SPECIAL COLLECTION
Reciprocal Radicalizing: Commemorating the Work of James A. Boon

The Devil in the Deal: Notes Toward an Anthropology of Confidence

Alexander S. Dent, The *George Washington University*

ABSTRACT
This essay uses Melville's analysis of confidence to look at the importance of uncertainty in contemporary capitalism. I focus, in particular, on the invocation of confidence in political spheres as a way to index ostensibly underlying economic realities. In The Confidence Man*, Herman Melville proposed that scrutiny of confidence was crucial for any understanding of 19th century America. He posited that, following P. T. Barnum, a larger and larger portion of communicative events were becoming conceivable as "pitches," where a seller tried to turn his or her interlocutor into a "buyer." The decision to buy required that the buyer accept the seller's claims about his subject position at a moment in which the buyer had very little to go on. The appeal of this economistic approach to communication has only increased with time, making an understanding of confidence urgent. Anthropologists of finance and politics in the United States ask us to consider the importance of debt, risk, and precarity. This essay proposes that confidence is the other face of this oft-tossed coin.* [Keywords: Economics, politics, language, United States, literature]

Anthropological Quarterly, Vol. 90, No. 4, p. 1007–1026, ISSN 0003-5491.

Step Right Up

When you tune-in to references to confidence in the mainstream American media, particularly in discussions of the connections between the economy and politics, you may be staggered not only by the number of times that it comes up, but also by the explicative and animating power that is granted *to* it. Variations in confidence "levels" account for booms and busts of the market, we are often told. The concept has appeared with particular frequency since the economic crash of 2008, and its use was re-invigorated with the near government shutdown of 2011 (Suskind 2011). It resurfaced again as the lynchpin of most stories about the impending debt-default of 2013; were we to have travelled down that road, the loss of confidence in the American economic (hence, political) system, we were told, would have been devastating. It loomed yet again in September of 2015 as Obama and the far right squared off once more. And most recently, for some, the confidence Donald Trump projected explains why he won the election of 2016 (Cohen and Thomas Jr. 2016, Huppke 2015, Konnikova 2016, Tong 2017).

This outline of an anthropology of confidence uses Herman Mellville's *The Confidence Man* (1971) to examine interviews of investment bankers, economists, and mutual fund managers. It also analyzes journalistic commentary on politics. It argues that confidence plays a significant role in contemporary capitalism—configured as neoliberal (Ganti 2014, Ong 2006) and, sometimes, "late" (Jameson 1991, Povinelli 2013). The emphasizing and mitigation of risk lies at the very center of contemporary financial qua political markets. Put somewhat differently, the practice of contemporary capitalism (whether it ends up having been late or not) maintains the continual uncertainty of its participants. This uncertainty derives from a reliance on potentially context-deaf robo-processes in markets for goods and equities, the multiple-leveraging of financial instruments such as mortgages and other speculative modes, and the consolidation, size, and international composition of businesses and government institutions (Appadurai 2015, Lears 2004, Minsky 2015, Taylor 2004). It is in this ambit that confidence, as an interactive frame defining itself in opposition to uncertainty, takes on new importance. The interest is not entirely new to anthropology, since Clifford Geertz, reading Ricoeur, pointed to the importance of confidence for "inscribing" cultures both for participants *and* for ethnographers (Geertz 1973, Helenius 2016).

The concept has a long history. Beginning with intensity in Melville's time, many interactions became construable as *deals* involving a pitch, a product, and a purchase (Halttunen 1982). The applicability of this sales model to a vast array of human activity has only increased with time. This has brought individuation, propertization, market centrism, and consumption together such that sellers are constantly in the process of soliciting buyers, who are asked to pony up. When they do, they reveal their confidence on a small scale which is then assumed, in a *Wealth of Nations* mode (Smith 1976), to accrue to a large one. Buyers who refuse may be branded misers, or even worse, misanthropes. Many current framings of American culture broadly speaking, and finance and politics, specifically, have justifiably underscored the importance of precarity (Stewart 1996) and risk (Ho 2009, Zaloom 2004). However, interactively understood projections of surety occupy the other face of this oft-tossed coin. As has been noted in the anthropological exploration of the relationship between debt and credit (a concept which draws heavily on confidence; see Peebles 2010), confidence and uncertainty are dialogically linked and are crucial not just to the constitution of identities, but to the capacity of subjects to circulate socially and spatially (Munn 1992, Peebles 2014).

Despite the fact that confidence is frequently discussed in contemporary analysis of politics and economics (Robertson 2010), it is often difficult to tell precisely what its contemporary users mean by the term. This is where a reintroduction of Melville comes in, as a reading of his work helps to show that confidence underscores the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of predicting the deal's outcome—where the deal indexes the increasingly transactional nature of much interaction. Melville's text also suggests that a number of other features of confidence are important. First, that confidence may reproduce itself exponentially for the beneficence of mankind. Second, that discussions of confidence index ideologies about the way in which small-scale actions become large-scale trends. And third, that confidence adumbrates a particular morality of consumption. Let us analyze these in order before transposing them to our contemporary understanding of how confidence, as in interpretive frame, both emphasizes and mitigates uncertainty under contemporary capitalism.

Enter the Devil

> The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose,
> An evil soul producing holy witness

> Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
> A goodly apple rotten at the heart.
> O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!
> —William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (2001:24–26)

Confidence is frequently portrayed by political commentators, economic policy makers, and investors to be an all-important but brittle thing. In an interactive mode, without the addressee's willingness to forego guarantees, the system as a whole can't operate. And it is a commonly held notion that confidence backs up something "real." But confidence can sometimes be employed in a reputable-seeming way without the requisite "true value." This is where Melville provides us with an important methodology for looking at the problem, one also followed by Goffman (1952) in his work on confidence games called "Cooling Out the Mark." By focusing on scamming, we can see places in which the "sham-polish" (to borrow an expression from Zora Neale Hurston) that consumer economies *require* starts to wear off. So, we can, in fact, see that the hovering threat of an ostensibly improper use of confidence puts everything at risk. Put differently, the constant threat that a game might be afoot means that in situations of exchange, not only is confidence necessary, but it is also undermined. This is the devil in the deal, and his presence might sour you for good. Your doubts that you *could* be dealing with a confidence man could result in a calculated distrust of *everyone*. Thus, in the course of an exchange, or, stepping back somewhat, in the context of an economy writ large, the Goldilocks Principle is paramount; confidence has to be "just right."

Along these lines, let us begin in earnest with the devil, who shows us some of the problems inherent in situations of exchange under capitalism, as he is reported to have done in the tin mines of Bolivia in the 1970s (Taussig 1980). *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (Melville 1971) opens on a river boat travelling down the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans on April 1, 1849. A deaf-mute comes on board and, by means of a slate, some chalk, and a quotation from Corinthians, casts aspersions on a sign intended to warn passengers about pickpockets, swindlers, and other sharpers who have been preying on the boat's passengers; "Charity thinketh no evil," the mute writes on his slate, admonishing those reading the warning for being distrustful of humanity. Offended by his accusation, the crowd jeers, sending him to a distal part of the ship where he collapses and goes to sleep. However, throughout the voyage, and completely unbeknownst to the passengers, this individual returns in a series of disguises so persuasive that he might just be the devil himself: a paraplegic “negro” asking for alms; an unhappy father trying to get home to save his daughter from a cruel ex-wife; a bookkeeper from the famous and recently recovered (but now upwardly-bound!) Grand Rapids Coal Company; an herb-doctor; an obsequious employee of the Philosophical Intelligence Office, which supplies homes with servant “boys”; and a rakishly attired cosmopolitan seeking philosophical discussions about charity, as well as a free shave. In every guise, this ductile con man attempts to get money or services out of the passengers by persuading them that he is to be trusted, and by scolding them for holding too little faith in their fellow man when they balk. Yet Melville takes no sides. P. T. Barnum, Thoreau, and Emerson, as characters with whom the confidence man speaks, are all under the same big top. The confidence man is invariably almost impossible to refute, and is frequently a delight to listen to, while his marks, even in their mistakes, are often charming; there is usually a sense of calm and relief when they take the bait, only rarely a sense of outrage—and when anger does happen, it usually emerges from someone overhearing rather than the mark him- or herself.

The book was clearly meant to address its times. Across the various conversations in the course of the pilgrimage, which literary critics (like Melville himself, see Boon 1999) have compared to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1979), Melville examines contemporaneous forms of American confidence in: radical social reform, Manifest Destiny, noble savages, liberal Christianity, nature, the legal system, and the fast-growing economy. In an historical inquiry into the period in question called *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830–1870*, historian Karen Halttunen (1982) embeds this in contemporaneous urbanization. In advice manuals from the period, young men venturing to cities, far from home, were counseled to avoid falling in with the wrong sort lest they should lose their money, their good sense, their labor power, to wit, their very souls.

However, as much as we can see these themes in mid-19th century America, Melville has hit on something that applies well today. From a close reading of the novel, we can extract a kind of interactionist model of confidence that still works well to describe contemporary consumer exchanges—and hence, the economistic logic frequently employed to conceive of politics in society. In the context of commerce, a confident seller is essentially saying, from an *emotive* perspective (in Jakobson's [1960] sense), "I am going to get what I want." In this mode, the speaker must "pitch," into the space of the interaction, his or her anticipation of the positive outcome *will be* accurate with reference to some specific task that will eventually be agreed upon as having been the goal of the interaction. The confidence (and also confident) man is saying (from a conative perspective—Jakobson, once again), "You will buy something from me, or give me your charity." And when all this is working right, the addressee receives the pitch with, "yes, I trust that you are who you say you are, and that what you have to offer (or your statement about being in need) is legitimate. Here is the money." On a small scale, we can say, following Austin (1962), that confidence is about the successful uptake of an illocutionary predictive certainty.

However, there is more to be said about the temporal play inherent in the confident pitch and its trusting reception. Because participants know at the moment of pitching that success will only be able to be determined *after* the transaction has been completed—perhaps a long time after. And yet, the interlocutor's willingness to buy what the seller has to offer must be procured and given *now*. The addressee must be disposed to *accept* what is being offered while being aware that this potential acceptance makes him vulnerable. So, confidence marks the willingness to take a chance. In this way, it embraces *both* the emergent quality of an interaction involving sales (and in mid-19th century America, as P. T. Barnum showed, more and more forms of human interaction could be framed as sales), with the understanding that the success of such an interaction relies on forestalling that emergence by, in a sense, taking a short cut to acceptance. In this small-scale, discursive context, confidence is that which facilitates the interlocutor deciding that what is being offered is firm, true, and fixed, without any such thing having been demonstrated. Confidence embraces uncertainty with joy.

This temporal sleight of hand moves us toward another important feature of Melville's confidence, which is that it mediates between small-scale actions and larger trends, or movements. In other words, the practice of confidence in a given interaction is frequently made, by Melville's confidence man, to speak to much larger issues. For instance, in asking for money in one of his guises, the confidence man proposes that individual donations of charity, such as the one he is currently seeking from his interlocutor, should all be "magnified and energized" (Melville 1971:35).

What he proposes is a grand scheme where massive amounts of money are to be collected and applied to social problems:

> ...you see, this doing good to the world by driblets amounts to just nothing, I am for doing good to the world with a will…To be an immortal being in China is no more distinction than to be a snow-flake in a snow squall. What are a score or two of missionaries to such a people? A pinch of snuff to the kraken. I am for sending 10,000 missionaries in a body and converting the Chinese *en masse* within six months of the debarkation. The thing is then done, and turn to something else. (1971:35)

When his conversational partner and mark expresses incredulity at the massiveness of such a scale, the confidence man characterizes his approach in a financial, though localized, mode: “I would quicken with the Wall street spirit” (1971:35). Here, then, is the aspiration that confidence writ small should become confidence writ large.

This articulation between small and large scales further underscores the ways in which confidence, or its lack, is believed to reproduce itself—which is to say, exponentially. Throughout, the confidence man expresses joy when someone confides in him (financially for the most part) because he argues that such confidence begets itself. However, on the opposite side of things, a lack of confidence spreads quickly, like a virulent disease, and can do great harm. This intensifies the urgency of the confidence man’s incitements to avoid doubt at all costs. Near the book’s opening, the crippled beggar is catching coins in his mouth when a “limping, gimlet-eyed, sour-faced person…began to croak out something about [the beggar’s] deformity being a sham, got up for financial purposes” (1971:8). This “immediately threw a damp upon the frolic beningnities of the pitch-penny players” (1971:88). Apparently, confidence is vulnerable. Later in the book, bemoaning the fall in the share price of the Grand Rapids Coal company, our confidence man, posing as the company’s agent, inveighs against the bears: “the depression of our stock was solely owing to the growling, the hypocritical growling, of the bears” (1971:41). His mark asks him if he is angry at the bears:

> If I am, it is less from the remembrance of their stratagems as to our stock, than from the persuasion that these same destroyers of

> confidence, and gloomy philosophers of the stock market, though false in themselves, are yet true types of most destroyers of confidence and gloomy philosophers, the world over. Fellows who, whether in stocks, politics, bread-stuffs, morals, metaphysics, religion—be it what it may—trump up their black panics in the naturally-quiet brightness, solely with a view to some sort of covert advantage. (1971:41)

All of this is to say that confidence may indeed beget confidence, but its lack is constantly hovering over our exchanges as an expression of their potential insufficiency, and hence, of our unwitting contribution to a kind of binding-up of the economic qua moral system. We must not listen to the naysayers. It's dangerous.

It is important to recall that, given the vast number of deliberately distorted and mis-contextualized Biblical quotations the various confidence men put forth in the course of the trip downriver, we are almost certainly listening to the devil. For Melville, confidence is a deeply moralized practice. The confidence man, in various guises, is quick to portray his interlocutor's willingness to accept his pitch as evidence of a positive attitude towards humanity as a whole. By the same token, he frequently rails against those who won't pay up, branding them misanthropes and haters (at which point they almost always feel guilty and spill). Therefore, confidence is not only the forestalling of the need for proof in the context of the individual deal. Confidence is trust in one's fellow man writ large. It is the belief that people are fundamentally good. It is the notion that one must look for positive traits in others, rather than flaws. Its absence reveals a solitary nature—one who hates humanity. And we have already seen how this hating is believed to translate from small to large scales.

Armed with these insights from Melville, let us explore other passages and corners of the boat—more specifically, the approaches to confidence found in contemporary economistic thinking about politics. Keep Melville's basic categories in mind.

Government Closures and Defaults

In order to contextualize the most current discussion in which confidence plays an important role in the US, cast your minds back to August 5, 2011. On this day, the Standard & Poor (S&P) credit rating agency downgraded the US Federal Government from AAA (which means outstanding) to AA+. This was in part a response to shenanigans in Congress. At the time, it was anybody's guess as to whether the government would shut down and the nation default on its debt. As it turns out, neither took place back then. But S&P's eventual downgrading was apparently a measure of its trust in the ability of the US to pay back its debt in circumstances of political instability. It was, thus, not precisely a vote of "no confidence," but at the very least one of "less." Indeed, this was part of the reason that the S&P was so sharply criticized by the US Treasury Department. Though neither of the other credit rating agencies followed suit (neither Fitch nor Moody), the idea among S&P's critics was that in *reporting* a crisis of confidence they ran the risk of *creating* one. This apparently followed from the fact that foreign investors and American consumers might *hear* that there was less confidence out there, and would then buy less American debt (investors) or goods (consumers). And because of the influence of the US economy on the economies of the world, this crisis could well encircle the globe. The stakes in this confidence-predicting racket were high, which appeared to be ratified by China's scold that the US needed to "cure its addiction to debt" (Schwartz and Dash 2011). America had developed an unseemly habit.

From S&P's perspective, their aim was to objectively state the confidence that investors *ought* to have in the US's abilities to pay its creditors; they perceived the political and economic situations to be intertwined. It was difficult to read their move outside the ambit of a failure to accurately label the tranches of tenuous mortgages that had almost tanked the global economy in 2008. If these groupings of essentially useless home purchase loans had been more accurately labeled, reporting on the housing crisis in 2008 and 2009 went, the companies that traded them would have been less cock-sure about their worth, and the carnage might never have begun (Glass 2008). Investors could have held the right *level* of confidence in those mortgages. Instead, they had held far too much. In this way, accurate ratings by ratings agencies could actually *avoid* another crisis—not create one. Their logic most likely sounded something like this: we could all be considerably more confident if we could really put our confidence in the agencies responsible for telling us how confident we ought to be. Recall, from Melville: confidence mediates between small and large scales, and is extremely fragile.

Once again in 2013, confidence maintained its role as the delicate flower that risked being harmed. In the week leading up to the closure, and describing this latest possible government closing and US debt default, Christine Lagarde, the head of the International Monetary Fund, who was once a synchronized swimmer, suggested that "growth" be thought of as the surface of the water, and that staying at that surface required teamwork. This sounded awfully like incitement to Congress to behave responsibly by raising the debt ceiling and keeping the government running. She expressed concern about "a long period of uncertainty" that was, in her euphemistic words,

> unhelpful…I took my job in July of 2011, and one of the first uncertainties we had to look at was the uncertainty that led to the downgrading of the US economy. This is not desirable. It can create volatility, instability, and as a result, it should be avoided by any means…What players in the economy do not like, what markets do not like, what investors do not like, what job creators do not like, is the uncertainty, is, being in the dark. They want to understand exactly what is taking place, when it is taking place, what the deal is, and at the moment the uncertainty is not conducive to that level of trust and confidence. (Lagarde 2013)

We can notice that Lagarde's remarks tack back and forth between structural–functional organisms like markets on one side, and hypothetical individuals whose roles are defined by their position in something called an economy, like job creators and investors, on the other. Her list of affected parties returns us to the articulation between small and large scales that makes quotidian transactions legible with respect to some larger "picture," and the other way around. By this rationale, when individuals with particular roles in the economy don't know what comes next, they can't fulfill their roles, and both the economy and the markets of which it is presumably comprised are wounded. On the other side, when these larger entities are not functioning confidently, it has an effect on actors at smaller scales. All of this plays out in more strictly economic circumstances as well. But what, exactly, we have to fear from a fall in confidence is still not clear.

Fear of Falling

Within the discipline of economics proper, the attention paid to the notion of confidence comes in the form of scrutiny of its excesses. "Overconfidence," by and large the *only* way of approaching the topic in economics proper these days, has recently been defined by one group of behavioral economists as "the tendency of individuals to overestimate the preciseness of their knowledge" (Cesarini, Sandewall, and Johannesson 2006). Let us expand on this in the form of a few hypothetical scenarios. In one, a buyer imagines he knows that something is currently underpriced, and that price will go up once he buys it. However, instead of rising, the price falls and our hypothetical buyer is now stuck with something he paid too much for, hoping that the price will go back up at some point in the future. We can imagine this from the other direction, too; an overconfident seller thinks, for instance, that what they have isn't worth much and sells it cheaply, only to find that what they sold is valued greatly, and they got way less than they should have. And from yet another perspective, we can anticipate how overconfidence might shape bundled purchases or sales too, not just individual ones. A mutual fund manager might, for instance, believe that tech stocks will go up, and might then direct the mutual fund he manages to invest in tech—only to have that industry tank. In all three cases, the states of mind of the decision-makers might, according to the above definition, be characterized as "overconfident."

We can notice two things about this economistic attempt to derive a theory of overconfidence that will work in all situations: first, that the theory is individuated; and second, that overconfidence points to a kind of epistemology. Very much as in Melville, the buyer and consumer are both required to predict future valuation of current objects or services without a crystal ball. In other words, the economistic focus on overconfidence once again asks us to consider the relationship between decisiveness of action, accuracy, and temporality.

However, there is more to be said—since a continual focus on overconfidence suggests that the market is rife with it—that it is, hence, replete with actors who *think* they know what they are doing, but in fact, do not. This emerges in a brief examination of the quotidian practice of how investment banking attempts to locate overconfidence in order to profit from it. One way we can see this is through investors, working in hedge and slush funds that want to focus-in on the places where they believe overconfidence has been practiced, and find ways to profit from that overconfidence. Consider David, who, when I first interviewed him in 2003, had been running a highly successful slush fund for a small group of private investors able to buy-in at the relatively low amount of $500,000 USD. David had been doing incredibly well for his clients in the early 21st century, averaging rates of return of 17 percent, even through radical ups and downs in the market. David's perception of his ability to do this was grounded in his methodology, which was to make use of a book written in 1934 by Benjamin Graham and David Dodd of the Columbia Business School—*Security Analysis* (2008). David's technique was to use Graham and Dodd's methods to determine when companies were overvalued and then to "short" them aggressively. This method required borrowing money in order to purchase shares and then sell them back when the price went *down*—making a profit form a price drop. At the time, David was emphatic that all the causality assigned to the ups and downs of the market promulgated by the news media was background noise. Statements like, "the DOW was six points down today in response to the new unemployment numbers" were garbage, in his view. According to David, amateur investors imagined that the market responded to such news. He knew better. In his eyes, the market marched to a different drummer, which he was able to hear by figuring out when companies had been overvalued. He was banking on the market eventually returning to its natural equilibrium—contradicting the overvaluations that investors had mistakenly (and overconfidently) acted upon. David was confident he had cracked the code, and his numbers did nothing to refute that.

Or was he overconfident? A friend of David's from college, John, who was, in 2003, one of the managing partners for a middle market private equity firm in Los Angeles, felt less than enthusiastic about David's success. "It's great that Dave has been able to get those kinds of numbers for his clients," he reported. "I'm really happy for him. But the longer I'm in this business, the more I realize that this whole thing is really a big shell game. You just can't predict it with any reliability." This was not to say that John undervalued confidence in all spheres of life. In a conversation that seemed, at the time, to be unrelated, he told me that his policy was to go over and introduce himself to a pretty woman the moment he saw her—immediately upon entering the room. Why? "Because it communicates confidence," and anything less communicated timidity—something women did not like.

In this way, we can see that confidence is important for John. He simply believes that Dave's is misplaced; for John, Dave is overconfident because the machinations of the market are close to random, or at least there is a ludic absurdity in trying to predictably make money for clients. For John, it is important to behave confidently, but one still cannot bank on the results. David, on the other hand, feels as though he can figure out what is coming next—a devaluation of the company he feels is overvalued—and then profit from that knowledge. The current occupations of both informants underscore the distinction between their orientations to confidence. David is the alternative asset manager for the Wealth Management Division of an enormous Swiss investment bank. John is now a professor of economics who studies micro credit from a behavioral perspective (see Moodie 2013 for an analysis of the way this transition from one occupation to another might not be coincidental). In both their statements about investing, and in their eventual career choices, what emerges is the importance of confidence as an interpretive frame—an epistemology of the market. David is confident that he is able to use the overconfidence of others to profit. John suspects that David's confidence in his ability to profit from the overconfidence of others is, itself, overconfident, but nonetheless believes that confident actions will improve one's chances in romance.

Other Measurements

Confidence, and its excess, is not only used by investment bankers as a way to make money; it also provides an important index of how the economy is doing that may then be used to set monetary policy. Along these lines, one of the most popular measures of consumer confidence, called the Consumer Confidence Index, is explained by an economics reporter and financial planning expert beginning with the following:

> Imagine that you are talking with your neighbor in your backyard, and you mention that you and your wife are shopping for a new car, you are getting ready to refinance your house and your wife's brother recently lost his job. Your neighbor tells you he was recently promoted, his wife is starting a business and his daughter just bought a new computer. (McWhinney 2004)

Here is a fictitious dialogue between two consumers, both of whom, note, can be described as being part of social groupings called "families," and in which small-scale decisions and happenings emerge. It is here, apparently, that we may read the state of confidence, and what we have just heard is almost unvarnished good news. *Despite* the fact that the brother-in-law just lost his job, the first couple is so content with their finances that they are shopping for a new car; they don't expect his status to spread to them. The other couple mirrors the purchasing glow. Due to career advances for both him and his wife, his daughter can now get a new computer. Leaving aside for the moment the question of why these two don't have other things to talk about—here, apparently, is where the state of confidence can be read. However, it is also here that we see that the *feeling* of confidence on the part of these actors is what is purportedly motivating their decisions, and these feelings, in turn, are presumably coming from somewhere. The things that have happened to them recently become understandable as positives with reference to a broader state of affairs—one in which it can be said that "things are going well." This rendering of confidence as an interpretive frame suggests that it is a kind of phlogiston that moves through small-scale purchasing decisions.[1]

All this fictitious attention to the small scale is intriguing when you consider the way that the index is actually calculated. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this process does not involve listening to neighbors talk across their backyard fences about new technological purchases and home loans and then compiling those conversations. Rather the organization that is responsible for the Consumer Confidence Index, a New York based think-tank started in 1917 and called the Conference Board, surveys 5,000 households by asking them five questions, to which they are to answer "positive, negative, or neutral." The questions are about current business conditions, business conditions over the next six months, current employment conditions, employment conditions over the next six months, and family income for the next six months. The answers are then aggregated and expressed as a relationship to the year in which the index was first calculated—1985—which, for the purposes of the eventual number, becomes ground zero for confidence. It is in this way that the uncertainty that is ostensibly channeled in small-scale exchanges, apparently becomes intelligible.

The amount of this phlogiston believed to be circulating is then promulgated, and in this promulgation comes to bear the hallmark of "public opinion" as it has been flagged by Habermas (1991) and Michael Warner

(2002). Government agencies, policy-makers, NGOs, banks, investors, tax experts, and many others, use these numbers to plan monetary policy, inventory, and stimulation for the economy. The measurement of confidence, and its eventual promulgation, in turn, risk becoming a confidence game in which positive numbers act as a pitch for the health of the economy. The importance of a continued belief in the correct amount of confidence might reside in a classical attempt to explain it from the history of economics. Thorsten Veblen summarizes the fragile nature of confidence in a recursive way:

> The state of confidence, as they term it, is a matter to which practical men always pay the closest and most anxious attention. But economists have not analysed it carefully and have been content, as a rule, to discuss it in general terms. In particular it has not been made clear that its relevance to economic problems comes in through its important influence on the schedule of the marginal efficiency of capital. There are not two separate factors affecting the rate of investment, namely, the schedule of the marginal efficiency of capital and the state of confidence. The state of confidence is relevant because it is one of the major factors determining the former, which is the same thing as the investment demand-schedule. (Keynes 2008:133–134)

In other words, the rate of investment seems, upon initial observation, to be the result of two different factors. However, the first one, the marginal efficiency of capital, is actually beholden to confidence. So confidence is doubly important. It may well be true, then, that participants in economies believe it accrues exponentially rather than arithmetically. This emerges in discussions of business cycles, where the presence of confidence foretells a self-reinforcing positive loop, whereas its absence digs a hole that is hard to get out of. In the words of Victor Zarnowitz, prominent Chicago economist and long time advisor to the Conference Board, “confidence, once severely shaken, takes time to mend” (1992:34).

Finally, with respect to the Melvillian typology of contemporary economic approaches to confidence, notice the ways in which these valuations of selling and buying also take on moral connotations. A confident economy is one in which transactions are leading to a certain flow. Economies in which consumers are holding on to their money by being tight, overly thrifty, or too cautious, are in crisis because they are believed to be in a state of immobility. Part of the moral crisis of a lack of confidence, then, emerges as the *failure to circulate*. This is further reinforced by the terminology used to describe business cycles themselves. This may be why there could be so much *over*-confidence at any given moment; rather that, than stasis.

The current CEO of global wealth management giant UBS, Alex Friedman, states in a recent investor publication entitled “The Three Pillars of Confidence” (2013) that he has every reason to suspect that the US is entering circumstances favorable to what he calls—using a term that is entirely common in investment banking circles—“a virtuous business cycle.” The publication itself, designed to show those putting their money into his bank that there are good reasons for them to do so, is intended as a kind of confidence-booster. In this context, then, how fortuitous that Friedman, going to press just before the 2013 fight between Boehner and Obama, feels that the market is in a state where confidence breeds confidence, and investments yield well for clients. Hopefully, he states, the days of the vicious cycle are behind us—ugly times where a negative feedback loop bred a lack of confidence. Though it has taken time, we have recovered.

Whither the Twain Shall Meet

Given the broad but frequent references to confidence in contemporary discussions of politics and economics, and the ways in which small-scale interactions ostensibly produce it, but also rely *upon* it, the question of what, precisely, a lack of confidence might *mean* returns. Here, we can see the importance of confident action not just in economic and political actions, but in interpersonal interaction as well. (Recall the banker-turned-scholar who hones-in on the prettiest girl, above.) In day-to-day interactions, confidence becomes a kind of micro-ritual that keeps stasis at bay—a bit like the way tearing bits of paper and throwing them out the window of a moving train keeps away pink elephants. Do you see any pink elephants, here? No? It must be working.

In closing, I propose that just as he has been helpful in identifying the temporal and moral problems associated with confidence, Melville can help in pointing the way towards what might be so troubling about its loss in contemporary capitalism—characterized, in particular, by an obsessive return to uncertainty and its mitigation. The role of uncertainty in market-based politics is similarly leveraged. Recall that one of the most important features of a sale is that the addressee must trust that the seller is who he says he is, and he must also trust that what the seller has to sell will behave as it is supposed to behave. Indeed, in a materialist mode, the two are intertwined. The seller is pitching a certain theory of himself and of his goods, which the buyer must accept. In this way, the buyer must accept the fixed identity of the seller, and the stability of the product at the very moment that both are most radically in question. This emerges clearly in Melville through the case of the herb doctor (recall, not a "real" herb doctor) who has just sold some medicine to a very sick man. The patient then wishes to know how he should buy more medicine should he need it. The incredulous confidence man says that the answer is obvious: more will be provided. How could the sick man show such a lack of confidence as to ask that question? But when the patient presses his case, the doctor relents somewhat, and replies that the patient should only buy materials that bear the correct stamp and seal. Again, this is not enough. So when his charge seems to waver yet again—once more betokening a lack of confidence that stands the chance of making any healing quite impossible—the confidence man encapsulates some earlier advice. "I told you, you must have confidence, unquestioning confidence, I meant confidence in the genuine medicine, and the genuine *me*" (Melville 1971:83). ■

Acknowledgments:

I want to thank Gustav Peebles and Caitlin Zaloom for careful readings of this essay. However, the piece's failings are not their fault. Put differently, Caitlin and Gustav: I have saved some of your comments for a book-form of this project.

Endnotes:

[1]For an interactive model in economics, see Stiglitz and Gallegati (2011).

References:

Appadurai, Arjun. 2015. *Banking on Words: The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Austin, John Langshaw. 1962. *How To Do Things With Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Boon, James A. 1999. *Verging on Extra-Vagance: Anthropology, History, Religion, Literature, Arts... Showbiz*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cesarini, David, Orjan Sandewall, and Magnus Johannesson. 2006. "Confidence Interval Estimation Tasks and the Economics of Overconfidence." *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 61(3):453-470.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. 1979. *The Canturbury Tales: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript with Variants from the Ellesmere Manuscript*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Cohen, Patricia and Landon Thomas Jr. 2016. "Trump's Honeymoon Begins: Confidence in the Economy is Booming." *The New York Times*, December 9. Accessed from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/09/business/economy/donald-trump-economy-confidence-booming.html?_r=0 on July 8, 2010.

Friedman, Alexander. 2013. *The Three Pillars of Confidence*. New York: UBS House View.

Ganti, Tejaswini. 2014. "Neoliberalism." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43:89-103.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3-30. New York: Basic Books.

Glass, Ira. 2008. "Giant Pool of Money." *This American Life*, May 29. Accessed from https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/355/the-giant-pool-of-money on Sept 21, 2017.

Goffman, Erving. 1952. "On Cooling the Mark Out: Some Aspects of Adaption to Failure." *Psychiatry* 15:451-463.

Graham, Benjamin and David L. Dodd. 2008. *Security Analysis*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.

Habermas, Jurgen. 1991. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.* Thomas Burger, trans. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Halttunen, Karen. 1982. *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830–1870*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Helenius, Timo. 2016. *Ricoeur, Culture, and Recognition*. London: Lexington Books.

Ho, Karen. 2009. *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Huppke, Rex. 2015. "Commentary: Donald Trump—The Perpetual Confidence Machine." *The Chicago Tribune*, June 29. Accessed from http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-huppke-donald-trump-20150629-story.html on July 8, 2017.

Hurston, Zora Neale. 1990. *Of Mules and Men*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Jakobson, Roman. 1960. "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." In T. A. Sebeok, ed. *Style in Language*, 350-377. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Jameson, Frederic. 1991. *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Keynes, John Maynard. 2008 [1936]. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*. New Delhi: Atlantic.

Konnikova, Maria. 2016. "Donald Trump, Con Artist." *The New Yorker*, March 19. Accessed from http://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/donald-trump-con-artist on July 8, 2017.

Lears, Jackson. 2004. *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*. New York: Penguin Publishing Group.

Melville, Herman. 1971 [1857]. *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*. New York: W. W. Norton.

McWhinney, James E. 2004. "Understanding the Consumer Confidence Index." Investopedia. Accessed from http://www.investopedia.com/articles/05/010604.asp on Sept 21, 2017.

Minsky, Hyman. 2015. *Can "It" Happen Again? Essays in Instability in Finance*. New York: Routledge.

Moodie, Megan. 2013. "Microfinance and the Gender of Risk: The Case of Kiva.org." *Signs* 38(2):279-302.

Munn, Nancy. 1992. *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ong, Aihwa. 2006. *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Peebles, Gustav. 2010. "The Anthropology of Credit and Debt." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39:225-240.

___________. 2014. "Rehabilitating the Hoard: The Social Dynamics of Unbanking in Africa and Beyond." *Africa* 84(4):595-613.

Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2013. *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Robertson, David Brian, ed. 2010. *Loss of Confidence: Politics and Policy in the 1970s.* State College: Penn State Press.

Schwartz, Nelson and Eric Dash. 2011. "Amid Criticism on Downgrade of US, S&P Fires Back." *The New York Times*, August 6. Accessed from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/business/a-rush-to-assess-standard-and-poors-downgrade-of-united-states-credit-rating.html on July 9, 2017.

Shakespeare, William. 2001. *The Merchant of Venice*. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard.

Smith, Adam. 1976. *The Wealth of Nations, Volume 1 and 2*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stewart, Kathleen. 1996. *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Stiglitz, Joseph and Mauro Gallegati. 2011. "Heterogenous Interacting Agent Models for Understanding Monetary Economies." *Eastern Economic Journal* 37(1):6-12.

Suskind, Ron. 2011. *Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington, and the Education of a President*. New York: Harper Collins.

Taussig, Michael. 1980. *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Taylor, Mark. 2004. *Confidence Games: Money Markets in a World Without Redemption*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tong, Laura. 2017. "What Donald Trump Can Teach Us About Self-Esteem (Even If You Hate His Guts)." *Huffington Post*, February 16. Accessed from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-tong/what-donald-trump-can-tea_b_9238364.html on July 9, 2017.

Warner, Michael. 2002. "Publics and Counterpublics." *Public Culture* 14(1):49-90.

Zaloom, Caitlin. 2004. "The Productive Life of Risk." *Cultural Anthropology* 19(3):365-391.

Zarnowitz, Victor. 1992. *Business Cycles: Theory, History, Indicators, and Forecasting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Foreign Language Translations:

The Devil in the Deal: Notes Toward an Anthropology of Confidence
[**Keywords:** economics, politics, language, United States, literature]

交易中的魔鬼：记关于信心的人类学之一些随想
[**关键词**：经济学，政治，语言，美利坚合众国，文学]

Дьявол в деле: Заметки к антологической уверенности
[**Ключевые слова:** экономика, политика, язык, США, литература]

O Diabo no Contrato: Apontamentos para uma Antropologia da Confiança
[**Palavras-chave:** economia, política, linguagem, Estados Unidos da América, literatura]

الشيطان في الصفقة: ملاحظات نحو انثروبولوجيا الثقة
كلمات البحث: الاقتصاد، السياسة، اللغة، الولايات المتحدة، الأدب