldCom* (2007), notes in his preface to the book that, "I've had to dredge up and relive the most painful time in my life, but in the end it's been a rewarding experience. I am a better person for working with [my co-author], and for being forced to reflect and

challenge myself” (2007: xxv). Similarly Dan Reingold writes in *Confessions of a Wall Street Analyst: A True Story of Inside Information and Corruption in the Stock Market*: “What you’ll learn in these pages is sometimes ugly, but it is all true. While writing this book, I have had to relive many of the decisions, judgment calls, and ethical choices I made. Sometimes those memories have made me smile; other times, I’ve cringed with embarrassment” (2005: 7-8).

In *Confessions of a Subprime Lender: An Insider’s Tale of Greed, Fraud and Ignorance* (2008), a personal narrative of the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007, Richard Bitner explicitly comments on this transition in the form of the economic confessional. He writes: “I started writing this book believing that somebody who experienced the debacle first-hand should tell the story. I quickly realized, however, that wasn’t enough of a reason for writing.... I want to see the mortgage industry find its moral compass and get back to the business of intelligently lending money” (2008: xii). While not abandoning entirely the form of the mid-century economic confession (specifically the merging of instruction with autobiography both in topic and in tone), Bitner shifted the narrative focus from market agnosticism to contrition before the dangers of the market.

As the activities recounted in economic confessionals became more sensational, their moral position involved a broadening of the scope of activities discussed. If earlier works were primarily occupied with exploring the intricacies of the market and the types of individuals encountered there, more recent confessionals have expanded to include accounts of other ethical failings. We see these failings dramatized at the beginning of Tetsuya Ishikawa’s *How I Caused the Credit Crunch* (2009), where he explains how the text took its final form.

I started writing a book which was very detailed, technically comprehensive and highly informative, but which explained things simply enough for even my mother to understand. I even gave the first few chapters to the friend who suggested writing the book. ‘Informative,’ he complimented me, ‘but fucking boring. What about all the other shit you did? Your Brazilian stripper, the whores, the drugs, the booze. That’s the shit people want to know.’ That didn’t inspire me, especially because stories of drugs, whores, alcohol and the general excess of bankers were not new. But I had the wrong end of the stick. What had made him suggest the idea in the first place was that he found my human story, and not the credit products interesting.... What he did care about was what drove us to these products in the first place (2010: 2).

Cityboy: Beer and Loathing in the Square Mile (2008) by Geraint Anderson offers a similarly expansive portrait of a trader’s downfall, twinning increasingly risky behaviour on the markets with the depravity of the narrator’s team on the streets of London.

These accounts document how the scale and consequences of financial speculation had exceeded attempts to provide a rational account of financial markets by the end of the 20th century. Yet, the moral turn should not be interpreted as marking the transformation of the economic confessional from a justification of the status quo into a tool for critical engagement. The most recent version of the economic confessional exemplifies the constraints on social change that define the cultural and affective context within which confessional narratives circulate in the contemporary moment. The moral trader is not socially responsible, even in the highly schematic way that the rational investor of earlier economic confessionals was. Instead, these narratives allocate responsibility and agency to the individual alone. In this way, these narratives enact the desired end result of processes of responsabilization and individualization that have restructured the institutions of political and economic life under neoliberalism.

To fully understand the place of these more recent economic confessionals within neoliberal culture, it is necessary to contextualize these shifts in narrative form in relation to the way that these texts are received. The reactions of concerned critics and whooping Wall Street Dudes to *The Wolf of Wall Street* discussed at the beginning of this article exemplify the range of different readings that economic confessionals solicited. Commenting on the similarly disparate responses to his own book, Michael Lewis attributed this to a breakdown in communication. He writes:

I hoped that some bright kid at, say, Ohio State University who really wanted to be an oceanographer would read my book, spurn the offer from Morgan Stanley, and set out to sea. Somehow that message failed to come across. Six months after *Liar's Poker* was published, I was knee-deep in letters from students at Ohio State who wanted to know if I had any other secrets to share about Wall Street. They'd read my book as a how-to manual. (Lewis 2008)

Suggesting that this is a question of mistaken interpretations or failed communication draws upon deeply held beliefs regarding the relationship between individual reason and public discourse that are foundational to liberal democratic conceptions of society. It is, however, possible to suggest that something more serious is going on that challenges the argument that this is simply a question of interpretation, bringing to light the limits rational discourse in the era of financial capitalism.

Rather than presume that this is another example of a failure to persuade due to inadequate evidence or logic, perhaps this is indicative of a more radical fracture within the financial imaginary and its associated forms of subjectivity. Perhaps the reception of these narratives maps the disconnect between an interpretation of these texts that focuses on the form of individualism characterized by the neoliberal moral trader and an interpretation that is structured by the expectation that these narratives are subject to the residual modes of governance and forms of subjectivity

that characterized the rationalist ethics of an earlier period of financial capitalism. These confessional narratives can be read as both models of how entrepreneurial individuals can rapidly accumulate wealth through participation in market speculation and cautionary tales of the excesses of capitalism that speak to a desire to return to the 'old normal' of financial markets that could be understood according to a shared rationality.

The divergent interpretations of these narratives of market morality connect these changes in the form of the economic confessional to broader changes in the relationship between modes of reading and forms of subjectivity. The consequences of viewing the economic confessional as either a 'how-to' or a fable for understanding financial capitalism entails more than just a generic shift as it also marks the difference between the entrepreneurial self who uses these narratives as a form of self-realization and the subject of liberal democracy that seeks governance through rules and norms. In this way, the evolution of the economic confessional documented here traces the transition between two conjunctures. The conflict between these two modes of narrating and interpreting the confessional narratives, however, should also serve as a reminder that residual modes of being and speaking about financial capitalism have not yet passed and emergent modes are not yet entirely dominant.

Conclusion: Settling Accounts with the Modern Confessional Regime

David Tell (2012) has argued that the twentieth century witnessed a number of 'confessional crises' during which the value of the confession itself was called into question. However, common to the way that economic confessionals are presented and received is a general belief that they describe the economy as it is, effectively effacing the performative nature of the confession. That these texts are viewed as offering plausible accounts of financial markets, even by those who are otherwise skeptical of such narratives, speaks to the unique place that discourse about markets holds in contemporary culture. While other areas of social activity are subjected to increasingly powerful skepticism, the market has mostly remained above doubt and suspicion. Yet faith in the truth of the forms of economic confessionals discussed above has also served to foreclose any broader engagement with alternatives to the confessional regimes of the past century. Is it possible to imagine a different way of speaking about and contesting capitalism through narratives that integrate multiple experiences of financial capital into an economy of solidarity rather than practices of display and discipline that conform to established economic logics such as defined in the texts discussed so far?

In this regard, the relationship between finance and confession put forward in the preface to *The Debt Resistor's Operations Manual* (2012) offers a striking counterpoint to the economic confessionals already discussed, and perhaps points a way forward. There, the authors explain that one of the obstacles to a social movement seeking to address the ubiquity and perniciousness of financial debt is the refusal

or inability to speak about it. “Because there is so much shame frustration and fear surrounding our debt,” they write, “we seldom talk about it openly with others. An initial step in building a debt resistance movement involves sharing the myriad of ways debt affects us both directly and indirectly” (Strike Debt 2012: vi). The editors of *The Trouble is the Banks: Letters to Wall Street*, a collection of letters recounting the travails of individuals faced with an unforgiving financial industry, offer an even more concrete consideration of what this different confession might involve. They write: “This is the speech of the People, not any authority above them. We have enough sources speaking for the highly placed and visible. This is a book that gives the ideas, and feelings, of the rest of us” (Greif, et al. 2012: xi).

It is important to be clear about how far this takes us from the kinds of economic confessional discussed above in both earlier and later forms. In an interview he gave shortly after the publication of *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Jordan Belfort explained that the publication of the book did not bring him peace: “I still don’t know who I am, but I know that I am not the guy that I was. It kills me, because deep down, I know that I am a good person. I just want to pay everyone back” (Thomas 2007). The proliferation of speaking subjects marked by the multiplication of personal pronouns in Belfort’s statement stands in stark contrast to the authorial presence that anchors the narrative in *The Wolf of Wall Street*. However, as the recognition of the need for many to speak against the shame of debt that is the focus of *The Debt Resisters’ Manual* and *The Trouble is the Banks* should remind us, the foreclosure of the multiplicity of the subject who witnesses and is called to account for financial speculation should not be rushed.

Learning to tell stories differently about the experience of finance capitalism might potentially overcome the constraints inherent in the received notions of confession that have been discussed here. Stories of debt and other experiences of financialization that are not centered on markets and investment banks work differently from traditional confessionals because they do not insist that the speaking subject possess the proper “knowledge” of financial markets before beginning. If the economic confessional speaks with a single voice, these narratives draw their power from the multiplicity of locations, experiences and identities that bring them together. It returns the performative power of the confession as a social act and, in the process, untethers the confessional from the structures of authority, individualism and subjectivity in which it is currently embedded. In this way, it is a contribution toward an adequate response to financial capital, and an important part of the process of resisting and unworking the damages it has caused.

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