The Failed Politician Melancholia, Crisis and Political Agency

Klaas Tindemans

ABSTRACT

The question at stake in this article is: does melancholia – defined as a structure of feeling, as valid in a given regime of historicity – bridge the gap between individual agency and societal determinism, specifically in the field of politics? The applicability of the very notion of melancholia is a first issue, and leads to an assessment of the impact, in the 17th century and afterwards, of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and to an analysis of Émile Durkheim's notion of 'anomy/anomie' as a societal variation on the theme of melancholia. Modern political history has put forward famous cases of 'politic spleen': the French revolutionary feminist Théroigne de Méricourt, the American President Abraham Lincoln are among the most instructive. In the 20th century, when melancholia has become medicalized as a form of psychic of neural trauma, cases such as President John F. Kennedy show both this evolution and the limits of medicalization. In a last chapter, contemporary examples demonstrate a closer relationship between melancholia as a personal condition and a – provisionally re-defined – notion of political sense of loss: the fatal political career of French Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy, who committed suicide after an electoral defeat, the hardship of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, losing crucial elections, and the political career of Belgian Prime Minister Wilfried Martens. Martens didn't fail in his career, but his decisive political shifts reveal remarkable connections between personal loss and ideological degeneration. In a conclusion these intertwinements between personal life and political doubt are put in the context of Durkheim's notion of anomy and the typically modern idea of 'crisis' as a societal condition of existence.

The definitive statement about politics and melancholia is, arguably, Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*). The novel reflects, in its characters, their discourse and their action (or inaction), on the end of a certain Middle-European civilisation and culture as they took shape in continental empires over the course of the centuries. Musil's *Kakanien* – the nickname for the double monarchy of Austria and Hungary (*Kaiserlich und Königlich*) under the last Habsburg emperors – is preparing for a (final?) celebration in 1918: 70 years under Franz-Joseph, parallel to a German celebration of 30 years under Wilhelm II. We know of course why this enterprise was shattered, but through Ulrich, the 'man without qualities', the ironic secretary of the committee preparing the festivities, we, the readers, can witness the degeneration from within. An extract illustrates the mood well. Ulrich has recited a list of proposals under the heading "Back to...!" (faith, baroque, state of nature, Goethe, German law, etc.) to Count Leinsdorf, the initiator of the 'Parallel Action', the double celebration of the emperors. Leinsdorf rejects the irony of this nostalgia – melancholia – among the citizens, but Ulrich continues in the

same mood, until the Count remarks:

"'Dear Doctor,' he said, 'In the history of humankind, there exists no such thing as a voluntary "back to..."'! This statement was a surprise to Count Leinsdorf himself in the first place, since his intention was to say something entirely different. He was conservative, he was indignant with Ulrich and he would have wanted to remark that the bourgeoisie had despised the universal spirit of the Catholic Church and was now suffering from the consequences. It would also have been self-evident to praise the times of absolute centralism, times when the world was still led by men who were conscious of their responsibility, from universally valid points of view. But suddenly, while looking for his words, it had occurred to him that he would really be unpleasantly surprised to wake up one morning without a hot bath and without railways and that, instead of them, there would only be an imperial herald, driving through the streets. Thus Count Leinsdorf thought: 'What once was, will never be there in the same way,' and while thinking this he was very surprised. Because supposing that in history no such thing existed as a voluntary "back to..."!, then humankind is like a man, driven by an uncanny wanderlust, for whom no return exists and no arrival, and this constituted a particularly remarkable condition."[1]

Here, in the character of Count Leinsdorf, Musil projects the very crisis of modernity itself, i.e. the debt of modernity to a history of *Unheimlichkeit*, uncanniness – its own history *and* its *régime d'historicité*. Its 'regime of historicity': how does a given society establish relationships between its past, its present and its future?[2] Musil's count embodies the crisis caused by the transformation of these relationships. The aristocratic count, probably closer to Metternich than to Bismarck, suddenly becomes aware of his own contradictions, and they escape him, as a slip of the tongue, as some kind of symptom. And melancholia is suggested in the 'uncanny wanderlust' (*unheimlicher Wandertrieb)* – more precisely: 'wanderdrift' or 'wanderdrive', an attitude the count perceives as an historical and universal parallel of the singular, pathological *fugue*. The fugue is the mental condition where the journey inside the subject, the ego, is materialized in the actual escape from all things normal, in the disappearance, somewhere between impulsive tourism and vagabondage[3]. So the gap between the desire for (a return to) the past and the satisfaction with the present, as the result of a 'progressive' societal attitude, is embodied

1   Musil 1952, p. 239-240 – *my translation*

2   Hartog 2003

3   Johannisson 2009, p. 221

in the condition of the escapist – arguably a most socially determined variation on the theme of melancholia.

The quote from Musil is an invitation to interesting reflection, or to formulate research questions. One of the most intriguing historical-political questions could be identified in the character of Count Leinsdorf: do political actors shape history, or is it a set of 'laws of history', deterministic or not, that govern societal and political transformations over time? This fundamental issue cannot be answered in the form of a relatively short essay, since it immediately confronts us with, among other problems (epistemological and hermeneutical), the same problem of the 'regimes of historicity', as François Hartog understands it: reflections on the very idea of historical change and transformation force us to analyse the contingent relationships between past, present and future, the latter being some kind of anthropological 'baseline'. So in this essay I will try to give some extremely provisional answers to this complex question by means of the concept of 'melancholia' – conceived as a 'structure of feeling'. The latter term was coined by Raymond Williams in order to refine the analysis of the culture in a given period. Culture is, in his 'totalizing' point of view, the structure determining the connection between the living expressions of a social experience – seen synchronously – and the remembered and recorded cultures of past periods. Through this connection we can, whether as social-science scholars or as engaged citizens, compare cultures over time. Structures of feelings are then the devices a given culture uses both to assimilate and to resist, on an individual and on a collective level, the apparently deterministic developments of history – accumulation of capital, class struggle, technological innovation. Structures of feelings are selection mechanisms to deal with tradition – of territory, class, gender, ethnicity, etc.[4] The concept fits nicely with the history of melancholia, since this is one of those rare human experiences where affections, cultural expressions, modes of production and political institutions meet each other clearly – not at first sight, but on closer examination.

Let me rephrase the research question: does melancholia, as a structure of feeling, bridge the gap between individual agency and societal determinism, in the field of politics? To start with, the very notion of melancholia in its applicability to the subject has to be explained, followed by various approaches to 'political spleen': historical cases linked to ideological paradigms (the French revolutionary activist Théroigne de Méricourt, the American President Abraham Lincoln); 'medicalized' cases, most instructively illustrated by American President John F. Kennedy; contemporary cases of 'failed politicians', in various senses (French Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Belgian Prime Minister Wilfried Martens. In Bérégovoy's case the failure

4   Williams 1961, p.64-70

was painfully literal: he committed suicide after an electoral defeat. Gordon Brown lost crucial elections. Prime Minister Wilfried Martens cannot be said to have failed, politically, but his memoirs reveal deep melancholia – personal loss, ideological degeneration, rancour.

In my conclusion, I will weigh these stories against a more anonymous and even amorphous notion of melancholia, which could comprise a whole society. The sociologist Émile Durkheim coined the term 'anomy' for the state of society where deep social-economic transitions are accompanied by the experience of moral and political lawlessness, as if any previous normativity has lost its meaning and its legitimacy.[5] A more common term for this phenomenon of melancholia, of indefinite mourning over a former society, is of course 'crisis'. The idea of crisis as a rupture, as the risk of the order of society collapsing, is a modern one. When a societal order has to find its legitimacy in the rationalization of its own foundations – and this is an elementary feature of Modernity, since God has been silenced by 'humankind' – every major re-configuration of the relations between past, present and future are 'critical' in many senses: decisive, resistible, traumatizing. In a modern crisis, the distance between the realm of experience and the horizon of expectations has become abyssal.[6] But in contrast to this philosophical (anthropological) notion of crisis-as-modernity, a different assessment of the phenomenon of 'crisis' is imaginable, one closer to contemporary political experience. 'Crisis', as a notion referring to the weak foundations of our (capitalist) system of political economy, has become a buzzword since the early 1970s. The gold standard, as the safe haven for monetary stability, has disappeared, the rise in oil prices has created new global dependencies, and other developments in political economy could be cited. The joint advantages of consumerism and the welfare state – the latter closely linked to the former, in order to ensure the legitimacy of them both – were called into question by a political elite that had previously thrived on undisputed consensus, 'social democracy' in a large sense.[7] The crisis took shape in the affirmed primacy of (de-regulated) financial policy, the constraints on trade-unionism, the primacy of law-and-order and the construction of 'Fortress Europe' – among many other phenomena. In this sense, 'crisis' is an ideological concept, meant to bridge the contradiction between a well-defined political economy – the logic of Capitalism – and de-politicization, in the guise of an officially restored consensus or 'common sense'.

This essay puts notions of melancholia, in politicians' behaviour and action, in the context of more abstract ideas of crisis of society as whole. It may result in an amendment – of course not the first one, and

....
5   Durkheim 1893/1967, p.18

6   Revault d'Allonnes 2012, p.78

7   Hall, et al. 1978/2013, p.300-310

surely not a comprehensive one – to the idea of man-made history, particularly recent political history.

Political melancholia

One of the most pronounced expressions of melancholia – provisionally defined as an attitude, resulting from a shared climate of feelings, emerging in early Modernity – is *A Satyre against Mankind*, a poem by John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, who belonged to the famous (and infamous) 'libertine' court of the English King Charles II. This dark satirical text, clearly not as a reactionary gesture, subverts one of the foundations of (early) Modernity itself, i.e. the autonomy of reason:

> And 'tis this very reason I despise, / That supernatural gift that makes a mite /
> Think he's an image of the infinite; / Comparing his short life, void of all the rest, /
> To the eternal, to the ever-blessed. / This busy, pushing stirrer-up of doubt, /
> That frames deep mysteries, then finds them out; /
> Filling with frantic crowds of thinking fools / The reverend bedlams, colleges and schools; /
> Born on whose wings each heavy sot can pierce / The limits of the boundless universe: /
> So charming ointments make an old witch fly, / And bear a crippled carcass through the sky. /
> 'Tis the exalted power whose business lies / In nonsense, and impossibilities.[8]

This is followed by a rant against philosophers, "who retire to think 'cause they have nought to do". And then he continues:

> But thoughts are given for action's government / Where action ceases, thought's impertinent: /
> Our sphere of action is life's happiness / And he that thinks beyond thinks like an ass.

In the more narrative sections of the poem, Rochester compares man and animal, in favour of the animal: it is 'false reason' that has corrupted mankind. But this feeling, pervading society, becomes only problematic, or critical, when mankind has to re-define itself, after the departure of God, or after His refusal ever to speak again to His creatures. If early

....
8   Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester 1993, p. 27

Modernity could be characterized by the quest for the legitimacy of autonomous thinking – the invention of the Cartesian *cogito*, the rejection of classical thought, and the glorification of curiousness[9], *A Satyre Against Mankind* expresses precisely the opposite attitude, in a discursive form where pain and anger over the loss of metaphysical certainties meet: this is anger about 'authoritative' reason. As Pol Dehert remarks in his essay on Rochester[10], Rochester's poem combines *Klage* (complaint) and *Anklage* (accusation). Sigmund Freud made this distinction in *Trauer und Melancholie*[11]: melancholia moves back and forth between the dark interiorization of a sense of loss of an unknown object (*Klage*) and the desire to express this impasse in irony, sarcasm and forms of 'libertine' behaviour (*Anklage*). In a more general way, the self-inflicted necessity to re-establish the possibility of knowing oneself and the world – after God has been declared 'indifferent' – begs its counterpart: the trauma of unknown loss, expressed in emotional 'deviancy'. The difference between mourning and melancholia, says Freud, is the fact that he who mourns more or less knows the object of his loss, whereas this is not clear for the melancholy man. Or more precisely, the melancholic might have an idea who (and/or what) he has lost, but he does not know what he has lost in them (it). The incapacity to separate these two aspects leads to a decrease and loss of self-regard. Or more precisely – again – melancholia means that one's image of oneself is profoundly altered.[12] But can you project this psychic development onto a whole society? The very definition of melancholia, whether by Robert Burton in the early 17th century[13], or by Freud, in the early 20th century, implies a societal embeddedness, because the meaning of those relationships that the 'patient' – a cultural term itself – has lost, are culturally *and* politically determined. The emotional value of a human relationship is constituted in a dialectic between the past – the traditions – and the actual experience: which indeed makes melancholia a 'structure of feeling'. But in order to provide a more precise answer, an answer that could lead to a specific notion of political melancholia, I will shortly digress on to two aspects of Modern melancholia: its affinity with anomia, and its conflict with utopianism.

The concept of 'anomy' – or anomia/anomie – is a sociological one, coined by Durkheim to explain certain types of suicide, especially those caused by the acceleration of the social-economic conditions, in the late 19th century. The 'mode of production' is not a linear and clear cause of

neurosis, eventually leading to suicide, but the societal environment, with its various dimensions – factory, family, matrimony, etc. – suffers from 'deregulation' (*dérèglement*)[14]. Anomia is a metropolitan phenomenon and coincides with the capitalist logic of stability followed by crisis, in a circular but also progressive movement: in the 'revalidation' after a crisis, society will be better off. Another sociologist, Robert Merton, redefines anomy – 'anomie' in his case – as a sense of social loss, not the innate aspect of a character, but an effect of the environment.[15] Anomia becomes tangible in two contradictory structures of feeling.[16] The first is a form of depression in (primarily) professional contexts: isolation, frustration, powerlessness, exclusion and the disappearance/dissolution of shared values. Strategies are developed to tackle this situation: adaptation, by turning to routines and rituals, or encapsulation, social withdrawal as a form of life – eventually leading to suicide. The second and opposite anomic structure of feeling is restless desire, epidemic insatiability: the individual is unable to get out of a spiral of excessive needs – anomy has an apathetic and a manic face. Confronted with anomy as a social pathology, the historical development of melancholy as a psychic and/or medical syndrome becomes clearly problematic. When Durkheim develops the idea that a system of rules and regulations – i.e. law – functions as the nervous system of society[17], he implicitly suggests that nervous disorder is the connecting 'structure of feeling' between social and individual appearances of anomy, also in the symptomatic oscillation between hyperactivity and hyper-fatigue. And one could go one step further: anomy, as a result of the connection (or disconnection) between forms of life and modes of production, is not a symptom of capitalism as a societal model, but its very condition. Capitalism – as a specific way to organize the division of labour as a social structure – has to uphold anomic discontent to maintain itself: melancholy becomes a political item.

A different politicization of melancholy is proposed by Wolf Lepenies. He also refers to Merton, who, in his theory of deviance, suggests that one of the earliest described forms of melancholy, namely 'acedia' – withdrawal from the world, in a condition of numbness, laziness and apathy, or 'retreatism' – should be taking into account by social scientists, thus introducing a structure of feeling as a principle of social order (or disorder).[18] The aforementioned use, by Merton, of the concept of anomia even consolidates this line of thought. Lepenies points to the

9   Blumenberg 1988, p. 440-470

10   Dehert 2015, p. 82-83

11   Freud 1946, 4

12   Leader 2008

13   Burton 1621/2001

14   Durkheim 1897

15   Merton 1938

16   Johannisson 2009, p.291-306

17   Durkheim 1893/1967, p.120

18   Merton 1968, p.243

theological roots of anomy, as a form of tolerated lawlessness or an inner exile in a subculture amidst a hostile, secular world.[19] In this context Robert Burton can call his lifelong project on *An Anatomy of Melancholy* a 'poetical commonwealth', a 'utopia', albeit a counter-ideal to the egalitarian models of Campanella's 'City of the Sun' or Bacon's 'New Atlantis'. More precisely, Burton implicitly criticizes the reduction of models of society and, *a fortiori*, models of state, to theories of power and authority: he refuses to describe the institutions in a precise way, because the basic relation of confidence between subject and state is shattered. In this gap, a different utopian attitude is needed and installed, since the 'institutional' utopias – and the more abstract theories of power – clearly condemn melancholia. It is here that a long tradition of interdiction of melancholy in progress-oriented social-political attitudes has its origins, as an aspect of the development of bourgeois society, as for instance Norbert Elias illustrates in his comments on behavioural rules for young men.[20] Melancholy, as a structure of feeling and thus as a 'historicizing' attitude – actual feelings are traumatically confronted with lost objects in the past – is not an innocent by-product of societal transformations, but on the contrary has a close connection – in a reverse, maybe even subversive way – with the 'progressive order' that Modernity gradually establishes, mentally, socially and politically. The utopian idea of progress does not tolerate, at least not at a fundamental level, withdrawal from the labour that has to be invested in this project. This intolerance is not a totalitarian gesture, but is more like a textbook for political behaviour – like Machiavelli's *The Prince*, but a bourgeois version – and thus for political theatricality.

The politicians' melancholia (I): Théroigne de Méricourt and Abraham Lincoln

The French Revolution could be considered as the first important 'material' rift with the political paradigm of pre-Modernity, as the political result of the 200 years following the 'Modernisation' of European societies on a 'theoretical' level: Hannah Arendt points to the importance of this revolutionary pathos – also present in the American Revolution – to mark the difference between this type of historical 'breach' and a simple *coup d'état*. A claim of novelty and the connection of this novelty with the primacy of freedom as a political goal: these markers are distinctive, even when expressed in such a paradoxical formula as Robespierre's 'despotism of freedom'.[21] One of the lesser-known symbols of this rift, this radicalisation of political novelty in the French Revolution, is Théroigne de

Méricourt, a former courtesan of Belgian origin, who became a figurehead of the feminist branch of the revolutionary movement. Women were welcomed in revolutionary ranks, but not on an equal basis and without the prospect of political rights. Nonetheless – or as a reaction – a strong feminist tendency, a 'warlike feminism' (*féminisme guerrier*) arose, but most of its leading characters – Olympe de Gouges, Madame Roland, among others – were victims of Robespierre's terror and guillotined. Théroigne herself escaped execution, and her life took a different but equally tragic turn. After being beaten up by a group of Jacobin extremists – and saved by the popular Jacobin leader Marat himself – she gradually sank into insanity, not before becoming the object of a muckraking campaign from all political sides, royalists and *thermidoriens* included. She was reported to have locked herself up in an illusory world of revolutionary fury, reciting fragments from speeches of Robespierre's ideologue Saint-Just. She was institutionalized at the mental hospital of *la Salpétrière*, and over the years she became an icon of a totally different idea of revolutionary fervour: political rebellion as an illness, as a form of hysteria. Jean-Étienne Esquirol and Philippe Pinel, both pioneers of 'alienism', the precursor of medical psychiatry, treated her. Although they considered folly as an illness, they opposed any physiological paradigm of diagnosis and they created for their patients a 'theatrical' environment aimed at moral transformation. Political activism was one of the causes of this hysteria and, during her detention, Théroigne had to play the symbolic role of revolutionary madness[22]. This 'treatment' left its traces, both in historiography and in the popular imagination, for a long time. Ghosts of Théroigne appear in very different places: in Charles Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* ("Have you seen Théroigne, of the blood-thirsty heart, / As an unshod herd to attack he bestirs, / With cheeks all inflamed, playing up to his part, / As he goes, sword in hand, up the royal stairs?")[23], and in the digital game *Assassin's Creed: Unity*.

The demonization of Théroigne exemplifies a 'reactionary' connection between political activism and melancholia, in a repulsive medicalized form, although Esquirol, later in his career, distanced himself from the moralism of his master, Pinel. The case of the American president Abraham Lincoln, however, presents the opposite image. In contrast with Élisabeth Roudinesco's biography of Théroigne de Méricourt, focusing on the construction of the legend and of the ideology of revolution-as-pathology, Joshua Wolf Shenk's portrait of Lincoln as a melancholy man[24] tells the opposite story. He describes the chronic depression of one of the most distinctive Presidents of the United States – his election as such

---

19   Lepenies 1998, p.9-42

20   Elias 1939

21   Arendt 1963/1990, p.29 & 34

22   Roudinesco 2010, p.199-237

23   Baudelaire 1861/2015, LIX

24   Shenk 2005

triggered the civil war in 1860 – which contributed both to his singular political attitude and actions and to the *a posteriori* legend of his being a founding father. Lincoln – "I am now the most miserable man", as he wrote in a letter, also referring to the traumatic feelings of Shakespeare's deposed *King Richard II* – never made a secret of his condition and it was known by more people than just his intimates. Shenk emphasizes that in mid-19th century America, depression, as a mental condition not univocally medicalized, was not considered to be an insurmountable societal risk. On the contrary, his psychic state perfectly matched the intellectual (and emotional) climate of the U.S. after the religious revival of the Second Awakening. American society experienced a mental rift, which resulted in the particular 'individualism' that Alexis de Tocqueville observed during his journey. This individualism, in contrast with simple egotism, is structural, says de Tocqueville, for a society based on representative democracy and formal egalitarianism[25]. Politically, Lincoln belonged to the Whigs, named after the homonymous party of 'enlightened liberals' in the United Kingdom. Their anti-slavery fraction was eventually to transform into the Republican party. The idea of unlimited upward mobility was dominant in this ideology, and Abraham Lincoln, the self-made man, adopted this self-awareness wholeheartedly. The dark side of this optimism, as an intellectual and political attitude, was the severe condemnation of failure, leaving no middle ground between success and loss. This made Lincoln's melancholy condition critically precarious: he had deliberately (and repeatedly) put himself in a position where he might lose everything. As a person, Lincoln compensated (or assimilated) this risk with remarkable fatalist philosophical and religious beliefs: non-congregational, theologically liberal, without an overbearing sense of sinfulness and, most importantly, a strong belief in the 'reign of reason'. It helped him to overcome his 'blue moods', although his colleagues were well aware of his almost physical absence in these moments of acute depression – he became extremely secretive, 'the most shut-mouthed man that ever existed', in the words of his professional partner, personal friend and (controversial) biographer William Henry Herndon.

In these short portraits, two very different assessments of the relationship between political behaviour and melancholia are made: (radical) political activism as an illness and a deviance –Théroigne de Méricourt – and political activism (on principle) as a traumatic virtue – Abraham Lincoln. Although the conclusions of their contemporaries are contradictory, they frame personal conditions in a larger structure of feeling: hysteria as deviancy, melancholia as virtuousness. Melancholia is seen as a structural element in political culture, even when the result can lead to opposing answers: Théroigne's exemplary internment versus the creation of Lincoln myth.

....
25   de Tocqueville 1848, III/2-3

The politicians' melancholia (II): cases of mental illness

It is relatively easy to draw up a list of illnesses, deviances, traumas and (nervous) breakdowns of important politicians through history, and to relate these conditions to crucial historical moments: Woodrow Wilson's stroke after the Treaty of Versailles, Churchill's 'black dog' – depressive moods – at the outbreak of World War II, John F. Kennedy's addictions and the Cuban Bay of Pigs debacle. This research has been done by several authors, sometimes with a political agenda[26], sometimes from a psychological point of view[27]– and in both examples the result is ambiguous. Between 1977 and 1979, David Owen served as Foreign Secretary in the British (Labour) Government of Prime Minister James Callaghan. He split from the Labour Party to found the Social Democratic Party in 1981, which would eventually merge with the Liberal (Democratic) Party. He also worked as a peace mediator for several international organizations, e.g. during the Bosnian war. But his primary educational background was medicine: before his political career, he specialized in neurology. In his book, *In Sickness and in Power*, he gives an overview of the problematic health conditions of major European and American leaders during the 20th century – from Teddy Roosevelt to Jacques Chirac – but he focuses on four major cases: the illness of British Prime Minister Anthony Eden during the Suez crisis in 1956, the health of John F. Kennedy, the secret illness (non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a blood cancer) of the Shah of Persia in the years before the Islamic revolution (1979) and the prostate cancer of François Mitterrand, discovered only months after his election as the French President in 1981. These are classic stories, describing both the impact of serious health conditions on political decision-making and the issue of the communication (or lack of it) of the actual medical state to intimates and the general public. Although these cases are described in a relatively pragmatic way, the selection and the analyses themselves point in a specific direction: Owen prepares for the introduction of a specific illness, only present in political (and business) leaders, intoxicated by their experience in power – the 'hubris syndrome'. In a polemical chapter, he analyses the political attitudes of George W. Bush and, more especially, Tony Blair during the build-up and the execution of the Iraq war in 2003. Apart from his problematic physical health – a heart condition – Blair suffered, in Owen's view, from a specific form of 'narcissism' characterized by a refusal to set limits to one's ambitions, a disdain for detailed information, a preference for the theatricality of one's power status – all shored up by a theological sense of calling. This hubris syndrome is not a typical personality syndrome, since, as Owen describes it,

....
26   Owen 2011

27   Ghaemi 2011

it only develops during the term in office – in the case of Bush and Blair in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11. The 'condition' manifested itself in the organization of their political staff: Blair went as far as to create his own miniature version of the Foreign Office, thus protecting himself from unwelcome advice, and the White House culture under G.W. Bush was of the same kind. In his conclusion, Owen links suggestions about preliminary (mental) health checks on politicians with an extension of the right – only ambiguously accepted by international law – of humanitarian intervention, with military means if necessary. This takes the analysis far beyond the original issue of the relationship between mental health and political prudence, as does the idea of 'inventing' a hubris syndrome as a high-political version of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. In a certain way, Owen's enterprise reminds us more than once of the (ideological) operations of the 'alienists' Pinel and Esquiral in Théroigne de Méricourt's case: medicalizing a fundamental political conflict, de-politicizing social action. The suggestion, for instance, that if his Western allies had been informed about the Shah's blood cancer, this would have prevented the radical irruption of political Islam in Iran, is interesting, but it remains a purely political analysis. In contrast, a case such as Lincoln's – or Churchill's, for that matter – demonstrates the singularity of the relationship between ill health and (chronic) depression in particular. The impact of these conditions can hardly become normative, as Owen suggests, since their outcome is unpredictable – as contingent as the outcome of 'sanity' in politics. The research by the psychologist Nassir Ghaemi, who is also a believer in a clinical, neurological approach to (political) melancholia, is more subtle. Ghaemi connects major mental conditions to the virtues of leadership: depression with realism and empathy, mania with creativity, hyperthymia with resilience. He demonstrates and illustrates these relationships with historical examples. Rhetorically, he takes Aristotle's famous dictum about the positive link between genius and melancholia as a starting point:

> Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of an atrabilious temperament, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile, as is said to have happened to Heracles among the heroes?[28]

But his rhetorical argument about 'genius' quickly shifts to a different ground, when he refuses – correctly, at that point – to reduce the vulnerable field of 'psychohistory' to stories of childhood trauma, with the portrait of American President Woodrow Wilson by Sigmund Freud

....
28   Aristotle 1984, 953a10-14

and diplomat William Bullitt as a notorious example[29]. Historic psychiatry, Ghaemi claims, looks for four types of evidence: symptoms, genetics, the course of illness, and treatment – the more these elements are found in the sources, the better we can assess the patient, even posthumously. However, most of the case studies rely on 'classical' historiographic sources, where the specificity of a clinical history is not always present. Even the well-documented story of Lincoln – thanks to William Herndon – is difficult to translate into a psychological portrait. However, in his (defensible) aversion to naïve psychohistory, Ghaemi risks becoming a victim of 'presentism' in his explanations of critical moments in a leader's mental condition: the incidents of the present moment explain a particular historical turn, not the more comprehensive narrative of both the actual leader – including his clinical records – and the political event. The case of John F. Kennedy illustrates this best[30]. Kennedy arrived at the White House in January 1961 in an awful physical condition, mostly as a result of his Addison's disease – a chronic endocrine system disorder in which the adrenal glands do not produce sufficient steroid hormones. Throughout his life he took anabolic steroids to compensate for this condition, which, objectively speaking, made him a drug addict. While building up his political career, Kennedy went from crisis to crisis, more than once received a 'death sentence' from his doctors, came alarmingly close to a septic shock and a full coma, and had lasting depressive periods. Biographers characterized his psychological condition as 'hyperthymia', which is a non-accepted qualification of a 'personality disorder' close to mania. Nevertheless, Ghaemi links the fluctuations in Kennedy's political record as a President with this hyperthymia – resulting from his endocrine disorder – and, more specifically, with shifts in treatment. In the first half of his presidency, Kennedy, heavily influenced by Max Jacobsen – a steroid and amphetamine dealer, known in socialite circles as 'Dr. Feelgood' – behaved as a true addict, and the clumsiness with which he handled the anti-Castro invasion in the Bay of Pigs was attributed to this condition. But his brother Robert Kennedy and the official White House doctor set up a medical *coup d'état*: instead of the dubious concoctions supplied by Jacobsen – who was banned from the White House – the President received a controlled dose of anabolic steroids with a certain state of mania as known side-effect. During this period, until his assassination, he established his reputation: the Berlin speech, the creative handling of the extremely dangerous Cuba crisis, the political recognition of the civil rights movement. Ghaemi speaks of a 'spectacular psychochemical success'. The question is, however, whether the reduction of political prudence – or, more spectacularly, courage – to specific clinical-psycho-

....
29   Freud & Bullitt 1967

30   Ghaemi 2011, p.169-186

logical incidents, as in Ghaemi's approach, tells us anything fundamental about the link between mental condition and political success. The implication, for instance, that the disaster of the Munich agreements between Hitler and Chamberlain would have been prevented by Churchill's 'black dog' is highly speculative, as is the 'proof' that Kennedy's steroids – apart from enhancing his sex drive – made him go to extreme limits to tame Khrushchev and Castro. On David Owen's list of political leaders, almost everyone suffers from mood swings or (mild) variations of depression[31], but he hardly asks if this observation is different from the presence of the same 'symptoms' in the general population, let alone answer it. One might wonder if the understandable fascination of David Owen and Nassir Ghaemi for mentally 'dysfunctional' leaders perhaps has less to do with medical interest, and more with historical, political and even societal concerns: can we, the citizens, afford this risk? "After scrutiny", answers Owen, the diplomat, "We should applaud it as a chance", answers Ghaemi, the psychiatrist. But in the process, the quest for the deeper grounds of psychic instability, medicalized or not, as a 'structure of feeling', as a cultural aspect and thus part of 'a whole way of life'[32], disappear silently and anecdotalism – or a strong thesis to be defended – gains ground.

The politicians' melancholia (III): failed politicians

Chris Mullin was for some years a Junior Minister in the government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. He published his diaries, which are a reader's delight: political diaries are a genre in their own right in the United Kingdom, the most famous (or infamous) being written by failed – or at least minor – politicians, as if their critical (and stylistic) quality were inversely proportional to their political success. In the last pages of his last volume (27 January 2010), Mullin reports a conversation with an embittered colleague, a back-bencher like himself:

> "'Have you seen this report on inequality?' A government-sponsored commission had reported that Britain was as class-ridden and unequal today as it had been in 1997. 'What have we been doing all these years?' 'Holding back the tide,' I ventured."[33]

At first sight, this is just a commonplace expression of frustration from powerless back-benchers, although Mullin, in the next paragraph, sums up the (modest) achievements of the Blair-Brown era. But the quote also exemplifies the 'post-democratic' experience of many contemporary politicians, which is that even a voluntarist attitude of elected representatives does not succeed in setting the political agenda. This point is made by several political scientists, such as Pierre Rosanvallon, refining the notion of 'de-politicisation'[34], Colin Crouch, describing the displacement of power centres to corporations[35], and Luc Huyse, reflecting on alternatives in participative democracy[36]. This feeling of gradual disarmament, of indifference, could be described as a form of melancholy: the loss of an undefinable object – legitimate power – and the impotence to assess in what this loss essentially consists for the mourner – the politician, as it happens, who is reduced to a breakwater, holding back the tide. The concept of the 'failed politician' might be helpful here when developing a more precise notion of political melancholy, in contrast to the ideological and medicalized approaches above. Four portraits will serve this argument, ordered on a scale of 'drama': dramas of failure and, respectively, suicide, impeachment, electoral defeat or mental retreat.

Pierre Bérégovoy, French Prime Minister (1925-1993)

The fate of the French Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy is the most tragic of these cases. Bérégovoy had a strong trade-unionist background, and politically he was a pupil of the almost mythical leftist politician Pierre Mendès-France, symbol of moral integrity in politics, advocate of anti-colonialism. In the shadow of the presidential regime of Général de Gaulle in the 1960s, he joined the effort to create a single non-communist socialist party in France: in 1971 the *Parti Socialiste* was created, led by François Mitterrand, a career politician without a socialist pedigree, which made him ideologically ambiguous. Bérégovoy was involved in the difficult negotiations with the *Parti Communiste*, resulting in a common political platform for the 1981 elections, won by Mitterrand. Bérégovoy became secretary-general – chief of staff – at the Élysée, the residence and office of the President of the French Republic. After speculation against the French *franc* or, more precisely, against the left-wing policy – 'Keynesianism in one country' – by the government of Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy (1981-1983), a more centrist course was taken by Mitterrand, and Bérégovoy, now the 'pillar of the Presidency' entered the government as Minister of Social Affairs with an enlarged portfolio. In subsequent governments he became the number two, as Minister of Financial and Economic Affairs, and in 1992 he was appointed Prime Minister, at a moment when the whole Mitterrand establishment was infected by alle-

---

31   Owen 2011, p.3-106

32   Williams 1958/1990, p.XVIII

33   Mullin 2010, p.416

---

34   Rosanvallon 2006

35   Crouch 2004

36   Huyse 2014

gations of corruption and similar scandals – including the family of Pierre Bérégovoy himself. During his years in government, he continued to act as the financial brain of the Presidency and of the socialist party, and his pecuniary pragmatism gradually became disconnected from any ethical considerations. Just before the 1993 elections, which were to be a disaster for the left, his dealings were scrutinized by an investigating judge: even without a formal indictment, his reputation was shattered. He killed himself using his bodyguard's gun 1st May 1993 – a very symbolic day. In spite of countless conspiracy theories developed after Bérégovoy's death, and the dubious secrecy surrounding his autopsy – not untypical for the Mitterrand regime – the fact that his death was self-inflicted was confirmed years later by the discovery of a suicide note given to his son-in-law. Mitterrand's bookkeeper was utterly entangled in a web of 'affairism', and "in killing himself, the statesman has effaced the man of weakness" – as Thierry Jean-Pierre, the investigating judge, said[37]. In what sense has the ill fate of Pierre Bérégovoy anything to do with melancholy? His suicide note cannot be analysed, any reflection is inevitably circumstantial. In this context, the most relevant aspect is the remarkable parallelism between the breakdown of the Mitterrand regime – most conspicuously in its political culture – and the collapse of a failed politician. Bérégovoy suffered from the (paranoid?) impression that he was always Mitterrand's second choice: he had to do his dirty jobs, even when he got finally the highest office. In 1983, as a Minister of Social Affairs, his syndicalist background was useful in quietening those opposing the sudden shift in economic policy from left to centre. And in 1993, the office of the Prime Minister was indeed degraded to the level of dirty jobs. It would be naïve to think that Bérégovoy's depression, eventually triggering his death, was caused by a gradual dilution of what was once an idealistic project: this happens in every political career, and Bérégovoy enjoyed Mitterrand's favours precisely because he was more than pragmatic enough to realize this. But something was lost, however, in political, professional and family relationships – the idea that not everything would go down the slippery slope of *Realpolitik*. The confrontation with the fact that his own family was implicated in corruption seems to have been the straw that broke the camel's back. Distinctions between social spheres – the political arena, the 'safe haven' of family – were blurred and the incapacity to redefine borders, all with their own sets of (informal) rules, proved fatal. Political melancholy surfaces when the personal invades the political or, more precisely, when the assumption, stoical or cynical, of loss of integrity on a political level contaminates the realm of intimacy. Here, the illusion of ethical purity was strengthened as a compensation for political degeneration, a disambiguation with fatal consequences – for the surviving family, of course, but for the political realm as well.

....
37   Follorou 2008, p.313-320

Gordon Brown, British Prime Minister (1951)

The calvary suffered by Gordon Brown – Chancellor of the Exchequer (1997-2007) and Prime Minister (2007-2010) of the United Kingdom – is only comparable to Bérégovoy's when seen in the broader context of the reconciliation of social democracy with late Capitalist society. The ending is obviously different, as is the configuration of power in the French and British governments. Brown entered politics – he became an MP in 1983, in the 'Falkland' elections – after a short academic career. As a student he was even elected Rector of the University of Edinburgh – a quite exceptional position at the age of 21. During the 'desert years' of New Labour, he was considered as a future leader and worked closely with the Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock, but after the 1992 election – which Labour should have won, as was incisively analysed and dramatized by the playwright David Hare[38] – something was broken, as his intimates witnessed. His rather shy character transformed into a complex, brooding person, sometimes described as saturnine[39]. But these kind of judgments should be treated with care and suspicion. As a Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Blair government, between 1997 and 2007, Brown built iron walls between his circle of close advisers and the Treasury department, which was sometimes seen as a symptom of his alleged misanthropy. But there may be another explanation: Brown was never in charge of large administration departments, but had always cooperated in smaller groups, at university and in the House of Commons. He was obviously afraid of being intimidated by the civil service and of losing power, so he reorganized his administration[40]. He also granted independence to the Bank of England on interest rate policy, taking it away from the government (and the Treasury), although genuine political-economic considerations prevailed in this issue. However, Brown's inner dark side won further prominence after the sudden death of Labour Leader John Smith, his political mentor, in 1994. Although it seemed self-evident to the outside world that Brown would succeed John Smith – he had a strong record as an MP and was Shadow Chancellor – influential circles, led by Peter Mandelson, preferred Tony Blair, a man without any socialist pedigree (like Mitterrand) but attractive to centrist voters. In 'the Granita agreement' – named after a fancy restaurant where they had a short negotiation, nicely romanticized in the clever Stephen Frears film *The Deal*[41] – Blair received Brown's support for the party leadership, but at a serious price. Once in power, the Labour

....
38   Hare 1993a, p.157-250 & 1993b

39   Keegan 2004, p.22

40   Jenkins 2007, p.254

41   Frears 2003

government would install a 'bipolar' leadership, Prime Minister Blair withdrawing completely from the financial-economic policies and giving the Chancellor a strong voice on education and social affairs: Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott would be the referee. Blair promised to resign in favour of Brown after two terms – a promise Blair delayed until after his third election victory in 2005. The Labour Party, after the unexpected and damaging loss of the 1992 elections, agreed on at least one conclusion about its cause. Then, Shadow Chancellor John Smith had defended tax reform, thereby giving the impression that the 'tax-and-spend' policy – associated with Labour since the end of the 1960s – would return. In 1997 'New' Labour did everything to prevent this, and Gordon Brown promised to continue the budget policy of his Conservative predecessor for at least three years, a pledge which didn't allow any major spending plans. Brown held to that promise, as he did regarding continuity in the realm of financial deregulation – starting with independence of the Bank of England. The framework of financial-economic policy also stayed 'objective' or 'data driven': Brown, a theoretical supporter of a single European currency, refused to consider any purely political argument to give up sterling for the Euro. Brown's gospel could be summarized as follows: orthodox budget policy in order to enable, in the mid-term, an investment policy – education, healthcare – coupled with a 'meritocratic' or 'voluntarist' social policy under the heading 'Welfare to Work'. This political logic could be labelled 'neoliberalism' – Jenkins calls Brown, without any reservation, a 'Thatcherite'[42]– but it could also be interpreted as the 're-enactment' of the older British dispute between 'cultural Marxists' such as William Morris and the Fabian Society. Both tendencies were convinced of the fundamental importance of education and culture – as the embodiment of a 'whole way of life' – to major changes in the degenerated industrialist society of high Capitalism, but they disagreed on whether or not the existing institutions were able (or willing) to transform society in more democratic and egalitarian directions[43]. Ed Balls, a member of the Fabian Society, was Brown's closest adviser and political ally, and he expressed the 'reformist' (or so-called 'depoliticized') economic policy – subscribing to the logic of financial Capitalism in order to redirect the budgetary gains obtained to his real political goals – in a famous 1992 discussion paper[44]. In contrast with Tony Blair, a politician without any ideological sensitivity, Brown was a socialist with a tradition – he wrote his PhD thesis about the Scottish Labour Party – and he came close to Fabian moralism: a strong sense of justice and a disdain for conspicuous wealth, combined with industriousness and exactingness. His major

....

42   Jenkins 2007, 253

43   Williams 1958/1990, p.182-184

44   Keegan 2004, p.131

political success, although not uncontroversial, was the bailout of British banks during the financial crisis of 2008: he set the example for European banking policy, insisting on recapitalization. Brown said that the British banks – which set the benchmarks in innovative financial policy – had arrived at a 'Capitalism without capital'[45]. It is ironic when a social democrat has to remind the financial sector of the fundamentals of their trade. And subsequently to act as the only 'real' capitalist left – the state as the capitalist of last resort. In Gordon Brown's case, political melancholy could be reduced to his character and its consequences. In 1994, he was said to have changed profoundly. He had, until then, made his reputation with well-documented attacks on the dubious financial policy of the John Major government, but then he lost his best friend, John Smith and he had to downscale his ambitions – allegedly because of loss of support among Labour MPs. He systematically frustrated every tax-and-spend proposal made by his colleagues, which made him unpopular. However, the character issue is only the surface of a much deeper melancholy in contemporary politics, closer to Bérégovoy's ordeal. The French example dealt mainly with the temptations of (the preservation of) political power and the resulting affairism, eventually blurring the spheres of life, leading to depression, both in private and in public respect. Gordon Brown's melancholy belongs much more to the political realm itself, being the result of ideological choices in the framework of the de-politicization of economic and social policy. "Welfare to Work" is a fine slogan, but it shows only the surface of a political culture obsessed with benchmarks, targets and other forms of 'measurability' as an almost neurotic compensation for the awareness that social democracy had *de facto* merged with late Capitalism. It is not clear though in whom this melancholy resides. Saying that it is the politician's melancholy means over-psychologising political action and agency, but it is as unclear whether the citizen – in a generic sense – is said to experience this gap between political ambition and societal outcomes as an unidentified loss.

Wilfried Martens, Belgian Prime Minister (1937-2013)

Christian democracy, political scientists say[46], was the most important ideological innovation to follow the World War II, and it was probably also the most powerful. In the six original members of the European Community, Christian democrat parties were the dominant political formations. Historically, the essential contribution of Christian democracy was the final reconciliation of Christian religion – especially Catholicism – with

....

45   Keegan 2012, p.69

46   (Müller 2011, 132-143)

an autonomous political and democratic domain. But with regard to the reconciliation of Christian democrat political forces – not to be confused with conservatism in general – with the social-economic constraints of late Capitalism, matters are more ambiguous. This ambiguity is illustrated, in an exemplary way, in the memoirs of Wilfried Martens, Belgian Prime Minister between 1979 and 1992[47]. And it throws an interesting light on political melancholia. Wilfried Martens' family background was one of modest farmers, and he succeeded as one of the few gifted students of his village to go to university, where he obtained a law degree. As a young solicitor, he became politically active, mainly as a spokesman for the (extra-parliamentary) Flemish movement. When he entered 'real' politics, he opted for the power apparatus of the CVP, the 'Christian people's party', and not for the small Volksunie nationalist party. The CVP was the reformed Catholic party, which on the one hand had been a federation of electoral associations, and special interest groups on the other: trade-unions, health insurance cooperatives, syndicates of the self-employed and farmers. After World War II, this diverse representation of a large Catholic 'midfield' transformed into a party with a Christian democrat programme that was close to the established Belgian institutions. With its (centre-) rightist tradition, the Flemish movement was ideologically close to Christian democracy, but at that time parties were organized at a Belgian level, with a dominant Belgian 'unitarism', not only on the French-speaking side. But the main political goal of the nationalists was at that moment – the late 1950s – a transformation of Belgium into a federal state, founded on exclusive language-based territories: to the 'Belgicist' establishment this was dangerous, subversive radicalism. Since Martens' entrance into politics took place in 1960s, he was also sensitive to the societal and political shifts of that era, particularly the politicization of youth culture. As the president of the youth division of the CVP, he confronted the established powers of the party together with a group of ambitious kindred spirits called the 'miracle board' (*wonderbureau*). They made a claim for a 'progressive front' with the socialists, the creation of a pluralist education system and, of course, a clearly federalist reform of the state. But the party officials succeeded in marginalizing them: with one exception, none of this political 'rat pack' was elected in 1971 and Martens changed tactics. He deliberately opted for an accommodation with the party line of the CVP, without – as he asserts – renouncing the radical manifestos of his 'miracle board'[48]. The efforts of the 'miracle board' lacked historical momentum: neither the transition from Catholic conservatism to Christian democracy and from trade-unionist socialism to pluralist social democracy (in the BSP socialist party) were com-

pleted – did this ever happen, one might ask – and so the momentum was missed. And it left its traces on the political *persona* of Wilfried Martens. Although he had been ideologically associated with the 'labour' wing of the CVP – based upon the strong Christian trade union –he reached the climax of his political career during the 1980s as Belgian Prime Minister, with a centre-right 'austerity' government that had to face economic adversity, budgetary problems, security crises (local terrorism) and Cold War controversies (the missile crisis) In 1981, his party lost the elections (but they remained the largest party in parliament), he dumped his social democrat coalition partner and continued to govern, for seven years, with the Liberal parties. With what might be called a 'Thatcherite' agenda – less confrontational however, but with the same 'There is No Alternative' attitude – Martens was transformed into the figurehead of neoliberal conservatism. When defending his policies, pragmatically and without any ideological or even political-economic framework, rancour often shows through, e.g. in his relationship with a critical press[49]. After his rather painful departure from the leadership in 1992, he committed himself to his presidency of the European People's Party (EPP), developing this loose confederation into the largest party in the European Parliament at any price. He brought in the British Conservatives – for a limited period – the Spanish People's Party, the Hungarian Fidesz and many other (moderate) right-wing parties, culminating in the welcoming of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. Among MEPs who were members of the EPP, there was great resistance to Forza Italia, but Martens reduces this to personal and irrational objections – and lack of insight into the 'grand design' of the whole operation. It is not what is written that is painful, but what is not written – the substance of the debate is missing[50]. Seen from this perspective, the Martens memoirs are an almost traumatic and definitely a melancholy story. The general tone is one of politics as compliance, dedication and selflessness – almost to the point of absurdity. During a crucial meeting about the umpteenth attempt at constitutional reform in Belgium, he received the message that his son had been involved in a serious accident during his holidays in Spain. The playwright Bart Meuleman wrote a monologue on the character of Wilfried Martens, based upon interviews with Martens' political intimates. The scene where he gets this news, a precise representation of the events, is central:

> "At night, at half past nine, the party presidents and the prime minister convene a second time to check the points of view. Cools [Walloon socialist] was now really drinking a lot. He pushed off immediately 'Scum', he says to Tindemans, and he holds his fists ready to

47   Martens 2006

48   Martens 2006, p.86

49   Martens 2006, p.295

50   Martens 2006, p.677-678

harm the prime minister, ready to punch him in the face.
'He', and he points with a fleshy finger to Martens, 'he's reliable. But you!!!'
"Now, now. Come on, come on.'The other presidents jump up. 'André, that's enough.'
Cools acts as if annoyed, gasps, puffs, and most of his poison seems to have been discharged.
Until Martens, who has kept his calm all day, suddenly stands up and addresses those present.
'Gentlemen,' he says, 'I don't want to spoil the good atmosphere, but at five o'clock this afternoon I learnt that my son Kris has had an accident at Marbella in Spain.' And Wilfried Martens starts to cry. Everybody is struck dumb. 'But what are you doing here', says Cools, suddenly sober, 'Take the Mystère [government jet] to go to your wife and son!' 'Cannot', says Martens, sobbing, 'I am not allowed to take a government plane for private matters.'"[51]

This incident summarizes the whole of Martens' private *and* political persona: political conscientiousness, self-deprecating irony, sentiment as a last resort. His rival André Cools, president of the socialist party, embodies the completely opposite character – but probably as desperate as Martens himself about the 'invasion' of private matters into the public realm. It also summarizes a certain attitude towards the duties of a politician as such. The debate in the room was about the constitutional nature of certain reforms, after criticism by legal experts: not a minor issue, and even in his personal distress Martens represents a strict, almost puritan viewpoint. A formalist viewpoint, which could symbolize this generation of Christian democrats' general concept of democratically legitimized power. A conservative viewpoint, in the profound sense of the word – balanced reforms can only be conceived and applied with utmost respect for the actual configurations of power. The fact that in the meantime the idea of an alternative vision of the world – which he once represented as the president of the 'miracle board' of young Christian democrats – had to be abandoned, was not even a conscious decision by one person, but a slow disappearance, though never felt as a surrender to the 'establishment'. The dramatized incident also marks the sudden realization of something lost, although Martens the politician was never aware of it: the very atypical crying fit is the physical sign of this horrible awareness. In Meuleman's dramatization, the interruption of a fundamental political discussion – and clearly one without any sense of propriety, as Cools' behaviour shows – by a family tragedy is no coincidence. The tragedy of Martens' son is the tragedy of Christian democracy – and social democracy, for that matter – and in the case of the Belgian Prime Minister

it led, in his memoirs, to rancour as a defence mechanism. Here, political melancholia is not even aware of the substantial (ideological) loss itself, let alone that this feeling would be capable of refining a certain sense of loss, or of realizing what precisely was lost in the lost object.

Wilfried Martens was not really a failed politician: under his leadership Belgium was transformed into a federal state, his austerity politics led to successful budget control – after a big increase in public debt in the early 1980ies –, and his stubborn insistence on installing NATO missiles strengthened North Atlantic loyalties. If 'failure' is the right term, this is about the demystification of idealisms in post-war Europe: the failure to stick to the welfare state 'as we knew it'. Not because this idealism was too cloudy, but because the welfare state never existed as an ideal for late Capitalism as such, only as a tool for the creation of (de-politicized) consent. And in this moral failure, or moral loss, melancholia prospers.

Conclusion: crisis as melancholia

Melancholia was defined above as a 'historicizing' attitude: it is a structure in which actual feelings are traumatically confronted with lost objects. Here 'lost' means: once present, but in the past. Melancholia has to do with time, with the possibility (or impossibility) of structuring experiences connected with material and mental objects in terms of past, present and future: from this perspective, melancholia is a thoroughly modern notion. Jürgen Habermas described the modern *Zeitgeist* as the combustion resulting from the clash between historical and utopian thinking:

> Modernity can no longer borrow its orientating standards from examples in the past. Modernity is left exclusively on its own – it has to create its normativity out of itself. From now on, the authentic present is the place where continuation of the past and innovation cross each other.[52]

It is thus not surprising that this 'combustion' takes the form of contemporary expressions of loss, which are always hard to define, let alone to quench. We have quoted literary examples in John Wilmot – the satirical revolt against 'false reason' – and Robert Musil – the poetic ambivalence regarding technological progress. And we have discussed (historical) political examples in Théroigne de Méricourt – the revolutionary disillusion transformed into 'medical' insanity – and Abraham Lincoln – chronic depression sublimated as visionary stubbornness. Our closer examination of four examples of contemporary politicians revealed a few

correlations between life stories and forms of depression, but they should have demonstrated in the first place the gap between political agency and the societal transformations these actors asserted that they had always invested in. These Prime Ministers, with substantial political capacities, occupy a political space they have to define themselves, taking into account, in Habermas' terms, 'authentic present', 'continuation of the past' and 'innovation'. In this political realm, a purely abstract interaction – politics as a (constitutional) procedure – is transformed into a manifestation of political subjects[53]. And consequently a space for melancholia is opened up, in the cracks between past and present, present and future, public persona and private citizen, political agent and political subject. And it is here that the notion of crisis might be helpful, from both the perspectives sketched above: crisis as an aspect of the historical condition of Modernity, and crisis as a concept by which to define specific dysfunctions in a late Capitalist society.

Even with the caution that every beginning has its necessary history, the positioning of the Cartesian *cogito* as the vantage point of reflexive a thought is effectively a beginning: it is a break with a world-view, and not simply a translation and/or a transfer of theological content to a secular realm, as if every teleological idea – like historical progress – were a variation on eschatological themes[54]. Secularism, as a paradigm, is embedded in the experience of rift, while a continuation of the past implies a break with the same past. The strongest form of this rift is of course a revolution, where the political space is truly 'theatricalized' in a radical present: the meaning of history is revealed, but the viewpoint is different depending on whether one is an actor in the events or a spectator – it is the latter who has to confirm the 'opening' of the political space[55]. But at the same time, an abyss opens up between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation, as historian Rainer Koselleck put it[56], when the rift is projected onto interaction with the future. It is here that the notion of crisis arises: the teleology as a stalemate. Translated into concrete contemporary terms, 'crisis' means – as a structural notion, not as an transitory incident – that experience and expectation cannot be reconciled, due to two major characteristics of this society: the acceleration of events, and the complex 'layering' of fields of experience – social, political, cultural, technological, medical, etc. – that can no longer be apprehended in a single 'structure of feeling'. It is precisely this acceleration that complicates this 'layering', and 'desynchronizes' our experiences: every field develops its own speed and rhythm, its own relationship with

past and future.[57] The result of this shifting of 'tectonic plates' is, on the political level, fundamentally disenchanting: the present is embodied in the permanence of the state of crisis, and politicians are not able to 'historicize' it – or else they are punished by their voters on such issues as immigration and global warming. At the same time, political subjects are forced to put their social actions in a context of past and future – a past and a future of their own making, since political agents – with the decline of the *état-providence* – no longer provide it.[58] Crisis, as a permanent condition, thus means the impossibility of deciding on which level which relationship between past, present and future should be established. In the case of politicians, this 'indecidability' has become acute: they are elected on the basis of the horizon of expectation they have proposed and even embodied, but in their actual exercise of authority they are stuck in the present. The cases presented above illustrate this abundantly.

But there is also an ideological aspect to be considered. Apart from being an historical category, coexistent with the concept of Modernity as such, 'crisis' is also a political tool, especially 'crisis of authority': "a 'crisis of authority' is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State"[59]. 'Hegemony' is the specific correlation between the consent of a population and the degree of coercive power exerted upon those groups who challenge the 'spontaneity' of this consent[60]. Thus when this correlation is out of balance, one can speak of a 'crisis'. Hall *et al*. describe how consent was constructed – in the United Kingdom, in their study – after World War II. Three thresholds of tolerance were built around the 'civilised society', the common denominator of consent: a threshold of 'permissiveness', defending normality from sexual deviance and non-violent protest, a threshold of 'legality', defending it from non-violent crime and violent protest, and a threshold of 'extreme violence' defending it from violent crime and terrorism. Consent was preserved – and actually experienced, interiorized, rationalized – as long as the variety of protective (coercive) actions was applied according to the status and character of the 'circles'. The hegemonic authority of the state was invisible and the balance was reached. But under the pressure of international developments since the 1960s – profound economic changes such as the disappearance of the gold standard, the raising of oil prices, the development of (deregulated) financial markets – the state took an exceptional form, and the differences between the levels of coer-

....

53   Rancière 1998, p.241-242

54   Revault d'Allonnes 2012, p.66-69

55   Arendt 1963/1990, p.52

56   Koselleck 1979, p.349-375

57   Revault d'Allonnes 2012, p.111-118

58   Hartog 2003, p.126 & Revault d'Allonnes 2012, p.135

59   Gramsci 1971, p.210

60   Gramsci 1971, p.12

cion were blurred[61]. Both real threats – the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland – and imaginary dangers – the infiltration of Black Power into West Indian neighbourhoods – served as an excuse to install a 'law-and-order' state, strongly supported by the tabloid press. The notion of 'mugging' – disproportionate violence in street robberies – was the symbol of this 'moral panic': phenomena of discontent, mostly not politicized, were magnified and in their mediatized form caused excessive panic, mostly directed at minority groups. Hall *et al.* do not suggest that this societal unrest was a conscious answer, the tactically well-planned 'creation' of a government that felt threatened: the preservation of hegemonic political structures almost invisibly encourages the blurring of levels of 'seriousness' in deviance. The coercive power fills in all the gaps left open by the dilution of consent. This kind of 'hegemonic crisis' might be the culminating point of political melancholia: the existential Modernity crisis is the breeding ground for this eruption of authority. In this metaphorical context, moral panic is more a symptom of hysteria: it scapegoats minority groups, it scavenges on the loss of the UK's imperial status – post-colonial depression, post-imperial melancholia[62].

When we consider the critical stories of Bérégovoy, Brown and Martens, both perspectives of 'crisis' are present. The result of the 'desynchronisation' of the public realm is the outsourcing of political agency to other actors: arbitration in legal conflicts, economic boards, international institutions, which all nibble at the classic properties of sovereignty[63]. And at the same time pressure grows, from the electorate, to re-affirm this sovereignty in a traditional way: citizens claim the re-establishment of political symbols, local regulation and physical barriers – a nation has a specific spatio-temporal identity that should be recognizable[64]. These politicians are all children of an era in society – from 1945 until the late 1960s – which was characterized by a 'partnership' between an expanding economy, a strong commitment to the welfare state and a progressive sharing of national sovereignties with European institutions. But the abyss between this progress, this post-national development, and the different agenda adhered to by the economic basis of this 'historical compromise' – corporate Capitalism, which is significantly different from free market Capitalism[65] – has created illusions that have been sublimated in various ways. This discomfort was embodied in the 'undercover' marriage between centre-left policy and corporate business (the Mitterrand-

61   Hall, et al. 1978/2013, p.215-223

62   Gilroy 2004, p.98

63   Revault d'Allonnes 2012, p.147

64   Judt 2010, p.195-196

65   Crouch 2011, p.49-70

Bérégovoy deals), the creation of an autonomous economic government (the Blair-Brown deal) or in the stubborn and rancorous embodiment of an imaginary general will (the relationship between Martens and King Baudouin).

Returning to the notion of 'anomia', mentioned above, as a necessary 'black hole' of an absence of rules between the actual modes of production and their political representation, these 'failed' politicians embody anomia, each in their own way. The very virtual 'idealism' of election campaigns and the prosaic realities of governance were reconciled – if that is the right term – in the shadowplay of 'affairism', where there is not even a code of honour: that was the tragedy of the Mitterrand presidency. In the UK, the mania of Gordon Brown – not as a pathological condition, but rather as an attitude – could be seen as the answer to bridging the gap caused by deep societal change. Between 1979 and 1997, a seemingly irreversible shift took place, away from the post-war bipartisan consent over the welfare state known as 'butskellism' – the blending of ideas of the centrist Tory minister R.A. Butler and the centrist Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell[66]– towards the re-introduction of a screwed-up class struggle known as Thatcherism. There were no (political) rules available for a transition to deregulation, and so anomic mania became the answer to the lack of societal firm ground. It is of course ironic that a social democrat was the executor of Thatcher's political testament, thus causing melancholia – among those who believed in a reversal of fortune in 1997 – about Brown's (and Blair's) political legacy. The 'anomia' of Wilfried Martens is of a still different kind. Christian democracy, as an ideology, but even more as a political force, is an empty shell, in which objectively opposed interest groups – corporate business with a Catholic pedigree, trade-unionism in the 'anti-socialist' tradition – can work on a consensus, before any public political struggle or coalition government. But the flipside of this flexibility is the steady hollowing out of the all too abstract, 'personalist' ideological common ground. Martens embodied the same 'neoliberal' shift in hegemonic consent that Thatcher represented, but in a less confrontational way, and his successor Jean-Luc Dehaene finished the job, as Blair & Brown did. But the ultimate condition needed to make this transition work is absolute political silence, or a communication based upon de-politicization. So, again, no rules can be proclaimed, the laws are not only unwritten, they are not even proclaimed: this is structural anomia, a structure of feeling also known as melancholia. And we do not know what is lost, even if we start to guess what was lost in what we lost: a whole way of life.

In his essay on the revolution of 1848 and the subsequent *coup d'état* by Louis Bonaparte in 1851, leading to the constitution of the Second Empire in France, Karl Marx tries to analyse the way societal movements

66   Judt 2010, p.49

do or do not coincide with political rifts: what is the 'relative autonomy' of the political realm[67]? Marx analyses the case where the Bonapartists strip the political rights from the bourgeoisie – the hegemonic class – in order to promote their self-defined ideas of political order and popular sovereignty. More fundamentally, Marx shows how a spontaneous 'drama-turgy' becomes apparent when different regimes try to represent particu-lar balances of power in the existing society. No regime coincides with the modes of production or with the societal 'state of the art'. Even when Marx' goal is to inquire into the conditions of (successful) revolutions, his analysis points to the situation where political melancholia appears – as a property of a political culture, or as an individual attitude. Between the totalizing ambitions of every political regime – they represent the neces-sary mode of governance in the given conditions – and the impossibility of this same regime of creating a stable *régime d'historicité* to realize these ambitions: fault lines appear in this contradiction, and in these fault lines, the abyssal rifts, things disappear. And there, in the best possible world, mourning commences.

....
67   Marx 1852/2007

BIBLIOGRAPHY
Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution.* New York: Penguin, 1963/1990.
Aristotle. "Problemata." In *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, by Aristotle, edited by Jonathan Barnes, translated by E.S. Forster. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.
Baudelaire, Charles. *Les Fleurs du Mal.* Paris: J'ai lu, 1861/2015.
Blumenberg, Hans. *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit.* Erneuerte Ausgabe. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988.
Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy.* Edited by William Gass. New York: NYRB, 1621/2001.
Crouch, Colin. *Post-Democracy.* Cambridge: Polity, 2004.
—. *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.
de Tocqueville, Alexis. *De la démocratie en Amérique.* Paris: Pagnerre, 1848.
Dehert, Pol. *Rochester's World. The World of a|the Monkey. Een anatomie van de barokke theat-raliteit.* Brussel: VUB / RITCS, 2015.
Durkheim, Émile. *De la division du travail social.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1893/1967.
—. *Le suicide. Étude de sociologie.* Paris: Félix Alcan, 1897.
Elias, Norbert. *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogeneetische Untersuchungen.* Basel: Verlag Haus zum Falken, 1939.
Follorou, Jacques. *Bérégovoy. Le dernier secret.* Paris: Fayard, 2008.
The Deal. Directed by Stephen Frears. 2003.
Freud, Sigmund. "Trauer und Melancholie." In *Gesammelte Werke Band X*, by Sigmund Freud, edited by Anna Freud. London: Imago, 1946.
Freud, Sigmund, and William C. Bullitt. *Thomas Woodrow Wilson. A Psychological Study.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967.
Ghaemi, Nassir. *A First-rate Madness. Uncovering the Links between Leadership and Mental Illness.* New York: The Penguin Press, 2011.
Gilroy, Paul. *After Empire. Melancholia or convivial culture?* Abingdon / New York: Routledge, 2004.
Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.* Edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. Translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.
Habermas, Jürgen. "Die Krise des Wohlfahrtsstaates und die Erschöpfung utopischer Energien." In *Die Neue Unübersichtlichkeit. Kleine Politische Schriften V*, by Jürgen Habermas, 151-163. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985.
Hall, Stuart, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts. *Policing the Crisis. Mugging, the State and Law & Order.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978/2013.
Hare, David. *Asking Around. Background to the David Hare trilogy.* London: Faber and Faber, 1993.
—. *The Absence of War.* London: Faber and Faber, 1993.
Hartog, François. *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps.* Paris: Seuil, 2003.
Huyse, Luc. *De democratie voorbij.* Leuven: Van Halewyck, 2014.
Jenkins, Simon. *Thatcher and Sons. A Revolution in Three Acts.* London: Penguin, 2007. Johannisson, Karin. *De Kamers van de melancholie. Over angst, verveling en depressie.* Translated by Elina van der Heijden and Wiveca Jongeneel. Amsterdam: Ambo | Anthos, 2009.
Judt, Tony. *Ill Fares the Land.* New York: The Penguin Press, 2010.
Keegan, William. *"Saving the world"? Gordon Brown reconsidered.* London: Searching Finance, 2012.
—. *The Prudence of Mr Gordon Brown.* Chichester: Wiley, 2004.
Koselleck, Rainer. *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979.
Leader, Darian. *The New Black. Mourning, Melancholia and Depression.* London: Hamish Hamilton, 2008.
Lepenies, Wolf. *Melancholie und Gesellschaft.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998.
Martens, Wilfried. *De memoires. Luctor et emergo.* Tielt: Lannoo, 2006.
Marx, Karl. *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte.* Edited by Hauke Bronkhorst. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1852/2007.
Merton, Robert K. "Social Structure and Anomie." *American Sociological Review* 3 (October 1938): 672-682.
—. *Social Theory and Social Structure.* New York: The Free Press, 1968.
Meuleman, Bart. *Martens.* Gent/Kortrijk: NTG/Theater Antigone, 2006.

Müller, Jan-Werner. *Contesting Democracy. Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe.* New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2011.

Mullin, Chris. *Decline & Fall. Diaries 2005-2010.* London: Profile Books, 2010.

Musil, Robert. *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften.* Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1952.

Owen, David. *In Sickness and in Power. Illness in heads of government during the last 100 years.* York: Methuen, 2011.

Rancière, Jacques. *Aux bords du politique.* Paris: Gallimard, 1998.

Revault d'Allonnes, Myriam. *La crise sans fin. Essai sur l'expérience moderne du temps.* Paris: Seuil, 2012.

Rosanvallon, Pierre. *La contre-démocratie. La politique à l'âge de la défiance.* Paris: Seuil, 2006.

Roudinesco, Élisabeth. *Théroigne de Méricourt. Une femme mélancholique sous la Révolution.* Paris: Albin Michel, 2010.

Shenk, Joshua Wolf. *Lincoln's Melancholy. How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness.* Boston / New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society. Coleridge to Orwell.* London: The Hogarth Press, 1958/1990.

—. *The Long Revolution.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961.

Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, John. "A Satyre Against Mankind." In *Complete Poems and Plays*, by John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, edited by Paddy Lyons, 25-30. London: J.M. Dent, 1993.