

Is Politics CRISIS & CRITIQUE Possible Today?

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IS POLITICS POSSIBLE TODAY?

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CRISIS & CRITIQUE

**IS POLITICS POSSIBLE
TODAY?**

CRISIS & CRITIQUE
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Introduction: Is Politics Possible Today?

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

... is a question that can easily appear ill-phrased and as if here someone made a category mistake. It can appear ill-phrased if one presumes that as long as there are human beings, there is politics. This would mean, politics is not only possible today. It is possible all the time (and everywhere). Because politics is never impossible. There might be bad and good forms of politics and political forms that are just rather mediocre. But politics from such a point of view is never impossible, because it is always already there when and where there are human beings. Because human beings are beings who are social and act collectively, and thus: as soon as there are human beings, there is politics. This is what one ends up with if one believes politics is primarily inscribed into the very social being of human being and it is what one assumes when one assumes that the existence of human beings brings with it, unavoidably, politics. Politics then would be a formal-natural implication of (human) existence. It is an (essential) part of the human life form; it is linked to human essence - and this obviously means that there is such a thing as a human essence for this position. Politics is possible, because it is, in some sense, always already realized with the very existence of human beings. Politics is therefore not simply always possible, it is rather always already actual and realized. It thereby is turned into a (natural) given (because inscribed into the very nature of the human - and maybe even into that of other - beings). Politics is according to this model a structural implication of the human world. In short, politics here becomes natural structure, natural structuration is political. For such a position, politics is on the side of structure, nature, essence and givenness.

But - as we could critically ask - what if there is a world wherein there are human beings who do not live like human beings (ought to)? This could then be the product of the human misunderstanding themselves or of the world, which does not allow for human beings to live in a human way. This is, obviously, a rather familiar critical trope, one that brings back memories of debates around alienation and dehumanization, and the like. If there are human beings but in a world where they cannot live like human beings then this discrepancy itself is where (emancipatory) politics is situated and located. The discrepancy defines the goal, the aim and end of politics. Politics in this view is also possible, but it is not a given. Rather it is possible because of the gap between what is and what ought to be. This gap might be sometimes difficult to identify, but it is nevertheless always there and because it is always there, even sometimes, invisibly, politics is (always) possible, but not always realized, when the gap remains untouched. It is realized when one operates from, around and against this gap. For this gap is never really empty, it is rather normatively charged and provides the very forceless force of the better political argument. For when one can identify how human being ought to live and how they are not living that way, one

can find in the nature of human beings the very norm by means of which one can critically judge the gap between is and ought. Politics then is always possible because there is always a natural norm that allows us to judge what is the right and the wrong way of leading a human life. Realizing politics - successfully - in this view cannot then but lead to the abolishment of politics through the very act of realizing politics. Politics attacks the gap between is and ought and overcoming it must imply the abolishment of politics as political act.

The question "Is Politics Possible Today?" rejects both these modes of naturalizing politics. It implies that politics is not always possible and seeks to examine the coordinates of the present world and determine if they allow for politics. This means that all terms in the question must be understood not only in an interlinked, but also in a fundamentally historical way. This, in turn, implies that our "Today" can (or could) be one that makes politics impossible. It can be one where we do not even know what politics is and it can be one where politics is not a given, but needs to be reinvented. Or it might be a today where it seems impossible that there ever will be politics or that politics could be reinvented. But this also means to conjuncturally explore and examine what we (possibly could) mean when we speak of and refer to the possibility of politics (today). Since possibility itself then turns out to be a historical category.

Politics is not always already realized and actual, it is not always possible. This statements are just another way of saying that politics is immensely historical. And it is immensely historical because it is one of the forms of practice that makes, that creates, that invents and transforms (even the forms of) history. But if there is an end of history, there might be an end of politics - and a symptom might be that we are confronted with so many politics of the end (and problematic forms of non-enlightened, to pun Jean-Pierre Dupuy, doomsaying¹).

If politics (is one of the forms of practice that) makes history, then history can seem possible or impossible in this, in our *today*; since it can seem that everything is already decided (and things will go down the drain) or that the future will be nothing but a (maybe increasingly horrible) repetition of the present, which in itself (since at least quite some time) could than be nothing but the repetition of the past. And then the impossibility of politics is linked to the impossibility of changing the prevalent mode of changing things, linked to not being able to transform the form of transformation. Therefore, the question "Is Politics Possible Today?" is a real question - both in the sense, it is really a question and it is a question of the real of politics. It brings together what transforms even the form of transformation (politics), inscribing it into a given conjunctural temporal and symbolic framework (today) and asks if

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¹ Dupuy 2002.

this inscription can be thought and practised (possibility) or not). It thus is reminiscent of the knots that result from thinking through the dimension of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary in their peculiar interwovenness.²

Is it possible to have an idea of politics that is not simply the repetition of the perpetually unfinished revolution that is today's increasingly explosive and catastrophic bourgeois society, or in different terms: capitalism? Can we move away what has become (inscribed into) our (second) nature? Of the naturalization of what we deem to be possible? The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* did, as frequently before, ask its authors to take a position on this question. Can we think and conceive of the possibility of what can so easily seem so or does always appear - maybe even increasingly if this is not a contradiction in adjecto - impossible, notably: politics? This is another way of asking: can there ever be politics? We asked for partisan answers. Since this is a question, which cannot be answered without taking a position. For even if politics might be (and might remain forever) impossible, thinking it in a partisan manner, signifies taking a stance, dis-stancing oneself from the prevalent dogmas and clichés of what is political and what politics looks like, from the tyranny of the possible and its particular instalments and from all the political clichés that are so easily naturalized. Taking such a (dis-)stance to the (non-)world of today - and even if the answer to our question (Is politics possible today?) is ultimately a negative one - can at least be considered to be reminiscent of what today might seem impossible (and might never be), namely politics. We hope we will all be reminded of its impossible possibility through the courageous position-takings that you will read in the following.

Dundee/Prishtina, November 2022

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² Cf. here the classical dialectical rendering of this interlinkage in the preface to the second edition of Žižek 2008.

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Volume 9
Issue 2

Politics Today: Thirteen Theses and Commentaries

Alain Badiou

Abstract: Across 13 theses and their associated commentaries, the article analyzes the contemporary global situation, points to its constitutive contradictions and characterizes the most recent failed attempts to transform it. It proposes a conceptual framework – having learnt the lessons from previous historical failure – that will allow the conception and practical articulation of what a yet to be invented politics must be.

Keywords: Communism, Movement(s), Neolithic Age, Nomadic Proletariat, Organization, Slogan

Thesis 1. The global conjuncture is one of the territorial and ideological hegemony of liberal capitalism.

Commentary: *Evidence? The banality of this thesis exempts me from any commentary.*

Thesis 2. This hegemony is not at all in crisis, is still less comatose, but is in a sequence of deployment that is particularly intense and novel.

Commentary: *There are hegemonic today two equally opposed and equally false theses about capitalist globalization. The first is the conservative thesis: that above all else capitalism, in combination with parliamentary "democracy", is the definitive form of human economic and social organization. This is truly the end of History, a motif recently popularized by Fukuyama. The second is the Leftist thesis, according to which capitalism has entered its final crisis, which is to say that it is already dead.*

The first thesis is nothing more than the repetition of the ideological process engaged in from the end of the seventies by the renegade intellectuals of the "red years" (1965-1975), and which purely and simply consisted in the elimination of the communist hypothesis from the field of the possible. It therefore allows us to simplify the dominant propaganda: that it is no longer necessary to vaunt the (dubitable) merits of capitalism, but only to register that the facts (the USSR, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, China, the Khmer Rouge, the western communist parties...) have shown that nothing else is possible, other than a criminal "totalitarianism."

In the face of this impossible verdict, the only possible response, drawing and extending the balance from the fragmentary experiments of the last century, is to reestablish the communist hypothesis in its possibility, force, and liberatory capacity. It is this, inevitably, which occurs and will occur, and which, in this text, I yet maintain.

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1 Translator's note: the present is a translation of a text that was published on the 9th of September 2022 in the French "L'Obs" (Nouvel Observateur), F.R. / H.H.Y.

The two forms of the second thesis – exsanguinating or dead capitalism – are based on the 2008 financial crisis, the inflationary monetary disorder triggered by the Covid 19 pandemic, and on the daily revelations of further, innumerable, incidents of corruption. From which the conclusion, either, that the moment is revolutionary, that only a strong push is needed for the 'system' to collapse (classic leftism), or, that it is enough to take a step aside, to retire, for example to the countryside, and to live a sober life in harmony with nature, in order to then come to the realisation that one can organise new "forms of life" – the destructive capitalist machine running on empty in its final throes of nothingness (ecological Buddhism).

None of this has the least connection to the real.

Firstly, the crisis of 2008 was a classic crisis overproduction (in the USA, too many houses were built and sold on credit to the bankrupt) whose expansion, with good timing, allowed for a new momentum of capitalism - a concentration of capital, ordered and boosted in a strong sequence; the weak are washed away, the strong strengthened, and in passing an important gain: the "social laws" issued at the end of the Second World War are for the most part liquidated. Once this painful ordering is achieved, "recovery" is in sight. Secondly, the extension of the capitalist enterprise over vast territories, the intensive and extensive diversification of the global marketplace, is far from being achieved. Almost all of Africa, a good part of Latin America, Eastern Europe, India... so many places "in transition", which are zones of looting, countries "in development", where the large-scale market reforms can and must follow the example of Japan or China.

It is in its very essence, in truth, that capitalism is corruption. How could a collective logic in which the only norms are "profit above all else" and the universal competition of everyone with everyone else possibly avoid widespread corruption? Acknowledged "cases" of corruption are nothing more than side deals – propagandistic local purges, account-settling between rival cliques.

Modern capitalism, that of the world market, which in its scant centuries of existence is historically a recent social formation, which after a colonial phase (from the sixteenth to twentieth century) when conquered territories were enslaved to a single country's limited and protectionist market, has only just begun its planetary conquest. Today, the looting is globalized, as is the proletariat, which is now from all countries of the world.

Thesis 3. However, three active contradictions are at work in this hegemony.

I/The oligarchic dimension of the ownership of Capital, which is extremely well developed, leaves increasingly less room for new players to be integrated into this oligarchy. From whence the possibility of an authoritarian ossification.

II/The integration of financial and commercial circuits within a

single world market opposes the maintenance of national figures who inevitably enter into rivalries, at the level of mass policing. From whence the possibility of a world war from which a clearly hegemonic State emerges, including on the world market.

III/Today there is doubt that Capital in its current developmental trajectory could valorise the labour power of the whole world population. From whence the risk on a global scale of constituting a mass of people who are completely destitute and thus politically dangerous.

Commentary:

I/ We are now at a stage where 264 people own the equivalent of what 3 billion people own – and the concentration of capital continues. Here, in France, 10% of the population own considerably more than 50% of the total wealth. These are concentrations of property that, on a global scale, are without stable precedent. And they are far from complete. They have a monstrous side, which, even as it does not guarantee their eternal duration, is nevertheless central to the capitalist deployment of which it is the main driving force.

II/ The hegemony of the United States is increasingly undermined. China and India alone have 40% of the global labour force. This indicates a devastating level of deindustrialization in the West. Indeed, American workers represent no more than 7% of the global labour force, even less goes for Europe. Out of these disparities, the world order, which for military and financial reasons is still dominated by the USA, sees the emergence of such rivals that would challenge their sovereign grasp of the world market. The clashes have already begun. In the Middle East, in Africa, and in the South China Seas. They will continue. The horizon of this situation is war, as proven by the previous century, with the two world wars, relentless colonial massacres, and which is confirmed today by the war in Ukraine.

III/ Today there are probably already between two and three billion people who are neither propertied nor landless peasants, not salaried petit bourgeoisie nor factory workers. They wander [errent] globally in search of a place to live, and constitute a nomadic proletariat which, if politicized, presents a significant threat to the established order.

Thesis 4. Over the last ten years, there have been numerous, sometimes very vigorous protest movements against this or that aspect of the liberal capitalist hegemony. However, all were resolved without posing any major problem to capitalism's dominance.

Commentary: *There have been four types of such movements.*

Brief, localised riots. There have been violent riots in the suburbs of large cities (London, for example, or Paris), which generally follow from the murder of young people by the police. From these riots (for which there

has either been little support from a frightened public or which have been mercilessly repressed) large “humanitarian” mobilizations grow, which are focussed on police brutality and are generally depoliticized inasmuch as mention is neither made of the precise nature of the demands nor of the profit ultimately derived from them by the dominant bourgeoisie.

2. Lasting uprisings without organisational design. Other uprisings, notably those in the Arab world, have had a broader social reach and often lasted for weeks, taking on the canonical form of the occupation of public squares. They have often been mitigated by the seduction of the option to vote. The classic case is that of Egypt: a large-scale uprising, the apparent success of the negative collective slogan “Mubarak Out”, Mubarak leaves power and is even arrested, over a long period of time the police fail to take over the square, the Copts and the Muslims are unified, the army apparently neutral... And of course, then, in the elections, the party with the populist vote – and minimally present in the uprising – wins. Which is to say the Muslim Brotherhood. The most active part of the uprising is then in opposition to this new government. This opens the way for military intervention. The army puts General Al Sissi back into power. Thence, the merciless oppression of any opposition, first the Muslim Brotherhood, then the young revolutionaries, and the de facto re-establishment of the old regime in a form much worse than before. The circular nature of this episode is particularly striking.

3. Movements which give way to the creation of a new political force. In some cases, movements have created the conditions through which a new political force, different from those habituated to parliamentarism, appears. This was the case in Greece with Syriza where the riots were particularly numerous and harsh, and in Spain with Podemos. These forces have themselves dissolved into the parliamentary consensus. In Greece, with Tsipras, the new government ceded without resistance to the injunctions of the European Commission and is thus sending the country back onto the path of austerity without end. In Spain, Podemos is similarly bogged down in the combinatory game, whether majoritarian or oppositional. Not a trace of true politics has emerged from these organisational creations.

4. Movements with some duration but with no notable positive effect. In certain cases, with the exception of a few classic tactical episodes (such as the momentary “overtaking” of classic demonstrations by groups equipped to challenge the police), the absence of political innovation has meant that – on a global scale – the figure of the conservative reactionary has seen renewal. This is the case, for example, in the USA, where the main counter-effect of the “Occupy Wall Street” movement was the rise

to power of Trump, or in France, where the pay-off of “Nuit Debout”² is Macron. Moreover, the aforementioned Macron was later the sole target of the typically petit bourgeois Gilets Jaunes (‘Yellow Vests’). As with all such movements, whose leaders are all frankly hostile to the destruction of bourgeoisie property and rather in reality want stronger State support for such property ownership, the result was nothing more than statist formalities and the sole target was President Macron. The grand result, par for the course for such hoaxes the parliamentary system reserves for its clients, was, finally... the re-election of this very Macron!

Thesis 5. The cause of such impotence in the movements of the last decade is the absence of, even hostility towards, politics. This takes on diverse forms and is recognisable by a number of symptoms. Beneath these negative affects is a constant submission under the fallacious name “democracy” to the electoral ritual.

Commentary: As signs of an extremely weak political subjectivity, we may note in particular:

1. Exclusively negative unifying slogans: *“against’ this or that, “Mubarak out”, “down with the 1%”, “we reject the labour law”, “nobody likes the police”, etc.*

2. The absence of a broad sense of temporality: *as much in terms of a knowledge of the past which is practically absent in movements with the exception of a few caricatures, and to which no inventive assessment [bilan] is proposed, as in future projections which are limited to abstract considerations on liberation or emancipation.*

3. A lexis heavily borrowed from the opponent. *This is principally the case for a particularly evocative category, like “democracy”, or in uses of the category of “life”, “our lives”, which is nothing but an ineffectual investment by collective action in existential categories.*

4. A blind cult of the “new” and an ignorant disregard of established truths. *This is a direct result of the “new” product as cult of the commodity, and a constant conviction that we “begin” things, which, really have already taken place many times. It simultaneously prevents us from learning the lessons of the past and understanding the mechanism of structural repetitions, and leads us to fall into the trap of false “modernities”*

5. An absurd temporal scale. *This scale, traced by the Marxist cycle “money, commodity, money”³, assumes that in a few weeks of “movement” one can deal with or even resolve problems that have been hanging for centuries such as private property, or the pathological concentration of wealth that has been pending for millenia; the refusal to consider that a good*

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²Transl. note: Badiou here refers to the 2016 protests against the proposed labour reforms (linked to the so called El Khomri bill).

³Translator note: M-C-M’.

part of capitalist modernity is no less than a modern version of "Family, Private Property, State", which was established a few thousand years ago, in the Neolithic "revolution". Thus, with regard to the central problems, which constitute it, communist logic is located on the scale of centuries.

6. A weak relationship to the State. *What is at issue here is the constant underestimation of State resources in comparison to those available to this or that "movement", both in terms of armed force and capacity for corruption. There is an underestimation, in particular, of the efficacy of "democratic" corruption whose symbol is the parliamentary electoral system, as well as of the scope of the ideological domination of this corruption over the vast majority of the population.*

7. A mix of disparate means without drawing up a balance sheet [aucun bilan] of their distant or near past. *There is no conclusion that could be widely popularised to be drawn from the methods implemented at least since the "red years" (1965-1975) or even from the last two centuries, such as factory occupations, union strikes, legal demonstrations, the constitution of groups whose aim is to make local confrontation with the police force possible, the storming of buildings, the imprisonment of the managers in their factories... nor of their static symmetries, for example, in the squares invaded by crowds, long and repetitive hyperdemocratic assemblies where all are summoned whatever their ideals or linguistic abilities to speak for three minutes, and out of which the goal is ultimately the predictable repetition of the exercise.*

Thesis 6. It is necessary to remember the most important experiences of the recent past, and to think through their failures.

Commentary: From the red years to today.

The commentary on the fifth thesis may well seem rather polemic, even pessimistic and depressing, particularly for the young people who, for a time, may legitimately be enthused by all forms of action for which I ask a critical re-examination. This is understandable if we recall that I personally in May '68 and its aftermath experienced and participated with enthusiasm in something of quite the same sort, and that I was able to follow for long enough to take measure of their weaknesses. So I have the feeling that the recent movements exhaust themselves by repeating, under the hallmark of the new, well-known episodes of that which we might call the "right" of the May '68 movement, whether this right came from the classical left or from the anarchist ultra-left which, in its own way, already spoke of "forms of life", whose militants we called "anarcho-desiring."

In '68 there were in fact four distinct movements.

1. A student youth revolt.
2. A revolt of the young workers of large factories.
3. A trade union general strike, attempting to control the first two revolts.

4. *The appearance, often under the name of “Maoism” – with a number of rival organisations – of an attempt at a new politics, the principle of which was to draw a unifying diagonal between the first two revolts by endowing them with ideological and fighting force that seemed able to guarantee them a real political future. In fact, this has lasted for at least a decade. The fact that it was unable to stabilize on the historical scale (which I readily acknowledge) should not mean as a consequence that one repeats what happened then without even knowing that one repeats.*

Recall how, in the elections of June 1968, a majority was put in place that was so reactionary that it could be said that we had rediscovered the “blue horizon” majority of the end of the war of '14-'18. The final result of the elections of May/June 2017, with the landslide victory of that recognised servant of globalized big capital, Macron, should make us reflect on what repeats in all this. All the more so since, in 2022, the identical Macron has been re-elected...

Thesis 7. The politics internal to a movement must be comprised of five characteristics, supported by slogans, strategy, lexicon, the existence of a principle, and a clear tactical vision.

Commentary:

1. The principal slogans must be affirmative and propose a positive determination rather than remaining in complaint and denunciation. *This is even at the price of an internal division once the movement has overcome its negative unity.*

2. The slogans must have strategic justification. *Meaning that they are fed by a knowledge of the previous stages of the problem that the movement places on its agenda.*

3. The lexicon used should be controlled and coherent. *For example: today, “communism” is incompatible with “democracy”, “equality” is incompatible with “liberty”, all positive use of an identitarian vocabulary – “French” or “international community”, or “Islamic” or “Europe” – should be banned, as well as psychological terms – “desire”, “life”, “no-one” – as well as all terms related to the established state systems – “citizen”, “electorate”, and so on.*

4. A principle, what I call an “Idea”, must be continually confronted with the situation, insofar as it carries with it locally a non-capitalist systemic possibility. *Here we must quote Marx’s definition of the singular militant’s embeddedness [mode de presence] within movements: “the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. In all these movements they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, not matter what its degree of development, at that time.”⁴*

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⁴ Marx / Engels 1987, p. 519.

5. Tactically, one must always bring the movement as close as possible to become a body capable of assembling in order to effectively discuss what it really thinks of a situation, such that it can clarify and evaluate it.

As Marx writes, the political militant is an inseparable part of the general movement, but is uniquely distinct due to her ability to see the movement from an overall [ensemble] perspective and from there to foresee what the next step must be, making no concession with regard to these two points, nor, under the pretext of unity, to the conservative views that can very well dominate, subjectively, even the most important of movements. The experience of the revolutions shows that the crucial political moments most often take the form closest to an assembly, namely, that of a meeting, where the decision to be taken is clarified by the speakers, who may also oppose each other.

Thesis 8. Politics is entrusted with the appropriate duration of the spirit of movements, which must be of the same magnitude as the temporality of States not simply a negative episode in their domination. Its general definition is that, between diverse compositions of people on the largest possible scale, it organises a discussion on slogans which may well be those of the permanent propaganda as well as those of the movements to come. Politics provides the general framework for these discussions – it is a question of affirming, today that there are two divergent paths regarding the general organisation of mankind – the capitalist and the communist. The former is no more than the contemporary form of what has existed for thousands of years, since the Neolithic revolution. The latter proposes a second, systemic, global revolution for the future of mankind; that we exit the Neolithic age.

Commentary: *In this way, politics consists of broad discussions that situate locally the slogan that crystallises these two paths in the situation. Being local, this slogan cannot but come from the experience of the masses concerned. It is there that politics learns how the effective struggle for the communist path, whatever its means may be, can be made to exist locally. From this perspective, politics' impetus does not lie in antagonistic confrontation, but in continued enquiry, in situ, of the ideas, slogans, and initiatives which are locally able to bring to life the existence of the two paths, the one being the conservation of what is and the other its complete transformation according to the egalitarian principles the new slogan will crystallise. The name of this activity is "mass labour". Beyond movements, the essence of politics is mass labour.*

Thesis 9. Politics is made with people from everywhere [partout]. The diverse forms of social segregation organised by capitalism are unacceptable.

Commentary: *This means, particularly for the intellectual youth who has always played a key role in the birth of new politics, the continued journey towards other social strata – particularly to the most deprived where the impact of capitalism is the most devastating – is necessary. In present conditions, in our country as much as on a global scale, priority must be given to the vast nomadic proletariat who, like the peasants of the Auvergne or Brittany in the past, arrive in whole waves and at great risk in order to try to survive as workers since they can no longer live as peasants without land in the country from whence they came. In this case as in all others, the method is that of patient enquiry on the ground (markets, housing estates, homes, factories), the organisation of meetings (however small at the beginning), the codification [fixation] of slogans, their dissemination, the expansion of the base of this work, the confrontation with various local conservative forces, etc. The moment you realise that active obstinacy is the key, this is passionate work. An important step is to organise schools to disseminate knowledge of the global history of the struggle between the two paths, of the present successes and impasses.*

What was done in the wake of May '68 by those organisations can and must be done once more. We must reconstitute the political diagonal I have spoken of, which remains today a diagonal between the youth movement, various intellectuals, and the nomadic proletariat. Here and there, this is already being done. It is currently the only true political task.

In France what has changed is the deindustrialization of the suburbs of the big cities; the remaining working-class resource of the extreme right. This must be fought on the ground by explaining how and why, in only a few years, two generations of workers were sacrificed, and simultaneously by enquiring as much as possible the opposite process. Namely, the brutal industrialization of Asia. Now as before, the labour with the workers is international, even here. In this regard it would be very interesting to produce and disseminate a world worker's newspaper.

Thesis 10. There is no longer any genuine political organisation. The task is thus to find ways to reconstitute it.

Commentary: *An organisation is entrusted to set up enquiries, synthesising the mass labour and the local slogans that emerge from them in order to inscribe them in an overall perspective, enriching the movements and ensuring their consequences are long-lasting. An organisation is not judged by its form or procedures as a State is judged, rather, by controlling its capacity to do what it is entrusted to do. Here, we might revisit the dictum of Mao: an organisation is that which can be said to "give back to the masses in a clear form what they have given us in a confused form."*

Thesis 11. Today the classical Party form is doomed because it has defined itself not by its capacity to do what Thesis 9 outlines, namely

mass labour, but by its purported pretense to “represent” the working class, or the proletariat.

Commentary: *We must break with the logic of representation in all its forms. The definition of political organisation must be instrumental, not representational. Moreover, “representation” should be understood as “the identity of that which is represented”. For identities must be excluded from the political field.*

Thesis 12. As we have seen, the relationship to the State is not what defines politics. In this way, politics takes place “at a distance” from the state. However, strategically, the State must be broken, because it is the universal guardian of the capitalist path, in particular because it is the police of the right of private ownership of the means of production and exchange. As the Chinese revolutionaries said during the Cultural Revolution, it is necessary to “break with bourgeois right”. Vis-à-vis the State, therefore, political action is a mixture of distance and negativity. The actual aim is that State become steadily surrounded by a hostile opinion and political spaces that have become alien to it.

Commentary: *In this case, the historical balance sheet is very complex. For example, the Russian Revolution of 1917 undoubtedly combined many things: a broad hostility to the Tsarist regime (including, because of the war, in the countryside), a long-standing intense ideological preparation (particularly in the intellectual classes), workers’ revolts leading to genuine mass organisations (baptised “soviets”), soldiers’ uprisings, all, thanks to the Bolsheviks, with an extant organisation which was solid, diversified, and capable of holding meetings with first-rate speakers whose conviction matched their educational talent. All of this formed through victorious insurrections and in an awful civil war that was finally won by the revolutionary camp despite a large-scale foreign intervention. The course of the Chinese revolution ran very differently: the Long March into the countryside, the formation of popular assemblies, a genuine Red Army, and, over a period of some thirty years, an enduring occupation of a large swathe of the North of the country in which it was possible, as the army was being consolidated, to experiment with agrarian and production reform. Moreover, in China, instead of the Stalinist Terror of the 1930s, there was a mass student and worker uprising against the aristocracy of the Communist Party. Without precedent, this movement – the Proletarian Cultural Revolution – is the final example of a politics of direct confrontation with the figures of State power. Nothing of this can be transposed into our situation. But, through this adventure, there is one lesson to be learnt: that the State, in whatever form, can in no case ever represent or define the politics of emancipation.*

The complete dialectic of every true politics contains four terms:

1. The strategic Idea of the struggle between the two paths – communism and capitalism. This is what Mao called the “ideological preparation of opinion”, without which, he said, revolutionary politics is impossible.

2. The local investment of this idea or principle by the organisation in the form of mass labour; the decentralised circulation of everything which results from this labour – slogans and victorious practical experiences.

3. The popular movements in the form of historical events, within which the political organization works as well for their negative unity as for the sharpening of their affirmative determination.

4. If it is the power endowed by the agents of capitalism, the State must be broken, by means of confrontation or siege. And if this is what is at stake in the communist path, it must perish, if needed by revolutionary means, as seen in the fatal disorder of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Inventing in situ the contemporary disposition of these four terms is the problem, simultaneously practical and theoretical, of our conjuncture.

Thesis 13. The situation of contemporary capitalism involves a sort of disconnect between the globalization of the market and the still largely national character of policing and military control of the population. In other words, there is a gap between the economic state of things, which is global, and its necessary state protection, which remains national. The second aspect resurrects imperialist rivalries in other forms. In spite of this change in form, the risk of war increases. Moreover, war is already being waged across large parts of the world. The politics to come will also have the task, if it can, of preventing the outbreak of a total war, which could this time put the existence of all mankind at stake. It may also be said that the historical choice is as follows: either mankind breaks with the contemporary Neolithic which is capitalism and opens out its communist phase on a global scale, or it remains in its Neolithic phase, with the extreme likelihood of annihilation in an atomic war.

Commentary: *Today, on the one hand, the great powers seek to collaborate to maintain the stability of affairs on a global scale (notably by fighting against protectionism), but on the other hand these same powers are blindly fighting for their individual hegemony. The result is the end of obviously colonial practices like those of 19th Century France or England, i.e. the military and administrative occupation of entire countries. I propose that the new practise is called ‘zoning’: in entire zones (Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Mali, Central Africa, the Congo...) States are undermined, annihilated, and the zone becomes a zone of looting, opened to mercenary forces as well as all other global capitalist predators. Or the State is made up of businessmen who are connected by a thousand cords to the big companies of the world market. In vast territories, rivalries*

intertwine with constantly shifting power relations. Under such conditions only one uncontrolled military incident suffices to bring everything to the brink of war. The sides are already drawn: the United States and their "Western-Japanese" clique on the one side, and on the other, China and Russia; nuclear weapons proliferate. We cannot but recall Lenin's dictum: "Either the revolution will prevent the war or the war will provoke the revolution."

One could thus define the absolute ambition of the political work to come: that, for the first time in History, it is the first hypothesis – the revolution will prevent war – that will be realised rather than the second – that war will provoke revolution. As a matter of fact, it was this second hypothesis which materialised in Russia in the context of the First World War, and in China in the context of the Second. But at what price! And with what long term effects!

Let us hope; let us act. Anyone - no matter who, no matter where – can begin doing true politics in the sense that this text outlines – and can talk, in turn, to those around them about what they are doing. This is how it all begins.

Translated by Heather H. Yeung and Frank Ruda

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Rethinking Politics and Freedom in Anthropocene

Wendy Brown

Abstract: In the context of the climate emergency, critical science studies scholars have subjected to critique epistemologies and ontologies of human and non-human life, science, nature, agency, and the earth. My thinking is still quite speculative; I have not yet attached particular objects to the work nor do I know where it will land. The following is thus a prolegomenon, or 'preface to an introduction to a critique,' as the Left Hegelians (including the youthful Marx) sometimes titled their writings, and there is more than a little Left Hegelianism in what follows.

Keyword: politics, freedom, Anthropocene, Left Hegelianism, epistemology

In the context of the climate emergency, critical science studies scholars have subjected to critique epistemologies and ontologies of human and non-human life, science, nature, agency, and the earth. Dipesh Chakrabarty has done the same with history and historicity, temporalities, the earthly, the global and the planetary. Tim Mitchell is doing something parallel with economy. I join a handful of others in seeking to do this with politics and freedom. My thinking is still quite speculative; I have not yet attached particular objects to the work nor do I know where it will land. The following is thus a prolegomenon, or 'preface to an introduction to a critique,' as the Left Hegelians (including the youthful Marx) sometimes titled their writings, and there is more than a little Left Hegelianism in what follows.

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1. Where we are

This much is common knowledge. Had major global political powers and players responded seriously to the emergency of the climate crisis in the 1980s, even the 90s, we would face a better planetary future than is now or forever possible. The transitions would have been easier, the political consensus for them greater, and the possibility for averting disastrous climate change effects better. This is not only because we have now passed many ecological tipping points along with several political and even economic thresholds. Political agreements within and among nations then available simply cannot be brokered on the current politico-scape. Nor had financialization yet placed a yoke on every state and transnational institution, or hold the "health" of capitalism itself in its grip.

Instead of major address of climate change in the 1980s, we got global neoliberalism. With its singular focus on capital accumulation and appreciation, including in the left-behind regions, its championing of deregulated markets as solutions to everything, its dissemination of toxic production and extraction to places least able to resist them, its discrediting of political power wielded for a common good, and its

sustained attack on democracies, societies, and habitability for much of earthly life, fossil fuel burning soared along with attachment to a consumption and growth economy. Neoliberalism's promise—affluence for all—was not only what Amitav Ghosh terms a hoax but the worse possible lure at this historical juncture.¹ Moreover, its encomium to tend only to one's own created a political and personal culture of back-turning to common fates, one that ranged across localities and states, families, individuals, and epistemologies. Neoliberal effects also eventually fomented the grotesque political turn spanning the globe: rising authoritarian, nativist, ethno- and religio-nationalist regimes; knowledge and education discredited for anything but capital appreciation; and widespread conviction that protecting wealth, self, property, and traditional values were the only business of politics.

More, then, was missed than the chance to address climate change before it achieved today's frightening pace, extent, and irreversible effects. Rather, we now find ourselves in a political-scape in which responding is singularly difficult while singularly urgent. The difficulty pertains not only to the right-wing nationalisms sweeping many of the most powerful and not incidentally most intensely fossil fuel burning nations, but to the particular form of cratering democracies. Votes must still be gotten (from ill-educated and media-manipulated publics) while political consensus and political accountability to a commonweal—even within nations—has evaporated. Political power wielded for world-rescuing or social justice purposes is tarred as tyrannical or totalitarian, political survival requires promises to prop up unsustainable ways of life, and events like the COVID pandemic or the Russian war on Ukraine postpone reckoning with the climate catastrophe over and over. The horror of a rapidly changing planet, metabolized unconsciously by almost all even when expressly denied, fuels aggression and a range of displacements—attacks on immigrants, science, democracy, and those ambitious for a just and livable world. Across the political spectrum, scarcity, fear, and an explicit or inchoate sense of end times breeds colossal selfishness on the part of the most comfortable and desperation for survival on the part of the most imperiled. Indeed, preppers no longer know a class or political party. Bruno Latour depicts this condition as eliminating the basis for his 1990s proposal for a “parliament of things” that would represent all planetary life but presumed common ground for how to settle disagreements, i.e., stable representative democracies. Instead, he says, we have entered a condition of “war” over a planetary future and who will and will not be part of that future.²

1 “...Gandhi, like many others understood intuitively what Asia's history would eventually demonstrate: that the universalist premise of industrial civilization was a hoax; that a consumerist mode of existence, if adopted by a sufficient number of people, would quickly become unsustainable and would lead, literally, to the devouring of the planet.” Ghosh 2016, pp. 111-12.

2 A chasm opened between the early 90s (when Latour developed the “parliament of things”) and the

This is the broad setting with which climate change politics now must reckon. Not chafe against or complain, but reckon. This reckoning has both practical and theoretical features, and the latter is where we might find our ways through the darkness that has descended over climate crisis politics, and that Latour perhaps abandons too quickly for war. It requires that we allow the climate emergency to alter our received understandings of politics and freedom, so that the very practices appearing to produce an impasse in addressing it could become our way through.

My speculative hypothesis is that foundational understandings and practices of politics in the West harbor troubling estrangements, exclusions, and conceits in relation to both human and non-human activity. These understandings and practices in turn position freedom as 1) a practice of mastery and domination (freedom as the right to dominate, exploit, or subjugate charted by feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theory); or 2) as against politics (freedom as the right to be let alone charted by liberal theory); or 3) as the dissolution of politics (freedom as the withering away of the state iterated in emancipatory Marxist and anarchist traditions). Politics founded on different grounds, taking its bearings from the climate crisis and founded in the distinctive human capacity to generate systemic powers with history making and climatic effects, could gestate other practices of freedom.

One more note before diving in: I provisionally accept and will mobilize the theory of Gaia to capture the dis-aggregated, heterogeneous, yet intensely imbricated character of planetary life. Postulated by the late chemist, James Lovelock, and biologist Lynn Margulis, this theory is often misunderstood as ascribing a unified holism to the earth and thus entailing a metaphysical agent (whether that of divinities, evolution, or other directing hand) or casting the earth as an integrated living creature. Both misunderstandings are near opposites of what Lovelock and Margulis believed they discovered, namely the “historicity and agency [in] all life forms on the planet” and the respective efforts of each life form to create the conditions for *lasting in time* and *expanding in space*.³ (Translated for philosophers, the theory of Gaia imbues every life form with a Spinozist urge to persist in its own being and a neo-Marxist crafting of the conditions for that persistence, hence its historicity.) Far from ascribing unity, holism, or totality to the planet, or drawing on metaphysics or religion to explain the variety and connectedness of

present in which, in his words, “we no longer live on the same planet,” and puts politics itself into question. Bruno Latour, Spinozalens Lecture, 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZF9gbQ7iCs> “I was much too optimistic in the 1990s. I was imagining a republic, a democracy...just extended. It was based on the idea that you could have a common world where people would disagree, but come to an agreement. Politics of Nature implied that there was a possibility of a general agreement on the procedures. That’s not the case now. We live on different planets....You can’t agree to disagree if you are not on the same planet”

3 Latour and Lenton 2019, p.17.

earthly life, then, Lovelock and Margulis theorized the interdependency of all earthly life at the site of this dispersed effort to persist in time and expand in space, and located its multiple histories and agitations in the complex and ongoing interactions among these efforts. That is why, as Latour says, “Gaia is not an organism” and “there is one Gaia but Gaia is not one.” What we have come to call the Anthropocene makes humans prominent, and problematic, in the histories, interdependencies, and agitations of Gaia, but not its sole actors or agents. Importantly, as the theory of Gaia undoes discursive conventions of Nature for the non-human world, it also undoes conventions of “Nature” for depicting humanness—it disputes “Nature” as either what we are (reactionary naturalism) or are not (reactionary culturalism), either what we are reducible to or what is Other to us. In short, Gaia challenges in a special way binaries of nature and culture, human and non-human, subject and object, what does and does not have agency and history. In this it potentially challenges nearly every inherited precept and practice of what we may still term, perilously, Western civilization. I will draw different implications from the Gaia thesis for politics and freedom than Latour does, but provisionally accept the thesis as a starting point for critique of their legacies.

2. The Problem of Politics

We may say that politics in its commonsense meaning is central to the climate catastrophe in four ways.

First, the quotidian, played out in COP conferences, backroom deals on drilling rights in the US Senate or floor debates on the rainforest in the Brazilian National Congress: the formal political domain remains decisive for responding to the climate emergency. This does not render unimportant economics, technologies, popular mobilizations, and protests or local experiments with sustainability. However, absent unprecedentedly large political actions, especially but not only in relation to fossil fuels, industrial agriculture, and deforestation, there is no turning from our current deathly planetary trajectory. This is not only because that turn requires tightly harnessing or replacing capitalism, itself a gigantic political undertaking, but because even apart from ending capitalist plunder, we will always require continuous political learning and decisions about viable practices in the fragile inter-dependent order of Gaia. The dangerous fiction of *laissez faire* in every domain is over.

The second sense in which politics is central to the climate catastrophe is that a host of modern political institutions, norms, and procedures are shaky, corrupted or crumbling, making the future for representative liberal democracy dubious at best. There are multiple sources for this condition, prominent among them globalization’s erosions of state sovereignty, national homogeneity and economic

security, and reactionary responses to these erosions. Then there is the climate catastrophe itself, where existing institutions and political parameters are inapt to its scales, spans, and temporalities. At the same time, as countless thinkers have noted, anxiety about climate change, avowed or not, generates anti-democratic sentiment on both the right and left, whether in the form of resource hoarding and walled states or anarchist rage at failing to address the house on fire.

The third sense in which politics is central to the climate catastrophe and other elements of ecological suicide is their challenge to extant political grammars for engaging them. In Pierre Charbonnier's elegant summary, "We inherit a world that no available political category is designed to manage," a condition, he adds, that severs us from the past and "the future as we had imagined it up until now." He thoughtfully names this condition one of "historic loneliness."⁴ Stengers, Latour, Haraway and others identify these anachronistic grammars as centered on binaries of the modern—culture/nature, subject/object, human/non-human, individual/society—that they hold responsible for logics in which everything is an exploitable resource for the human species. Chakrabarty and Ghosh deepen and extend this account to include the colonial predicates of European modernity, its wealth-extraction for Western affluence and the non-universalizability of this affluence and of liberalism more generally.⁵ As postcolonial theory has taught since Said's *Orientalism*, binaries of the European modern legitimate colonial domination and imperial exploits. Mitchell identifies the crucial links to fossil fuel capitalism here, which first pillaged and deformed the oil rich parts of the world and now threatens the whole.⁶ Other theorists have added sovereignty, property, individualism, and nation states to the pool of terms, entities, practices, or commitments at odds with the global character of the crisis and its grossly uneven distribution of effects, costs, and victims.

This brings us to the fourth way in which politics is central in addressing the climate emergency. The emergency itself, the crisis-state of liberal democracy and of political grammars that externalize, objectify,

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4 Charbonnier 2021, p. 261. After opening the problem of our vertiginous present, Charbonnier quickly re-circumscribes the problem as that of "realigning the labour question and the ecological question" or "organizing the map of our attachments so that politics and the use of the Earth are no longer heterogeneous." (261) These efforts to re-suture politics and economics, by connecting land and class exploitation, aim to hitch the unrealized radical ambition of the French Revolution to the revolution Charbonnier believes is required now. What they elide is the scandal of inherited political lexicons and practices that mobilized hubristic supremacies of Europeanness—including but not limited to those of coloniality, slavery, gender and wealth—to plunder the world in the name of civilization.

5 Chakrabarty 2021. Ghosh 2016.

6 Tim Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*. Other theorists have added sovereignty, property, individualism, and states to the pool of terms and practices inapt to the global character of the crisis and uneven distribution of costs and effects.

and subjectivize “nature” while identifying culture with propertied white EuroAtlantic masculinity—these three things together demand rethinking what politics is and might be, as crisis always demands rethinking. This does not mean jettisoning every extant category in Western political thought, but reconsidering them from a perspective that disembeds them from givenness let alone goodness, and identifies their dangerous entailments as intrinsic rather than external to their operations. Many are doing this work now although, apart from the new materialists, they are mostly outside the field of political theory.

But isn’t capitalism the problem, some would query at this point, and not only those who insist that the Anthropocene is a misnomer, that we should actually be speaking of the Capitalocene or Plantationocene? Why focus on politics when everything about the nightmare of our current conjuncture—from ecocide to immigration wars, from rising autocracy and authoritarianism to the ethno-religious nationalisms gaining momentum everywhere—is an emanation of a capitalist mode of production, extraction, distribution, finance and consumption? Of course capitalism is central. But just as politics was essential to capitalism’s origins, construction, protection and successive reformations, politics has always been required to constitute and steer it, even if not especially in its fiercest free market iterations where constructions of markets, and support and bail-outs of markets, are everywhere just under the skin of those iterations. Politics—macro and micro—is also entailed in modifying, transforming, or replacing capitalism. The lingering ghost of the base-superstructure model that permitted the role of the political in both capitalist and socialist political economy to be ignored or downplayed is long overdue to be chased from the house. It is also clear that a capitalist ontology in which everything and everyone is an instrument rather than an end in itself, its thoroughgoing and violent anti-Kantianism, will not perish with public ownership. We need not invoke Maoism (“conquer nature!”) or Stalinism (the “great transformation of nature” programs undoing Lenin’s conservationism) to appreciate this. What Weber termed instrumental rationality, what Latour calls objectification, what Stengers calls the “politics of management,” will not produce a viable future for the planet and human justice on it. This is not a matter of a conceptual fix, or an intellectual paradigm shift...notions that index the grip of a philosophical hubris of unembedded humanness, an apartness from the world, in which how we think is imagined as independent of the social-ecological relations organizing what we do and how we live. Rather, it is a matter of discerning what the crises of the present foment as valuable alternatives to the ideas and practices governing our world now.

Put slightly differently, on some level, everyone knows the possibilities for seriously responding to the climate emergency are political. Both de-regulated and state incentivized markets got their

try; the hockey stick handle shot skyward. Geoengineering (shading the sun, cooling the oceans) portends more reckless and dangerous disturbances in Gaia, without any accompanying alteration in the human orders of ownership and distribution, protection and exposure, responsibility or schemes of justice. Technologies for renewable energy, carbon absorption, and ecological modes of agriculture, transportation, communication, construction, and entertainment are only as useful as the political decisions to support, subsidize, and require them as replacements for their toxic predecessors. Indeed, no one knows better than the fossil fuel companies and their financial investors that politics is the mainstage of operations—where they bargain, hold hostages and capture electorates; where they peddle “clean coal” and obtain vast drilling rights in exchange for small subsidies for renewables; where they obtain cheap finance and tax breaks in exchange for greenwashing; where they buy politicians and legislation and stall international protocols behind smokescreens of provisioning for humanity

Yet even as we take politics to be central to addressing climate change, we regard it as a barrier as tall and thick as perduring capitalism, and imbricated with that perdurance. Thus, we know the political holds our fate, but this knowledge generates hopelessness—because politics and political systems are in such disrepute and disrepair today, because climate change is global and our most powerful and nimble political entities are not, because most political leaders and institutions are chained to interests other than the future of the planet, because citizenries today are so frightened, diseducated, manipulable. This paradox—that politics is our only hope yet hopeless—is why Greta Thunberg routinely shows up to major political forums on climate change mainly to denounce them as dithering when the house is on fire. The paradox allows us to restate the fourth sense in which politics is central to the climate crisis, namely that climate change has brought Western politics itself into crisis.

Political paradoxes, as Joan Scott teaches in *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, are not conceptual conundrums to solve. Rather, they express historical conditions in which demands for political change appear bound to terms and practices that would render them incoherent at best, foreclosed at worst. In this respect, paradox symptomizes a demand for change that cannot be realized within the existing order of things and for which its cousin, dialectical overcoming of contradictions, has proven fantastical. The paradox of politics being at once decisive for determining the future of the planet and the seeming blockade to a better future calls us to open the question of what politics means and could mean, is and could be. In short, it calls us to submit politics to critique and explore its possibilities for reformulation from the crisis that has put it in crisis.⁷

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⁷ It is from Marx, of course, that we learned to do this kind of critique, though politics itself was never

3. Etymology and Philology

Etymologies are often useful places to start thinking about our semantic inheritances and their entailments, especially when they recover large or lost meanings for histories forgotten or reveal how terms and the practices they iterate have been narrowed, twisted, bowdlerized, economized, or—the term de jour—weaponized. Certainly the descent of politics from *politika* (common affairs of the city) and its kin in ancient Greece—*polites* for one who participates in the polis, a citizen, and *politeia* with its wonderfully untranslatable signification of the entire order of social and political relations constituting a polis, a “constitution” or “regime”—all of this is indisputably rich for launching critiques of the later monarchical and liberal narrowing of politics to states and interests.⁸ It is also rich for resisting the contemporary reductions of citizens to voters and of politics to corruption, deceit, conniving, power games, or instrumentalization of events for crass partisan advantage. Since the ancient Athenians identified the polis and *politika* with practices of freedom, these origins also trouble liberal and especially neoliberal oppositions between politics and freedom, the commonplace that they are each other’s limit.

However, the political lexicon arising from the ancient Athenian polis also suggests some of the retooling of politics required for the Anthropocene. *Politika* (politics) *polites* (citizens) and *politeia* (regime or constitution) carry the consequential constitutive exclusions of the polis itself. There is, first, the sharp distinction between the polis comprising free men and the *oikos* where unfree women, slaves and workers produce those free citizens. Two important separations are performed here: politics from economics, and political freedom from what we today call its social and economic forms. Second, identified exclusively with relations and concerns among free men in the polis, *politika* and *politeia* mark the difference between the city and its outside lands, separating urban from rural, subordinating the latter to the former, and excluding unfree humans, non-humans, and terraforming from political concerns. Third, the ancient polis, iconic of civilization as such, bore a supremacist identity in relation to foreign entities (named “barbarians” by those Greeks) lacking similar political forms. “He who is without a polis,” Aristotle intones, “is either a poor sort of being, or a being higher than man: he is like the man of whom Homer wrote in denunciation: ‘Clanless and lawless and hearthless is he.’”⁹ The falsehood has been repeated a thousand times since, always to simultaneously dehumanize and justify whatever those who call themselves civilized might do to those they name barbarians.

part of his work of critique or discernment of new possibility at the site of crisis. Moreover, contra Marx, we know better now, than to seek for a homogenous, unified or systematic concept or practice of politics. We will do best with plurality and partiality as coordinates for thinking and rethinking.

⁸ Wolff 2014, pp. 801-2.

⁹ Aristotle 1981, Book 1, chapter 2.

Aristotle goes further: he famously declares humans “by nature political animals,” ones “meant to live in a polis” *because* we alone have language, hence the capacity for deliberation and morality; *because* we are singularly capable of being unbound from necessity for free thought and action; and *because* we can instrumentalize other animate and inanimate beings to produce this freedom. Not only does this chain of “because” estrange politics from its human and non-human material predicates while containing the instrumentality toward Gaia that portends our devastating conduct within it, not only does it build into politics an ontology of mastery, rule, eventually sovereignty, rather than co-habitation, it occludes the most important basis of politics, the most important “because” constituting our politicalness and constituting politics as a venue for freedom, justice and ecology. This rests in our singular capacity to generate extraordinary systems of powers together that exceed individual agents and intentions, powers that make worlds and histories (human and “natural”), on the one hand, and the necessity of governing these powers together for our thriving and freedom, and for earthly well-being, on the other. Instead, the understanding and practices of politics gestated in the ancient Athenian polis naturalized relations of domination and instrumentalization, ontologized politicalness and citizenship apart from provisioning and protecting life, and produced a figure of freedom reflecting these relations and estrangements. The fictive autonomy of politics characterizing its Western form rests here, as does its haplessness before the ecological mess we have made. The construction and entrails of *politika*, I am arguing, is as important a piece of our ecological crises as the ontologies and epistemologies of European modernity that preoccupy critical science studies scholars. This legacy also generates the basis from which the anti-politics of the present could arise.

Politika and *politeia* are not merely ontologically wrong from the perspective of the Anthropocene. They do not only institutionalize anthropocentrism, and legitimate instrumentalization of the human and non-human life sustaining the elites for whom politics is constructed and conducted. They do not only separate politics from Gaia. Again, as consequential as what these terms enact is what they eschew, namely politics as that through which we might, or must, govern the powers that humans generate together, powers that, if we do not govern them in a manner that is alert and responsive to their every effect, simply have their way with us and the planet. The constitutive exclusions of this lexicon themselves generate disavowal and indifference toward this capacity and responsibility, a capacity and responsibility that together constitute the most important basis for politics as singularly human. (Here I quarrel gently with my critical science studies compatriots who want to distribute politics everywhere, and with my Marxist compatriots who insist, still, on the super-structural character of politics.)

There are surely important links between founding politics in estrangement from nature and necessity, reifying it as a realm of freedom for the few, separating it from other aspects of human practice, and eschewing responsibility for governing the powers creating human and natural histories, with the two now thoroughly entwined.¹⁰ Even in Rousseau and Marx, the two most prominent Western thinkers struggling to link freedom with shared control of power, one sees the predicament: the freedom they promise is unrealizable because politics estranged from life, and imbricated with mastery, remains unrepaired. Rousseau treated political power independently of social power and Marx imagined it dissolved into social power with the end of private ownership and class society.¹¹ For both, the shared sovereignty that would ground freedom is also exclusively intra-human, unrelated to the non-human life with which we are interdependent and which our powers effect.

My point is not the obvious one that the origins of Western politics were bound up with patriarchy, slavery, imperialism, and propertied wealth, or that in these origins, most of humanity and all non-human life were figured as what Aristotle termed instruments for “the sake of man” where Man is a synecdoche for the elite served by these instruments. Rather, these origins reveal an ontology contributing to the process of both earthly destruction and our felt helplessness before it. Yes, distinctly *modern* oppositions between culture and nature, reason and feeling, subject and object, science and politics, all intensify this problem. Thus do Latour and others rightly indict European modernity for these intensifications, not only its twinning with capitalism’s birth. But to address the stymied politics of the climate crisis, we have to address this deeper and longer legacy of politics in the West, its institutionalization of elite domination, objectification of what it imagined as nature, imbrication of freedom with this domination and objectification, spurning of responsibility for the human powers crafting histories and the earth, and conceit of autonomy from its constitutive basis.

It is along such lines that Latour insists we cease speaking separately about politics or ecology to speak only of *political ecology*. Yet political ecology remains too partial in its redress of the problem I am chasing: we need also political economy, political sociality, kinship politics, and politics of psyches. The point is not to eliminate all distinctions or differences among “spheres of justice,” but to challenge the autonomy of politics while holding onto its human singularity, thereby strengthening its capacities, its relevance to the climate emergency, and its reputation. This transmogrification of politics would also resist what late modern nihilistic trivialization has made of it—tragi-comic circus performances and power plays.

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¹⁰ Chakrabarty 2021.

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*; Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”

The powers that dominate us unless we govern them include those of production that Marx theorized so brilliantly if incompletely, powers that make not only human histories and worlds, but effect those throughout Gaia. In addition, there are powers identify with extraction, communication, finance, surveillance, circuits of waste, digital technologies, and of course with the organization of gender and race, caste, and sexuality. None of these can be governed for the thriving of all planetary life by collectivizing ownership (Marxism), abolishing discrimination on their basis (liberalism), altering norms and membership qualifications (robust identity politics), or extending access to or within these powers (democratization). However important for diminishing human exploitation, exclusion or marginalization, each strategy stays within the separations articulated in the Western origins of politics and is therefore limited in its emancipatory force for humans and concern with effects on non-human life forms. There is also no end-point to the problem of governing the powers we produce. Production, for example, requires deliberate governing even when, indeed perhaps especially when, it is publicly owned, and not only because of its imbrication with other powers (reproduction, racialization, etc.) and the rest of Gaia. In this sense, “the state,” even construed metaphorically, never withers away, and, as Tim Mitchell reminds us, it was never the cohesive entity that modernity made of it and it is past time to cut off the Hobbesian head of political theory concerned with the Anthropocene. Creatures who generate social powers conditioning them (their histories, organization, and possibilities) and other life in Gaia can never be done with the task of governing them well. Politics will always be an emanation of these powers, hence not autonomous from them, yet is the domain for governing these powers, hence not fully assimilable to them. Neither autonomous nor super-structural, neither separate nor assimilable, politics is ours alone because it alone carries the possibility of collectively, deliberately and responsibly harnessing and directing the powers we generate.

4. Freedom

I want to turn finally, and briefly, to the implications for freedom of this regrounding of politics, or what Latour might call inviting politics to land on earth. Again, if we differ from other life forms in Gaia, in our capacity to build extraordinary powers always at risk of slipping our control and which have extraordinary effects on us and the rest of Gaia, and if our freedom rests in the effort to control rather than be controlled by these powers, then the pursuit of freedom, far from irrelevant to the climate emergency, is at its heart.

This claim runs against the contemporary discursive grain that identifies politics with freedom’s limit rather than its realization, and

is at odds with the commonplace that freedom is incompatible with addressing climate change. Neither personal nor political freedom are imagined to comport with the global reach and injustices of the climate crisis, its requirements of drastically altered economies and ways of life, and of enforceable decisions based on scientific, technological, political and economic expertise. But recasting the understandings and practices of politics in which freedom is grounded, and replanting freedom in this ground, allows other possibilities to emerge. Far from a semantic or conceptual change, or a paradigm shift, which remain at odds with any iteration of historical materialism, these possibilities would be imminent to the crises of the present. They are born from the crisis of freedom's extant modalities and they promise to redeem freedom from its implicatedness with planetary impoverishment and human injustice.

Indeed, every twist of contemporary freedom's kaleidoscope refracts freedom's crisis state today. There are free markets, and grossly underregulated production, extraction, and consumption, which together treat the planet as an infinitely exploitable quarry and garbage heap. There are individual rights, especially but not only property rights, consecrating entitlements without responsibility to both the human and non-human world. There is freedom identified with autonomy, personal or political, a fiction at odds with our constitution by and inter-dependency with all earthly life, and with political sovereignty compromised by globalization and financialization. There is freedom as license fully detached from justice and responsibility, hence implicated in inequality, domination, and violation—the freedom celebrated by most right wing movements today yet importantly framed and animated by liberalism. There is freedom as emancipation, challenged by so many strains of recent critical theory, and too narrow and anthropocentric for the Anthropocene in any case. There is freedom imbricated with material growth and affluence, practically limited to the few while ideologically exported to the many.

A number of contemporary theorists are working to repair these legacies—whether from the Black Radical tradition, postcolonial thought, feminist theory, Marxist ecology, or French and German critical theory. Etienne Balibar's "equaliberty" aims to suture freedom and substantive equality, but does not move beyond the human orbit. This is also true of Massimiliano Tomba's work to repair the split between Marxist social emancipation and Rousseauist shared political rule and of contemporary republican political theory. The Black Radical tradition, with its searing critique of liberal understandings of freedom still largely ignored by most liberal theorists, is also limited by its humanism. The scholar-activist authors of *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal* explicitly update Franklin Roosevelt's famous "Four Freedoms" (which added freedom from want and from fear to the classic liberties of speech and religion) to specify "five freedoms that orient us to an

uncertain future.” In an effort to capture every injustice of the present, from super-exploitation to statelessness, they add freedom to move and to live to freedom from fear, toil, and domination. One might quarrel with the presumption of abundance at the heart of their manifesto but even more surprising is that their brief for a postcapitalist ecological order is couched in a largely unreconstructed idiom of personal or individual freedom. Surprising in a different way is a recent piece by Corey Robin and Alex Gourevitch arguing for a new left freedom politics today. Aimed at wrenching away from the Right “the most fundamental term in the American political vocabulary,” they urge mobilizing a language of freedom to challenge neoliberal work conditions. Not only do they occlude climate altogether from their concerns, they insist that because “unfreedom today is most widely experienced in and because of *the* economy...the left’s freedom program must begin with *work*.”¹² Their argument to renew freedom as a left discourse centers entirely on labor organizing and state provisioning to redress economic precarity.

An attempt at a Marxist and ecological critique of Western freedom in relation to the Anthropocene comes from Latour-influence French political theorist Pierre Charbonnier. He begins *Affluence and Freedom* boldly: “moving away from ecological forcing and decarbonizing the economy implies a total redefinition of what society is, a rearrangement of relations of domination and exploitation and a redefinition of our expectations of justice.”¹³ Building on the unrealized radical potential of the French Revolution, he argues that the freedom the revolution ultimately delivered was not mainly problematic for being bound to autonomy, which for him the work of “dismissing arbitrary authorities and entrusting the assembled people with the power to provide themselves with their own rules, to grasp the rudder of history and to realize the liberty of all as equals.”¹⁴ Rather, it is that this project was linked to *affluence*, Charbonnier’s umbrella term for the promises of capitalist growth and development. It is the binding of freedom to affluence, he believes, that separates politics from ecology, and separates ecology from a more radical version of the “social question.”

Charbonnier elaborates, “what blocks the emergence of a political thinking that can face up to the climate crisis is....not only capitalism and its excesses; it is also partly the very meaning of the emancipation of which we are the heirs, one that was built in the industrial and productionist matrix and resulted in the establishment of protective mechanisms still dependent on the reign of their growth.”¹⁵ He thus

¹² Robin and Gourevitch 2020, p. 8.

¹³ Pierre Charbonnier 2021, p.10.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.263.

calls to reinvent liberty by re-suturing nature and culture, “politics and the use of the Earth” so that “the democratic ambition” might become “independent of affluence.”¹⁶ Yet Charbonnier has nothing to say about what this new liberty might look like, only a sense of what it must avoid. Moreover, pinning his hopes on the emergence of a “new critical collective subject,” he acknowledges that “the collective of the new labor question, that is of self-protection in the context of climate change” looks nothing like a socioeconomic class. Rather, “people living near dangerous installations, victims of extractive devices, alternative land users, commoners, scientist and educators....compose, with the Earth, a collective hardly comparable to a dominated class....they are united neither by the experience of exploitation nor by collective identification with a common condition or identity, or even simply by the fact of being victims.”¹⁷ Charbonnier’s inability to respond to his own call to reinvent liberty for political ecology appears due in part to two enduring Marxist attachments, justice centered on labor and a universal and unified revolutionary agent. These attachments also mean that he does not allow new possibilities and coordinates for freedom to emerge from the crises of the old ones, but, rather attempts to supplement a relatively unreconstructed Marxism with the concerns of political ecology.

I want to conclude this terse review of efforts to rethink politics and freedom in the context of the Anthropocene by turning to Bruno Latour, whose rethinking of freedom perhaps founders on the opposite problem as that of Charbonnier, namely too little Marxism.

Latour’s recent recrafting of freedom through the framework of Gaia is scattered across his copious recent work but cogently compressed in a text published in English as *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* and a 2019 *Critical Inquiry* piece co-authored with earth scientist Tim Lenton, “Extending the Domain of Freedom, or Why Gaia is So Hard to Understand.”¹⁸ In the *Critical Inquiry* essay, Latour and Lenton argue that “the uniqueness of Gaia opens a new definition of what [a polity is] just when the situation summarized by the term *Anthropocene* reopens the connection between what philosophers used to call the *domain of necessity*—that is, nature—and the *domain of freedom*—namely, politics and morality.”¹⁹ The symmetrical challenge of the two domains, they argue, in turn challenges “the old idea of nature,” whether external nature understood as governed by laws of determinism or human nature governed by “social Darwinism, sociobiology, dialectical materialism,

16 Ibid. p.261 and p.257.

17 Ibid. p.257.

18 As noted in Note 2, supra, Latour has largely left behind his earlier experiments with “A Parliament of Things.”

19 Latour and Lenton 2019, p. 19.

eugenics, IQ controversies or for that matter much of economic science.”²⁰ We should add neuroscience to this list.

In the case of both human and non-human life (which together Latour renames “terrestrials”), the challenge is to protect freedom against epistemologies, politics, and other practices that threatens it. Latour and Lenton thus position human freedom against what they cast as the bad naturalism of deterministic human sciences, a naturalism that denies our agency and self-determination, *and* positions the freedom of other organisms against the bad naturalism casting them as objects, inert or law driven, a naturalism that denies their agency and self-determination. (This bad naturalism, and reification of culture as its opposite, leads Latour to reject the very term Nature.) In both cases, Latour and Lenton argue, all the agency and freedom is on one side, and all the object status and determinism is on the other side—the result of false binaries of culture and nature, subject and object, freedom and necessity. You can see what they are arguing in the modernist effort to insulate freedom from any kind of embeddedness, determinants or even conditioning. Such is the case with Kant’s formulation of moral autonomy, in Arendt’s formulation of action that is free from both motive and results, and even in Marx, in that little passage on freedom and necessity in Volume 3 of *Capital*, where he suggests that real freedom is to be found in “human energy that is an end in itself, beyond necessity.”²¹ You can also see the implications in practices of freedom that are supremacist, violent or merely irresponsible toward the life forms (human and non-human) identified with the second term in these binaries—nature, object, necessity. Freedom rooted in the culture/nature opposition, in short inevitably becomes freedom to colonize, enslave, exploit, extract, use, or abuse.

With what Isabelle Stengers names “the intrusion of Gaia” today, its undeniable force in the present, the old naturalism (and the binaries that are its predicates) comes into crisis, one that effects all of its elements and entailments.²² Gaia’s conferral of agency and historicity on *all life forms*, and its *intrusion* into all that humans now experience, forcibly cracks “the ancient dichotomy between necessity and freedom” on both sides.”²³ As Latour and Lenton put it:

When humans look at Gaia, they do not encounter the inflexible domain of necessity but....what is largely a domain of freedom, where life forms have, in some extraordinary ways, made their own laws, to the point of generating over eons multiple, heterogeneous,

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²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kant 2012; Arendt 2006; Marx 1976, p.441.

²² Stengers 2015 [2009]

²³ Latour and Lenton 2019, p. 20

intricate and fragile ways of lasting longer in time and extending further in space.

Conversely, any human trying to situate himself or herself as part or participating in this history can no longer be defined only as 'free' but... as being *dependent* on the same sort of intricate and intertwined events revealed by Gaia. More freedom in the domain of necessity is fully matched by more necessity in the domain of freedom. This is what is meant by [Lovelock's claim that 'the Gaia hypothesis implies that the stable state of our planet includes man as part of, or partner in, a very democratic entity.']²⁴

This "very democratic entity," Gaia itself, where all life is at once dependent and free, Latour and Lenten continue, "opens the possibility of extending the domain of freedom by sharing it more widely on both sides."²⁵ This in brief, is how Latour imagines the reconceptualization of freedom emerging from the crises generated by the "intrusion of Gaia" into our lives and consciousness.

Yet even as Latour invites the non-human world into democracy and freedom, indeed claims that it was always already thus, he is careful not to dissolve the human basis of politics. In the *Down to Earth*, he writes, "Obviously there is no politics other than that of humans and for their benefit. This has never been in question. The question is about the form and composition of this human. What the New Climatic Regime calls into question is not the central place of the human; it is its composition, its presence, its figuration, in a word, its destiny. Now if you modify these things, you also change the definition of human interests."²⁶ Politics, then, remains singularly human for Latour, even if freedom does not.

This move, however, implies a consequential splitting of freedom (enjoyed by every creature, naturally, as it were) from politics (uniquely human), and hence a worrisome potential for sustaining the modernist conceit about their opposition, one challenged as I said earlier, by the Greek etymology with which we began. This splitting off of freedom from politics, I want to suggest, occurs in part because of Latour's restricted, perhaps even modernist formulation of freedom, one rooted in the *agency* of organisms, hence resting in them individually rather than in the unique capacity of humans to govern their collaboratively generated powers together.

There is something else to note in this passage. Suggestive as it is, it resorts to an age-old tendency in Western political theory to ask what humans *are* in order to develop political possibilities or norms, that is, ironically, to stay with the human nature question rather than,

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²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Latour 2018, p.85.

as Marx taught, to ask what humans *do* that is distinctive. “Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence, men are indirectly producing their actual material life.”²⁷ To ask what we are inevitably leads to an ahistorical formulation of our needs and relations with others. It also nestles too comfortably within a methodological individualism that Latour seeks to depart. Indeed, it leads to sentences such as these in *The New Climatic Regime*, where Latour seeks to establish “dwelling” as a framework for thinking about the thriving of various life forms. “To define a dwelling place, for a terrestrial, is to list what it needs for its subsistence, and, consequently, what it is ready to defend. This holds as true for a wolf as for a bacterium, for a business enterprise as for a forest...”²⁸ Yet, for *homo sapiens*, need is a quintessentially complex historical, social, as well as subjective matter (forced to choose between an internet connection and a nourishing meal, many today would opt for the former). Moreover, a politics rooted in need and dwelling, no matter how richly defined, cannot yield a politics centered in responsibly governing our collaboratively generated powers. It cannot locate freedom in governing rather than being subjected by these powers. It can only deliver freedom reduced to Gaian principles, that is bound to the effort to persist in time and extend in space in response to its environment....principles that resonate disturbingly with the “needful” aspirations of Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, Peter Thiel or Elon Musk to live forever and fly away from earth.

Of course these unintended and perverse resonances are not what Latour intends, nor are they our main concern. Rather I am suggesting that Latour attempts to derive a politics and freedom from Gaia without rethinking the legacies of Western civilizational politics and freedom as deeply as he has rethought modernist legacies of nature and science. This leaves us within the politics of the old (as Latour’s “parliament of things” also did, with its focus on representative government) and with freedom unbound from the common and from the problem of what we *do* that is distinctive. This notwithstanding the seeming radicality of a formulation in which we are all dependents now, terrestrials “not limited by frontiers and...constantly overlapping, embedding themselves within one another,” and oriented away from a system of production in favor of a system of engendering. The former, he tells us, is aligned with the modern—nature, materialism, the role of the sciences, the centrality of the human, and the quest for freedom. The latter departs this orbit for “cultivating

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²⁷ Marx and Engels 1976, p. 150.

²⁸ Latour 2018, p.95.

attachments," distributed humanity, and an ethos of dependency, genesis, life support.²⁹

Certainly Latour's proposals for paradigm shifts—from humans to terrestrials, production to engendering, freedom to dependency, nature/culture to Gaia—are provocative. By themselves, however, they do not reach to the fundamental problematic constituting politics and its human singularity, which I have been calling the collective generation of powers that order our lives and condition our histories, and establish the very problematic of freedom, or what I have elsewhere called freedom's scenes. It is one thing to affirm principles of Gaia as conditioning human existence and which we ignore at our peril, especially to affirm our dependencies and feature the engendering practices exceeding a production/consumption matrix. It is another to reduce our species to these principles or derive from them our responses to Gaia's intrusion; both moves ironically invite naturalism in through another door and by another name. If politics arises from peculiarly human powers, and freedom rests in our capacity to govern rather than be governed by these powers, and to be responsible to rather than indifferent to their effects, it makes no more sense to derive new practices of politics and freedom from Gaia than to imagine all life participating in photosynthesis or in reproduction through copulation. We cannot assume our own artful place in Gaia by falsely universalizing diverse species' traits and capacities, or projecting those of one life form onto another. Only by rooting freedom in our interdependence rather than autonomy, in our living together rather than our separateness, in our embeddedness in Gaia rather than our apartness from nature, and above all in our power-generating capacities, will we arrive at a politics simultaneously apt to the complex constellation of our dependency on Gaia, our distinct place in Gaia and our exceptional and excessive effect on Gaia. This does not mean politics should only comprise human things or sustain existing divides between "nature" and humanity. It does not mean understanding our politicalness as primordially rooted in some imagined singular capacities for agency, language, morality, deliberation, communication, reason, judgment, or will; or in some hypostasized good, evil or anarchic nature; or in some imagined instinct for ruthlessness or domination or imagined incapacity to secure ourselves without the state. Rather it is that as creatures who generate powers that make histories and worlds within Gaia, and have an outsized effect on all of Gaia, our freedom must be, can only be, related to this capacity, and the curiosity, humility and responsiveness it requires.

Politics, *politika*: an old name for the distinctly human practice of engaging together about our common affairs. The crises of the present demand a radical transformation in what counts as common, including, as it must, all of Gaia. It also demands transformation of who is a *polites*, a

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²⁹ Ibid., p. 83.

participant in what is common even if not a citizen. And it calls for a wider accounting of the powers comprising *politeia*, so that we know what we must handle together to not be handled by these powers and their effects. Transformed thus, political freedom would not be merely tethered to responsibility but become the shared practice of responsibly stewarding the powers and histories we unleash within and upon Gaia...for the first time in Western history.

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Technique as Politics

Andrea Cavalletti

Abstract: This article attempts to answer the question “Is politics possible today?”, developing on some theses from my book *Class* (2019), particularly reflecting on the relationship between politics and technique. The aim is not to define this relationship (e.g. a technique as a means of good politics, or a politics that has a good technique as its goal) but to outline, at least in a preliminary and still imprecise way, the horizon of their non-destructive coincidence. Just like the book, this article also has its main reference in the work of Walter Benjamin and his original idea of solidarity.

Keywords: Technique, Class Struggle, Solidarity, Survival, Nonviolent Means, Walter Benjamin, Jean Fallot.

The interventions, dangers and tempi of politicians are technical
W. Benjamin

1. The question “Is politics possible today?” is political in-itself because it concerns its own conditions of possibility; it concerns the simple survival of human beings, with “today” meaning *the time in which the ideal of a community which is originally and essentially “inoperative” (because Being itself is “being-with”) must deal with the destruction of human life on earth as a specific effect of human social life.* The end which is certain – for Heideggerians, at least – because it is indefinite, is “today” replaced by the end which is certain and definite because it has already begun. Consistently, “being-toward-death” is replaced by being-dead. The detestable face of Valdemar is the image of the current impossibility of politics; his hideous voice is nothing but the voice of the “self-determined” peoples: a threatening sound spread by the media which is nothing but our own voice, “intonated from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth”.

The question “Is politics possible today?” is not a rhetorical one (and the answer is not nonsense) because it can only be asked beyond the limit of this endless end. Indeed, if even today political life and life as such (being-with and pure being) cannot but coincide, it is because they share the one and only margin of possibility that remains to us.

2. In 1976, the Marxist philosopher Jean Fallot wrote: “Capitalist society is precisely the limit-class society, that is, if the words have a meaning, the limit of a classless society or the limit of a non-society altogether”.¹ This statement is an implicit quote and a particular radicalization of

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¹ Fallot, 1976, p. 287.

the famous quote in Marx's *Communist Manifesto*: "Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells".

Fallot, however, was also a scholar of Epicurean materialism: he was thus able to combine the Marxist concept of class struggle with ancient hedonism. As is well known, Epicureanism was both a theory and a practice that aimed at pleasure as the reduction of desires, and achieved the extinction of fear through the separation of existence from death ("If I am, then death is not. If death is, then I am not").

This is the essential point for us too. It is also known, in fact, that the governmental dispositifs produce a balanced combination of fears and desires which is consistent with the logic and tactics of the government itself, that is, with preserving the capitalist system. Meanwhile, human beings – the active and passive subjects of this apparatus – reproduce and consume their commodities and their own life in the threatening but habitual scene of their disappearance from the face of the earth. This has been happening "today" and for too long, just like in 1976. And that is why Fallot's warning sounds more urgent than ever. This admonition is to be understood as something very different from a neglected sermon: it is a laconic as well as precise practical instruction and a fruitful new interpretation of what we call "solidarity". Fallot conceived it as the ability to save oneself and others by escaping the grip of the capitalist apparatus. For this reason, he called it "*effective solidarity*" or "class struggle".

3. As Fallot wrote, the Marxist modality of the reduction of desires (or fears) consists, "thanks to the union of theory and praxis, [...] in gradually replacing our personal desires (for distinction, pre-eminence, possession, enjoyment) with a feeling for the needs of the masses [...] reducing our personal and insignificant desires, dissolving them into the immense sea of needs of the exploited and enslaved".²

We can proceed on this path. A potential dialectical development of Epicurean materialism concerns the conception and practice of friendship. For Epicurus, friendship is not based on an abstract moral ideal (in truth, as Dostoevsky explained, on humiliation), but on need, which is the material basis of morality itself. How to define this need? The famous motto answers: "It is not so much the help of friends that we need as the trust that we will be able to use it when needed". If the "need" is dissolved in the ocean of needs "of the exploited and enslaved", the "we" does not denote a group of individuals focused on their own interests but a class animated by mutual trust and solidarity. For this reason, any claim

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² Fallot, 1977, p. 116.

to base politics on the friend / enemy distinction, i.e., on the distinction between public and private enemy (*hostis* / *inimicus*), becomes ineffective: friendship is not the correlative of enmity, need for trust is neither private nor public.

The real mass of fearful and eager individuals and the mythical unity of the “people” belong to the same device. Only confident friends are able to escape this trap: their “need for trust” is synonymous with “effective solidarity”.

4. Finding escape also means hiding the traces. If true friendship is mutual reduction of desires, it requires a peculiar mode of life. Friendship is shared in containing oneself, living on the sidelines, honoring the Epicurean motto *lathe biosas*: “live so that no one notices that you have been there”. In other words: live dissolving your personal and insignificant desires into the immense sea of the needs of the exploited so that no one notices that you have been there. This is just a paraphrase, sure, and a paraphrase doesn’t get us very far. But as Walter Benjamin once wrote, “A neat sentence by Brecht helps us out here: ‘Erase the traces!’” (*Short Shadows II*, 1933). We must also remember that in one of his preparatory notes for the famous fragment *Capitalism as a religion* (1921), Benjamin mentioned the idea of the “overcoming of capitalism through migration (*Wanderung*)”, theorized by Erich Unger in *Politics and Metaphysics*. Although the note is extremely short and cryptic, the meaning of this “overcoming” becomes clear (and, for us, also in view of an effective solidarity with the masses forced to migrate) by reading a later and equally well-known essay, namely the *Commentary on Poems by Brecht* (1939). Here, commenting on the refrain of the first poem of the *Reader for Citydwellers*, Benjamin writes: “he who fights for the exploited class is an emigrant in his own country. For Brecht – a Communist aware of this situation – the last five years of his political work in the Weimar Republic amounted to a crypto-emigration. He experienced them as such. [...] Crypto-emigration prefigured the real one; it also prefigured illegality. ‘Erase the traces!’ – A rule for those who are clandestine”.³

Brecht’s “Erase the traces!” thus helps us to understand at least three essential aspects: first of all, Epicurean friendship – or pleasure as the reduction of desire – is a simple and convenient opportunity that prefigures (and therefore is in solidarity with) the condition of the migrant; secondly, it concerns the work – it requires a technique that must be constantly renewed (to hide each time the traces just left); thirdly, this technique is a survival and escape technique because it consists in concealing one’s own internal emigration (crypto-emigration means: live so that no one notices that you have been there even as a migrant).

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³ Benjamin, 2003, pp. 232-233 (translation slightly changed).

5. Tolstoy was able like no other to destroy the myth of the brilliant leader who leads his troops. Developing his microphysics of historical contingencies and minimal influences, he showed that no victory of the Grande Armée was the product of Napoleon's alleged genius as no defeat was an effect of his ill will. The personal activity of the Emperor during the Russian invasion did not in fact have an extraordinary strength, greater than that of any soldier: just like the latter, it simply "coincided with the laws under which the event took place".

Benjamin, for his part, showed that the right political tendency coincides with the right technical solution, and that only such a technique frees us from the false appearance of the passive mass, whether it is subject to the will of the leader or to the fatal constraint of the event. This technique, we could also say, erases all traces of personal desires for distinction, pre-eminence, possession... The activity (or performance: *Leistung*) of the revolutionary leader – i.e., the revolutionary performance as such – is thus the same but different from anyone's activity because it *makes itself* indistinguishable from any other.

The model of this operation is the Brechtian technique of estrangement. Its result is the loosening up (*Auflockerung*) of the suggestive tensions that shape the mass of spectators and therefore its transformation from a passive audience to a conscious class. In other words, the actor ceases to be admired by a passive crowd, dissolving his mythical primacy by exposing his performance to the scrutiny of a loose mass of active collaborators who meanwhile turn their attention to themselves.⁴

Now, not even the "theatrical" technique is of course sufficient in itself. Furio Jesi has rightly highlighted the tendency of epic theater to routine, or rather to the "regular exercise of the profession of playwright in the class struggle" consistent with the loss of contact with the proletarian public. Brecht tried to overcome this difficulty by multiplying the estrangement effects, but risking exactly in this way to reduce revolutionary innovation to a practice (one among many others) of bourgeois theater.⁵ Every "artist" (every professional intellectual) must therefore hide his traces over and over again because even his best performance will only be the ephemeral paradigm of an ever-changing technique. But this is the truth: a complete transformation of politics into technique could only consist in constant experimentation, that is, in the continuous and rigorous examination, selection, modification of the same experimental performances. Once again, as we have been taught, realization and abolition coincide.

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⁴ On this topic see also Cavalletti, 2019.

⁵ Jesi, 1974, pp. 94-96.

Whether the technique can offer a solution or it becomes an empty and useless habit depends in turn on a technical solution. However, the reflective and self-critical attitude must not turn into an infinite regression. In other words, the technique itself must find its most sober and authentic *raison d'être*, that is, its true point of application or its one and only possibility of intervening, the point where the fuse burns. Benjamin defines “loosening up” as revolutionary solidarity. The two, moreover, strictly coincide for him with class consciousness. For us, even this definition has only one precise meaning: technique and politics coincide when survival is at stake.

6. As Benjamin observed, in the *Reader for Citydwellers* “the city appears as a vast theater of the struggle for survival and class struggle”.⁶ The first corresponds to the “anarchist perspective”, the latter to the “revolutionary perspective”, and if the two perspectives are coherent it is because the two struggles in effect are one.

In this case too, Benjamin's late political theory must obviously be distinguished but also strictly related to that of the early 1920s. In his great essay *Critique of Violence* (1921), he again quoted Unger's *Politik und Metaphysik* to reject political compromise as “a product located within the mentality of violence”.⁷ However, he distinguishes “with regard to the class struggle” a “nonviolent”, i.e., “anarchist”, undertaking. As we know, the paradigm of this undertaking is the general strike of the proletariat theorized by Georges Sorel, which “sets itself the sole task of destroying state power”. Benjamin writes: “Taking up occasional statements by Marx, Sorel rejects every kind of program, of utopia – in a word, of lawmaking – for revolutionary movement. ‘With the general strike, all these fine things disappear; the revolution appear as a clear, simple revolt, and no place is reserved either for sociologists or for the elegant amateurs of social reforms or for the intellectuals who have made it their profession to think for the proletariat’. Against this deep, moral, and genuinely revolutionary conception, no objection can stand that seeks, on grounds of its possibly catastrophic consequences, to brand such a general strike as violent”.⁸

Just like Sorel, Benjamin thus conceives the revolution as a clear and simple revolt, that is, regardless of the pretensions of realization; not as an end that is claimed to have been reached but as a “pure non-violent means”. And if “the critique of violence is the philosophy of its history”, this conception can be clarified by reading the famous lines of the *Fourth Thesis on the Philosophy of History*. “Seek first food and clothing, then the

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⁶ Benjamin, 2003, p. 233.

⁷ Benjamin, 1996, p. 244.

⁸ Ivi, p. 246.

kingdom of God will be added”: Hegel thus overturned the statement of the Sermon on the Mount. Benjamin quotes Hegel’s sentence to explain and develop it as follows: “The class struggle [...] is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as confidence, courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers”.⁹ As the end of the revolution is present in it, the revolution is not the ultimate, future goal of the revolt but is manifested in it.

Just as the struggle for survival and the class struggle can only be coherent, the anarchist perspective of the revolt and the communist and revolutionary one must coexist. Thus in the theater of the city the means are not subject to the end, and all the intermediate levels converge and overlap – consistent with Engels’ words of 1871: “Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat”. Thus the classless society is immanent in the struggle for survival, and survival is immanent in the struggle of the exploited and classless class of the vast theater of the world, where everyone and no one is an artist or a spectator, a leader or a follower.

7. In Sorel’s vocabulary “Utopia” has a definite meaning in opposition to “Myth”. As everyone knows, however, the adjective “utopian” is usually understood in a trivially negative sense, e.g. from the propaganda of neoliberal realpolitik which stigmatizes as unrealistic any purpose diverging from it (in the realized dream of spectacular capitalism, in fact, reality as such is a private good). So the “amateur of social reforms” of our day implicitly takes this reality / utopia opposition for granted while openly reject the accusation of naive utopianism. *Excusatio non petita*: if the sense of “real” is consistent with the preservation of dominant power, a “realistic” opportunity to change could only be utopian in the ordinary negative sense.

Of course, it could be argued that this critique of progressive reformism is itself trivial. Sometimes, however, even a banal remark is more than enough.

Even the theory of the progressive state of the post-growth economy, which accepts the limited availability of resources by trusting in governmentality as an unlimited capacity for imagination and adaptation, it is nothing but an internal (progressive) adaptation of the state system and political economy. It is a practical adoption of the border policy that all states implement (as long as possible) against the emergence of

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⁹ Benjamin, 1969, pp. 254-255 (translation slightly changed).

exploited and migrating masses. In other words, such a theory is based on the violent limitation of the needs of those who are defenceless and voiceless in front of the power of states and their defence treatises. Solidarity itself is thus limited to a possible unilateral concession, while utopia – i.e., the petty dream of basic income, pension restructuring, fiduciary reform and so on – is a luxury paid for by those who cannot afford to be deprived of food and clothing. Precisely from the point of view of progressive reformism, , they will always only need our help and will never simply be able to use it when needed.

It is true, however, that confidence in the potential utility of others express itself in struggle just as courage, humor, cunning and fortitude. In other words, the revolutionary quality of solidarity lies in reciprocity: only when the ability to make use of the help of others is perfectly reciprocal, both the need for help and the willingness to help turn into need for trust (in help), that is in friendship.

8. “Capitalism had reached a point on the world arena where it ceased to justify its costs of production”. This century-old sentence becomes perhaps more relevant than ever when the cost is the survival of the humanity as such. Similarly, the concept of “reactionary utopia” would still be useful to define the tendencies to reduce economic or environmental solidarity within state boundaries. However, if the current struggles against the exploitation of man and nature can overcome the phantasmagoric illusions (and relative disappointments) that would make them inoperative, it is because of their ability to escape the constraint of immediate feedback. They approach the issue from a different slant. The most urgent task, today as yesterday, is in fact not to resist or fight, but not to fall to the trickery of the governmental device which, continually provoking them, selects our resistances and neutralizes them in advance.

Therefore only those who are in solidarity will be safe, and free from fears as from desires. They will dissolve these burden in the immense sea of needs of those who are deprived of food and clothing, just before the tidal wave engulfs everyone.

9. The vertigo of the end of the world contains in itself and explains the current vertigo of war. As Roger Caillois explained, “one’s being is dragged to ruin as persuaded by the vision of its own annihilation not to resist the powerful charm that seduces one’s being by terrorizing it”.¹⁰ The deeper the chasm, the greater the attraction it exerts. And the most looming danger frightens and attracts at the same time by inducing the most conflicting feelings: hope in delay and impatience for the end. So it is not surprising that in the current apocalyptic situation those who are primarily responsible for it are so panicked that they have to offset

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10 Caillois, 1943, p. 53.

one danger with another: as everyone can see, in fact, they are simply trying to prevent the planetary environmental catastrophe by replacing it with the obstacle of nuclear world war. And just as removing danger means exactly approaching it, also the dilatory approach (or the agonizing slowness) of the "ecological transition" policy and the immediate effect of a nuclear blast at ground zero are two inseparable prospects.

The one who will be able to save himself from dizziness is not the one who tries to look away from the abyss but the one who fixes his gaze on the vertigo itself by examining it carefully. What will he discover? That there is no magic. What will he see? A mechanism invented by men. And he will calmly look at the scary and attractive abyss, recognizing a very well done set.

10. The danger is actual, as is the effect of dizzying deception. In other words, the abyssal depth is real precisely because it is painted on a surface, and the most dangerous of all tricks and traps is the one hidden behind the danger itself. Indeed, what is most feared will come true: the terror that paralyzes us and makes us dizzy will make us slip and fall. But he who calmly fixes his gaze on vertigo itself does not get stuck inside the mechanism: politics is still possible for him. He knows that the greatest and most real danger lies not in our banal, effective inability to stop the destruction, but in the process of subjectification that corresponds to it.

The danger lies in the machine of exploitation of men and nature which, extracting surplus value and producing commodities (i.e., expectations, civil behavior, good habits and so on), massively pollutes, destroys, and kills to the point of inducing terror and paralysis, that is, to produce the same apparent impossibility of being stopped. This machine projects both the illusions of progressivism and the illusion of fatalism, inducing both submissive reverence and desperate anger. It artificially produces both our aspirations and our fears, because it is based on their fundamental equivalence and interchangeability. By accustoming us to wanting what we should have feared and to fear what we were darkly wanting, that is, to desire and fear at the same time, it has pushed us to the brink. Almost a century ago, in 1934, Simone Weil would go on to enact her effort of critical analysis to escape from "the contagion of folly and collective frenzy" promulgated by the modern social machine, which is precisely "a machine for manufacturing irresponsibility, stupidity, corruption, slackness and, above all, vertigo".¹¹

Those who today calmly fix their gaze on vertigo have no illusions and will never seek partial satisfaction of needs through work, since they know that the greatest danger lies precisely in wage labor, that is, once again, in simultaneous exploitation and destruction of human life and natural environment in order to obtain surplus value. They are in fact still

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¹¹ Weil, 1973, p. 124.

awake and able to calmly observe all the seeming resistances, which are not only idle but also dizzying in turn (as in the famous film, idleness and vertigo are always closely linked). Therefore, who today calmly fix their gaze on vertigo will not ask for “external concessions and this or that modification of working conditions”.¹²

Whether we call it exploitation or destruction, the process is the same and can only be stopped by a “totally transformed work” which is also the only, still possible interaction between humans and the environment.

11. The only politics that is still possible, that is, the only non-destructive politics, coincides with the solidarity struggle for survival. The struggle for survival is a class struggle and the classless society is immanent in it. Of course, these sentences sound anachronistic. However, this corresponds exactly to the vertiginous functioning of the social machine. Precisely because it cannot definitively eliminate the possibility of class struggle, it must continually censor (whit carrots or sticks) the idea of struggle, the concept of class difference, and finally the word class itself by replacing it with “people”. Obviously the machine is always well-oiled and its different tools (suggestive persuasion, police repression, fascist violence and so on) will be used according to the circumstances. On the other hand, recognizing a sign of vulnerability in this obligatory movement is a classic task and a revolutionary virtue of meticulous and detached observation. At the same time, the inquiring gaze does not allow itself to be enchanted, that is, it will never be obsessed with the functioning of the machine.

This last consideration, rather trivial, is still only a way of reiterating that politics is a technique. And it is a way of returning to Benjamin's suggestion that revolutionary performance (or technique) consists in letting oneself be immersed again and again in the mass or – we could even say, since this performance is called solidarity – in the ever-widening sea of the exploited. Now, that the classless society is immanent to the struggle means that the technical, non-violent solution of conflicts is immanent to it. Let us therefore try to follow again the ideal interweaving of Benjamin's early and later texts. The dictation of the *Fourth Thesis on the Philosophy of History* actually seems to echo in one point that of the *Critique of Violence*. The first reads: “it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that [spiritual things] make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as confidence (*Zuversicht*), courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude”.¹³ The 1921 text further explains: “Nonviolent agreement is

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12 Benjamin, 1996, p. 246.

13 Benjamin, 1969, pp. 254-255.

possible wherever a civilized outlook allows the use of unalloyed means of agreement. Legal and illegal means of every kind that are all the same violent may be confronted with nonviolent ones as unalloyed means. Courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust (*Vertrauen*), and whatever else might here be mentioned are their subjective preconditions".¹⁴ Now, just as the spiritual goods of the *fourth thesis* are inseparable from the material ones, these subjective premises are inseparable, in the nonviolent sphere, of pure means, from their objective manifestation. The latter, Benjamin points out, "is determined by the law (whose enormous scope cannot be discussed here) that says unalloyed means are never those of direct solutions but always those of indirect solutions. They therefore never apply directly to the resolution of conflict between man and man, but apply only to matters concerning objects. The sphere of nonviolent means opens up in the realm of human conflicts the most materially relating to goods (*in der sachlichsten Beziehung auf Güter*). For this reason, technique in the broadest sense of the word is their most particular area".¹⁵

From our point of view, expressions such as "trust" or "confidence" could be legitimately understood in the Epicurean (and Marxist) meaning clarified by Fallot. Furthermore, we could now put forward the hypothesis that the enormous field of indirect solutions (i.e., solutions freed from immediate feedback) is that of "effective solidarity" or "class struggle [...] for the crude and material things (*um die rohen und materiellen Dinge*)": if every conflict is resolved in relation to things, the environment itself ceases to be the unlimited source of their infinite extraction and the unlimited place of their landfill just as man ceases to extract surplus value from the other man's work. Then the agreement mediated by things and work simply coincide because the agreement extends to the environment itself. Politics therefore does not belong to the domain of desires (for distinction, pre-eminence, possession, etc.) but to the strictly material sphere of needs-goods mediation.

Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro recently wrote that the end of the world is not the end of everything. They pointed to the example of the Amerindians who survived the destruction of their world by Conquistadors. This population have survived thanks to their mythology, whose objective and material manifestation is a technique of mediation and negotiation of goods with animals, plants, and the needs of the natural environment. The Amerindians, who do not have a state and are not recognized as a people, think that everything is negotiation, everything is social, that each individual life is a true association of beings, and that politics and society do not concern the environment,

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¹⁴ Benjamin, 1996, p. 244.

¹⁵ Ibid.

but coincide in a sense with the environment itself: "They think that there are more societies in heaven and earth [...] than are dreamt of in our philosophy and anthropology. What we call environment is for them a society of societies, an international arena, a Cosmpoliteia".¹⁶ This example is of the utmost importance to us. Its relevant role is the same role of the class struggle in the struggle for survival beyond Valdemar's suspended death. Its teaching is a "preparations to survive civilization" and can be summarized as follows: the one and only non-destructive policy is cosmopolitan loosening up which is also an anti-hierarchical performance: it is the continuous, meticulous destruction of the supposed hierarchy of creatures that culminates in mankind.¹⁷

We men of the Anthropocene cannot forget the words of Poe's character: "Quick! — quick! — put me to sleep — or, quick! — waken me! — quick! - / *say to you that I am dead!*". And the following lines clearly tell us about the way of reacting of the current capitalist technocrats who, despite everything, still dream of being alive: "I was thoroughly unnerved, and for an instant remained undecided what to do. At first I made an endeavor to re-compose the patient; but, failing in this through total abeyance of the will, I retraced my steps...". Walter Benjamin's words resonate here once again: "The interventions, dangers and tempi of politicians are technical".¹⁸

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¹⁶ Danowski, Viveiros De Castro, 2017, p. 69. See also Cavalletti, Danowski, Viveiros De Castro, 2018.

¹⁷ See Benjamin, 1999, p. 546.

¹⁸ Benjamin, 1986, p. 84.

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Thinking Life: The Force of the Biopolitical

Andrew Benjamin

Abstract: The demand that stems from a particular vesion of political theology is 'choose life'. A concern with a philosophical thinking of life continues to have a predominate place within contemporary philosophy. More exactly that concern figures most usefully when refracted through terms such as 'biopolitics' and 'political theology'. Both of these domains of inquiry can be seen as forming an important part of the history of philosophy's continual engagement with life. Indeed, the broader claim would be that life – present as a necessarily plural term and thus always understood as devolving into an engagement with forms of life set within differentials of power – has always had a central role within the philosophical. The project of this paper is to sketch out a number of instances that indicate the ubiquity of the interplay of life and power and then to trace some of the consequences. The continual question is; what is chosen in a positive response to the demand 'choose life'?

Keywords: Biopolitics, Political Theology, Life, Judgment, Seneca, Arendt

See, I set before you this day life and good,
death and evil . . . I have put before you life
and death, blessing and curse. Choose life
—so that you and your children after you will live”
(Deut. 30:15,19).

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A concern with a philosophical thinking of life continues to have a predominate place within contemporary philosophy.¹ That concern figures most usefully when refracted through terms such as 'biopolitics' and 'political theology'. There is no attempt here to refuse what either term offers. Both of these domains of inquiry can be seen as forming an important part of the history of philosophy's continual engagement with life. Indeed, the broader claim would be that life – present as a necessarily plural term and thus always understood as devolving into an engagement with forms of life set within differentials of power – has always had a central role within the philosophical. The project of this paper is to sketch out a number of instances that indicate the ubiquity of the interplay of life and power and then to trace some of the consequences. The continual question is; what is chosen in a positive response to the demand 'choose life'? Within any attempt to engage that demand the role of the history of philosophy is fundamental. After

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¹ I am indebted to Nathan Bell, Lucy Benjamin, and Miguel Vatter for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

all what is Plato's concern with education and rulership in *The Republic*, other than a deliberate and necessary encounter with the problems that stem from the ineliminable presence of structures of knowledge, control and sovereignty within life. (And thus as integral to the constitution of life itself.) The result is that there cannot be a thinking of life that could ever be independent of an engagement with that presence. If there is a broad conclusion that can be drawn – and it is a conclusion for which this paper is an attempt to provide argumentation – then it is simply that the continual concern with life within the history of philosophy necessitates the recognition that life as a locus of philosophical thought cannot be separated from its interarticulation within, and as, regimens of power and control. In general terms, what this also means is that the biopolitical, despite the attribution of a sense of novelty to the term, can now be seen as always having been the way in which life is understood. Note the position advanced by Judith Butler.

By biopolitics, I mean those powers that organize life, even the powers that differentially dispose lives to precarity as part of a broader management of populations through governmental and non-governmental means, and that establish a set of measures for the differential valuation of life itself.²

In other words, to think that it is possible to posit forms of life as though life were not already structured by the way in which power is distributed is not just simply to misunderstand what life is, equally, it is premised on either the denial or the refusal of the presence of the very differentials of power that have always exerted a structuring influence on the presentation of life within the philosophical.³ Neutrality, as is the case with the naturalism, are both feints imposed upon the philosophical to rid philosophy of its having to engage with, from within its own terms, what will continue to be identified as founding disequilibria of power that are always already – at work.

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2 Butler 2012.

3 Clearly what is asserted here is a position that draws as much on Foucault's reading of the history of thought as it does on Derrida's deconstruction of what he identified as phallo-logocentrism. For Derrida the latter exerted a structuring effect on the history of philosophy. Moreover, phallo-logocentrism cannot be separated from political questions and thus ultimately from the way power operates. The approach being taken here notes both of these positions, however it adopts a different path due to its inscription of the question of judgment as central to any philosophical consideration of life. The criteria of judgment have to be located in life, not brought to it. Neither Foucault nor Derrida evinced a concern with the complex relation between judgment and life.

1.

In the *De Vita Beata* Seneca outlines that which circumscribes and defines the possibility of a 'happy life', for example, 'virtue', 'tranquility' and 'freedom'. There are two formulations of this specific subject position that have a defining link to happiness. Both deserve consideration. The significant point here is that even though they are not presented as such, both evidence the way differentials of power are always already at work within presentations of life within Seneca's version of Stoicism. Noting their presence opens up essential aspects of Seneca's thinking of life, and that thinking's inscription within the biopolitical. In the first instance Seneca writes that the 'the happy life is in harmony with its own nature (*Beata est ergo vita conveniens naturae suae*).⁴ The second formulation clarifies what this evocation of the nature of 'the happy life' actually entails. He adds that 'man' (*vir*) should not be corrupted by that which is external and thus, as a result, he is also be able to 'be the molder of his own life' (*artifex vitae*). The idea of human being as self-making or self-fashioning does of course have its own history.⁵ Nonetheless, what is involved when both of these formulations are taken together is that human nature is given a sense of propriety. Happiness comes from the possibility of an accord that 'man' (*vir*) is free to bring about. Happiness in this context has to be linked to '*libertas*'. Freedom and tranquility arise from overcoming the threats to selfhood and thus from that which would hinder the possibility of self-making. As the passage continues the 'tranquility' and 'freedom' (*libertatem*) that would then follow are described by Seneca as having an enduring quality (*perpetuam*).

Two points need to be made here. The first is that what Seneca is describing is a form of self-definition, a type of inner accord; the concept of the self within it is of one that is in accord with that self's own proper project. The second is that liberty is the situation that allows human being – and thus any one human being – to enter into this state. This becomes the key aspect since, as Chaim Wirszubski has argued, only 'a Roman citizen enjoys all the rights, personal and political, that constitute *libertas*'.⁶ Happiness, once linked to liberty, cannot be separated from citizenship and thus from the ways in which citizenship functions as a limit condition in relation to human being; a condition which once naturalized is then taken to have universal applicability. And yet, of course, such an application is premised on the disavowal of that initial limit. In other words, universality depends upon this naturalization. The limit in question can be further underscored by the link between

4 Seneca. 1932. *De Vita Beata* 7.3.3. The following lines are a discussion of this entire passage of *De Vita Beata*. (Occasionally translations here and elsewhere in the text have been modified.)

5 I have analyzed in greater detail the implications of self-making in both Seneca and Pico della Mirandola in Benjamin 2019.

6 Wirszubski 1950, p. 2. See in addition my: The Figure of the Slave. Notes on Seneca Letter XLVII.

the conception of 'leisure' and self-direction that appears in *De Otio* in which Seneca argues that it is possible to live a life based on 'some model' (*aliquod exemplum*). As a result, this means that 'we can direct our lives' (*vitam derigamus*).⁷ (The inclusive and equally excluding use of the 'we' - *derigamus* - needs to be noted.) If this self-direction is to occur, then it is best done 'in leisure' (*in otio*). The conclusion is clear. What is proper to human life, a life that is then identified implicitly with the life of human being, necessitates the possibility of 'leisure'. There is however an important contrast that can be made between the necessary and generalizable state of 'leisure (though the same argument could also be made in relation to 'tranquillity') and St Augustine's report in *De civitate Dei* of what Seneca 'thought about the Jews'. It is not just that the Jews are described as an 'accursed race' (*sceleratissimae gentis*) more significantly in this context is the description of the Sabbath as the loss of a day due to 'idleness' (*vacando*).⁸ The full force of the distinction between 'leisure' and 'idleness', which is a distinction that positions free time within an already present conceptual framework, is that there could only ever be a generalized state of human being if it were premised on the refusal to recognise that 'leisure' always has a restricted application. Again, the general is the after-effect of a founding restriction.

The attribution to Seneca of the position Augustine claims is his brings its own set of attendant considerations into play, nonetheless what the presence of such a position serves to underscore is, as noted, the impossibility of allowing 'leisure' universal application. The conclusion is that any projected form of universality can only function as such if the universal is predicated upon maintaining the distinction between slave and citizen on the one hand and insisting on the subject positions that works to hold 'leisure' apart from 'idleness' – *otio* apart from *vacando* – on the other. In sum, the conditions under which universality is possible are those which indicate its impossibility. Within this configuration the realization of universality is nothing other than the operative presence of modes of inclusion, exclusion, and separation.

This positioning of human being needs to be developed. A number of elements have to be noted. The first of which is that even though self-fashioning is linked to the project of becoming who one is, and that this mode of becoming is in turn linked to the sense of propriety in which the 'happy life' is defined in terms of an accord with its own nature, it is also the case that there are possible impediments to the realization of such an end. If these restriction or impediments occur, and this may happen for a number of reasons, one of which would be the complex role played

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⁷ Seneca. 1932, *De Otio*. I.

⁸ St Augustine. 1960, VI. XI. For an attempt to establish a complex relation between Augustine and Judaism and Jews see: Fredriksen 2008. For the other side of the discussion on the Sabbath see Heschel 2005.

by *fortuna* within human life, it is also true that, in Seneca's own terms, the 'happy life' necessitates both liberty and a reckoning with 'chance' (*fortuna*) in which the deleterious effects of the latter can be held off. This means that what counts as a 'happy life' is given in advance. And yet, its realization cannot be taken for granted. Rather, it takes the form of a potentiality to be actualized. That potentiality is linked to freedom. As Joy Connolly argues being free needs to be understood as 'the capacity to live not *in potestate domini*'.⁹ Accounts of the impediments to the happy life appear in the structure of Seneca's own argumentation. There is, however, an additional point. Noting it allows for the identification of the organising logic that allows the 'happy life' to be presented.

If the supposition is that if the 'happy life' is the actualization of a potentiality, then any one subject has to be in position such that self-fashioning is in fact a genuine possibility. The ability must be realizable. What has emerged however is more complex. The ability in question needs be understood in terms of a potentiality to be actualized. It is not axiomatically actualizable. Seneca continues to present it however as though it is. The process is naturalized and thus thought to pertain as though it were a general description of human being. In fact, the opposite is the case. What is in fact involved is the creation of set of positions that depends on the freedom that comes from a strictly delimited sense of autonomy. That freedom, which can always be thought to apply automatically, is neither natural nor universal. Excluded are both certain ethnic or religious positions that are the result of already present assumptions about citizenship and the presence of slavery. Moreover, questions of sexual difference are resolved – resolution as preclusion – in advance. That '*vir*' is as much 'man' as it is 'husband' should be noted. In other words, it is a sense of freedom that cannot be separated from the differentials of power that secure the relationship between liberty and self-fashioning in the first place. And yet, of course, it is a sense of freedom in Seneca's writing that, in being naturalized, is projected back – hence the idea that there is a sense of retroactive application at work – and thus is taken to provide the description of an original state of human being. The contrary is, of course, the case. Once that state of affairs is uncovered, then it is precisely the presence of this projection which enables the designation 'life' to become a site of negotiation. (Negotiation stands in relation of distance, at the very least, from any claimed subject position defined by the centrality of *otium*.) Once there is the recognition that processes of naturalization are original then question of what counts as life and also the 'good' or 'happy life' are then ones whose answers remain to be determined. As will become clear, this undoing of processes of naturalization is part of what is involved in the transformation of the given into a locus of judgment. What needs to

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9 Connolly 2015. p.27

be noted is that potentiality and actualization are linked, in Seneca, to a sense of universality which is merely there in name alone. In fact, the relationship between potentiality and actualization thus construed is the way in which differentials of power are maintained. Hence the thinking of life implicit in Seneca is circumscribed in advance.

Self-fashioning is also a dominant theme in the Renaissance. In Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), for example, human being is given a specific description that brings self-fashioning into play. Again, it is a power that is proper to the self. Pico voices God's description of the creation of human being.

We have made you neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that you may, as the free and extraordinary shaper of yourself, fashion yourself in whatever form you prefer.¹⁰

The response to Pico is not to doubt this claim. Moreover, it is a conception of human being that is reinforced by the assertion a few lines earlier in the *Oration* that the human has been set 'at the centre of the world' (*medium..mundi*). Contesting claims of this nature would be pointless. Pico's argument should be analysed in a way similar to Seneca's. Were this to occur it would have been demonstrated the way the relationship between this conception of self-fashioning, with its almost too obvious anthropocentrism, the related introduction of 'emulation' as part of the means by which self-making occurs, and the overall configurations of power that enabled their complex interrelation to have been made in the first place, are all productively interconnected. All have to be thought together. Self-fashioning cannot be excised and the taken to be the neutral expression of self-care.

2.

At this stage in the argument however it is essential to begin the task of sketching some of what is entailed by the attribution of centrality to processes of judgment. Judgment is often linked to the evocation of norms and normativity as though what the terms 'norms' and 'normativity' identified functioned as ends in themselves. In other words, it is as though simply stating them was sufficient. Normativity can be defined in different ways. However, in order to begin the supposition is that claims that evoke both norms and normativity refer, if only initially, to the capacity of humans to reason, come to decisions and therefore to act. It is also true that reflection – which might also be described as the work of reason - on those acts or events, whether by the agent (him or herself) or by others may equally be taken as a form of judgment having normative implications. Even though it demands clarification an important distinction

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¹⁰ Mirandola 2013, p.117, paragraph 22.

emerges here; significantly, it is a distinction that troubles in advance any apparently straightforward use of discursive formulations that deploy the language of norms and normativity in an unproblematic way.

The distinction in question is between, the apparently immediate forms of presence (incorporating acts, events, decision, objects thus particulars in general and this will include the equation, perhaps conflation, of the object of interpretation with its literal presence), and, in contrast, what might generally be described as the specific instance of reflection on the decision, act, event or object. This way of configuring the difference between them contains an important opening. Even though the immediate decision, the brute presence of an act, the givenness of an object, etc., may be taken as temporally immediate in the sense that they all occur - where the occurrence of an act and the givenness of an object have a similar status since both may be characterized by the appearance of immediacy - what is actually present is the possibility of judgment. Events and acts are necessarily *judgeable*. The fact that in all instances what takes place, again accepting the position that sanctions forms of coalescence between occurrence and particular, can be judged, means that any one occurrence cannot be reduced to its simple appearance. There cannot be pure activity, or a pure event. Any particular is always already informed; formed, in part, by what allows it to be judged. The immediate is therefore always already a mediated site. Again, the refusal to acknowledge that such a state of affairs obtains is premised on reducing judgment to description since what always has to be disavowed is the informed presence of anyone one appearance. If appearance is always already complete and therefore it is assumed that any description is definite (and definitive) then judgment becomes no more than a heightening of that description. And yet, what informs the appearance of immediacy are the concepts and categories whose presence have the doubled effect of allowing any one particular to be both meaningful and judgeable. (And again it should be noted that the 'particular' ranges from the singular decision to the object.) The important additional point is, of course, that immediacy reappears as secondary. Immediacy is always produced. The immediate - present as mediated immediacy - is marked in advance. To which it should be added that this underscores further why there cannot be a simple event or a pure singularity. The singular will always have been premised on a founding relation. The connection between immediacy and universality should be noted. Both are produced. Neither is original. If this position can be assumed, then the question to be addressed is how original states of relationality are to be understood.

Prior to pursuing the nature of the distinction between the apparently immediate and mediated presence (which will continue to be undertaken here via the concept of normativity) it is essential to note the consequences of insisting on what has been designated as the *judgable*. Terms such as *judgable* and *judgeability* may have a distinctly

odd register, nonetheless they play a fundamental role in the arguments to come. Both terms presuppose the presence of an occurrence, i.e. the particular's presentation. And yet, as has already been suggested, there cannot be pure particularity. However, it is not just that form is informed, it is equally the case that any particular also announces, in virtue of its being what it is, a relation to the history of which it forms a part (and thus the other histories into which it might be incorporated). A drawn line is already part of the history of drawing. A robbery, a stutter, a philosophical text, a poem, even a grimace, because they are particulars, are already incorporated into a network of relations in which they become meaningful. This position is taken as given. And yet, a note of caution needs to be introduced. Becoming meaningful is not the same as a judgment. It is important therefore to acknowledge that despite there being moments of overlap, points of interdependence and possible visual imbrications, it is nonetheless important to indicate some of the elements that maintain the distinction between meaning and judgment.

Even though the term 'normativity' is itself a locus of debate, appeals both to norms and to the belief that there are preexisting norms to which reference might be made in order that forms of evaluation or judgment occur, is in fact a commonplace. What will be suggested here is that references to norms and normativity are for the most part premised on not having considered certain aspects that are fundamental to any claim based on their assumed use. What needs to be investigated therefore is the presence of that which might check the invocation of norms or appeals to normativity. In the first instance it should be noted that the criteria of evaluation might not have been available at a particular time, or at least not in a way that reference to them could itself have exercised any form of 'normative' force. The history of slavery, for example, did not have inscribed within it sustained arguments or positions that sought to counter its continuity, or at least not in way that those arguments could have had the status of norms. The continual 'threat' of the slave revolt and the continual policing of racialized subservient bodies was not normative in any positive sense. In fact, the contrary was the case. The history of slavery contains justificatory claims that were attributed a normative dimension. Almost until the very end of organized slavery norms sustained it. The apparent end of slavery might be identified in the UK with the *Slavery Abolition Act 1833* or on the case of the USA with the *13th Amendment*, which took force on December 18, 1865. While these dates are far from arbitrary, it should be clear that the end of slavery is a more complex state of affairs. Indeed, it can be argued that rather than signalling an end they have both been incorporated into slavery's history and thus now form part of its transformed continuity. The question therefore is how they are both present and yet slavery continues.¹¹ Clearly

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11 For an engagement with the continuity of slavery see: Kara 2017.

part of the answer lies in the failure to understand the possibility of continuity through, and despite transformation. Moreover, it means that norms will always involve contestation. Hence, as will continue to be suggested, the locus of concern should be contestation or conflict rather than the norms as ends in themselves.

It should always be recognized that even when slavery was contested, as is also the case with contemporary forms of sexism and racism, coupled to the complacency that greets the continual presence of poverty, none of these differing configurations of social relations, then and now, could have been or can now be countered by reference to norms that were thought to have had or now have automatic force. Norms and normativity always have a content that is marked by the presence of contestation. Hence what has to matter is the primacy of contestability such what is always present are conflicting norms. This is a clear instance in which even though meaning and judgment have an affinity they can be separated. Even accepting that the meaning of a word may be the subject to a form of contestation, the presence of *poverty*, to continue with this example, yields responses that are divided between strategies that aim for its elimination, though there are others which would hold, even if reluctantly, to its inevitability. Both are judgments made in relation to poverty. The reason that they can be contested is not simply that any one judgment is contestable by nature. More significantly, they are contestable because there cannot be settled by recourse to norms. They are neither neutral nor universal. Norms are themselves the articulation of differentials of power. There is no point defining normativity in terms of 'what ought to be believed and or done'.¹² Both the attempt to eliminate poverty and the position that accepts its inevitability can be linked to oughts. Arguing in relation to an already given set of conditions – the conditions harbouring norms – is simply to naturalize the setting in which norms occur. How would any 'ought' provide anything other than further evidence for the presence of contestation?

And yet, were this to be the end of the argument then all that would have been discovered is that relativism can incorporate differentials of power. If relativism obtained then the allocation of primacy to a specific play of forces means that forms of adjudication are not possible other than those linked to having greater strength or power, on the one hand, or, on the other, a sense of equanimity regarding the use of violence. In order to avoid the continual oscillation between positions within such a setting, what becomes necessary is a short cut; a way out. The argument is going to be that the way through the problem posed by relativism and the reduction of judgment to a play of forces, can be found by returning to the point of departure, namely, returning to life.

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¹² Pippin 2009, pp. 35-43, 105. For part of the undoing of normativity by rethinking it in terms of enforced and enforcing conceptions of normalization see Ahmed 2006, p. 113.

3.

To begin, the claim has to be that the absences of contemporaneous criteria of judgment – e.g. the absence of a clear and sustained opposition to slavery during the Greek or Roman period (other than the continual threat of the slave revolt) - does not mean that events/occurrences linked to it fall outside the realm of judgment. The implicit premise here is that what counts as the basis of judgment, which assumes the fact of an event/occurrence being inherently judgeable, does not entail the copresence of criteria of judgment in a way that has to accord with the being-present of that which is to be judged. History has to have a more complex temporality. *Judgeability* does not depend on the simultaneous presence of events and criteria of judgment. What this means is that what continues to confront thought is the possibility that prevailing norms do not allow judgment to be effective, or even to have taken place. (Certain historical periods, in other words, envisaged nothing other than their own perpetuity.) To return to one of the examples used above. Poverty continues. (13.6% of the population in Australia live below the poverty line. The number is 11% in the USA.¹³) That continuity is not countered by normative claims precisely because such claims are always contestable. What counts as the norm therefore, in such instances, is not the content of norms. What is normative is their actual contestability. For example, while it was not possible to contest slavery during the Roman period, this does not mean that Roman slavery cannot become a locus of judgment. Moreover, it might be that the absence of the possibility of contemporaneous contestability indicates the need to rethink how that absence was understood. Emerging as a result would be the question of what there has to be in order that judgment is in fact possible.

In a sense this is the predicament that Arendt discovers in her analysis of the totalitarian. One significant consequence of the totalitarian, for Arendt, was that its having been present, its historical actualization, necessitated the subsequent creation of modes of argumentation accompanied by forms of institutional presence that would come to guarantee and secure human dignity. This is not a minor point given the fact that resistance to the actuality of the totalitarian – both conceptual and institutional - was ineffective in this regard. Secondly, inherent in the promulgation of such settings were claims made about human life. Claims that were linked to a form of propriety. However, it was not propriety as an abstract form of self-accord that posited the centrality of the individual. That would be the Stoic legacy within neo-liberalism (perhaps as neo-liberalism). Rather, in the place of the self-centered subject there is the continual and effective primacy of relationality. Indeed, there is in Arendt's thinking a continual insistence on the centrality of

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¹³ For poverty number see: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/poverty-rate-by-country>

relationality. That insistence focuses on several aspects of Roman thought and political activity. The most important in this context is the position she attributes to the Romans who she described as the 'most political people we have known' since they identified the being of being human with the formulation advanced in *The Human Condition*, '*inter homines esse*'; i.e. 'being between men'.¹⁴ What this deceive formulation underscores is the proposition that being is always relational. Moreover, claims that inscribe relationality at the center do not pertain to life as simply a lived event. Rather, claims of this nature concern those elements which, even if not actualized, are proper to life. Propriety moves therefore from the singular subject to the primacy of the relation; a relation that has both temporal and evaluative priority. The fact that it is possible to recover from the Roman world instances of the affirmation of the primacy of relationality underscores the impossibility of recourse to norms as though they had a singular quality to which reference might always be made. What in fact has to endure is an insistence on the primacy of contestation and conflict. The famous line from Horace's *Epistles* (1.XVIII: 85-6) stages this position:

*nam tua res agitur, paries cum proximus ardet,
et neglecta solent incendia sumere vires.*

(For it is your concern when the wall of your neighbour is burning
And neglected fires are accustomed to assuming great power.)¹⁵

The locution *tua res agitur* (generally, 'this thing concerns you') creates the setting in which relationality is both announced and then taken to be inescapable. It is clear from this example that conflicts concerning relationality could have had normative force. Were this conceded then in contrast to the link between the normative and (putative) ought claims, there would be the recognition of an attendant democratic impulse within those relations in which a dominating power delimited and defined the normative. A generalized and inclusive conception of being-concerned would have questioned the forms of policed segregation demanded by slavery.

In this context it is essential to note the formal description that Arendt gives to the 'space of appearance'. That space is the setting in which human being is able to live out that which is proper to it to it; i.e. live relationally. She writes that the

space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together
in the manner of speech and action, and therefore *predates* and

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14 See in addition, Connolly 2018

15 Horace 1926

precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized. (Emphasis added.)¹⁶

While the 'space of appearance' is the locus of relationality, her description contains another element. There is a temporal register of fundamental importance. Even though it may involve reading Arendt against herself, what has to be pursued centers on the conception of time implicit in the terms 'predates' and 'precedes'. The claim is that these terms point towards the other element that is often overlooked, or even resisted, in considerations of normativity which, if it were expressed negatively, would involve the non-pragmatic nature of the 'space of appearance'. (This should not be seen as denying, of course, that the 'space of appearance' also has pragmatic and thus a necessarily actual dimension as well.) What has to be taken up is the doubled nature of the 'space of appearance'. It has both a complex temporal as well as an ontological register. As a beginning therefore the question that has to be addressed, and the necessity here is not being adduced, it arises because of the language Arendt used, is how is the temporality of the terms 'predates' and 'precedes' to be understood? In relation to that question there is another, namely, what further ontological implications would that temporal configuration then have. In other words, what has to be addressed, in addition, concerns how the existence of that which 'predates' and 'precedes' any one particular is to be understood?

The first response ties the ontological and temporal questions together. It concerns how what Arendt designates as 'the space of appearance' can be both a particular with actuality and thus be an identifiable and describable state of affairs, as well as having that form of abstraction that cannot be ascribed particularity precisely because it 'predates' and 'precedes' any one – thus all – particular instances. The 'space of appearance' is not a self-identical particular in the precise sense that it cannot be made identical to the pragmatic instance. If that is the case then what can be concluded from the nature of this doubled presence is that the 'space of appearance' is characterized by a foundational irreducibility. It has a particularity that can always be dated and given an exact location and yet there is also that aspect of the particular that 'predates' and 'precedes' any one actualization as particular. This has a further important consequence. The argument is that this irreducibility marks the presence of a constitutive spacing between pragmatic instances of actualization and that which always and of necessity 'predates' and 'precedes' actualization is in fact the inscription of judgment's conditions of possibility; in sum, the claim is that the presence of this spacing forms (and provides) the basis of any

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¹⁶ Arendt 1958, p. 199.

one particular's capacity to be judged (thus its *judgeability*). While this point will be developed the argument is going to be that the sense of the *not-yet-conditioned* space of appearance that 'predates' and 'proceeds' is the 'space of appearance' as the unconditioned necessity integral to the definition of human being. Repeated here is the supposition that can be associated with Arendt namely, that, *to be is to appear*. Thus, the argument is going to be that restricting appearing is the diminution of being in the precise sense that it is a constraint on the actualization of what will be referred to as the *potentiality-to-be*.) In this context particulars, which are by definition conditioned, can be judged because of the immanent presence of the unconditioned as always coterminous with the conditioned or pragmatic instance. Both are present, present in their difference, and present at the same time. Judgment is possible, and only possible, if the object of judgment and that in terms of which judgment occurs are, or can be made, copresent. They are copresent in their difference. That difference is between the pragmatic and the immanent presence of the ground of judgment.

The second point to note follows on from the first. If the 'space of appearance' has this doubled designation, then not only is there the question of the status of the elements comprising it, what must also be addressed is how the relationship between them is understood. Taken overall the points noted above indicate that the precondition for thinking life, working with the recognition that life's insistent presence continues to create this need, necessitates recourse to judgment. Choosing life becomes the acknowledgement of the inescapability of judgment. At stake here, thus integral to thinking life, is that which grounds and thus allows for judgment. Again, even though detail is all, the results of this engagement with what is implicit in the 'space of appearance' can be presented in summary form. As has been suggested what is proper to the being of being human is the *potentiality-to-be* in place with others; in sum, to appear. Arendt does not refer to potentiality in this regard, nonetheless the identification of being and appearing is fundamental to her work. She argues in *The Life of the Mind*, for example, that,

in this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, Being and Appearing coincide.¹⁷

This coincidence needs to be supplemented. While it is not Arendt's argument, 'appearing', in the sense in which the term is used here, can be interpreted as the actualization of that potentiality. Its presence has a form of necessity when considered as a potentiality to be actualized. The distinction between the structure of potentiality and actualization at work in Seneca's conception of the 'happy life' is instructive. For Seneca

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¹⁷ Arendt, 1978, p. 19

the interplay of potentiality and actualization was defined in terms of forms of both delimitation and exclusion. As emerged, it was structured by the opposition between the citizen and slave on the one hand, and the implications of the distinction between *otio* and *vacando* on the other. Arendt's position is not delimited in advance in this way, namely by the restrictive and restricting presence of divisions that indicate the presence of founding disequilibria of power. Indeed, 'appearing', once taken as defining human propriety, has a universal presence. (Yielding, as a consequence, the already noted proposition: *To be is to appear.*) What the reference to the universal means is that there cannot be a case in which human being is not so defined. If to be is to appear then 'appearing' has the force of the unconditioned.

There is however another form of necessity that accompanies this set up. While 'appearing' is definitional and thus necessary to the being of being human, there is the necessity of a type of pause that is built into the position. Given that 'appearing' is present as a potentiality, then it is also going to be the case that any one actualization is necessarily contingent. The presence of the 'space of appearance' needs to be understood in the same way, i.e. as a necessary presupposition but only ever a contingent reality when it is a question of actualization. There is therefore a prevailing *contingency of actualization* that delimits actuality. Furthermore, once the being of being human is thought in terms of relationality and potentiality, it then follows, as has already been intimated, that what restricts appearance has to be understood as a diminution of being. In other words, to the extent that propriety is linked to potentiality then what counts as human being must be reconfigured. While the locus of being involves relationality, after all what is Arendtian 'plurality' other than a mode of relationality, human being needs, as a result, to be defined in terms set by the interplay of potentiality and actualization. Human being has to be recast in terms of a continual and prevailing *potentiality-to-be*. Actualization has always to be understood as necessitating the interplay of place – named by Arendt as the 'space of appearance' – and human plurality. Now that some of the ontological implication of the complex structure of human being have been sketched, and the hovering presence of the *potentiality-to-be* positioned between potentiality and actuality, it is now possible to return to a consideration of the more strictly temporal elements in Arendt's description of the 'space of appearance'.

What 'predates' and 'precedes' pragmatic instances have a complex status. Predating and preceding are still forms of presence. Moreover, it is that presence which is also part of the spacing that constitutes the possibility of judgment. What underscores this position is the supposition that when Arendt writes of the 'space of appearance' – and the same position holds in relation to the 'right to have rights' – she can be read as addressing not only that which has universal force

but equally that which is integral to human being. Human being is not however an inactive abstraction. Being is enacted. The point is that enacting is neither a singular nor one-dimensional activity. What is enacted is life; (in the end, forms of life). Human being is an activity. Hence the insistence on the formulation *potentiality-to-be*. As such it is possible to think of human being as life. (It is not by chance that Arendt wanted to call *The Human Condition*, *Vita Activa*.¹⁸) These are lives that are necessarily related to other-than-human lives. Here it is essential to be clear. Life cannot be equated with bodily presence. A philosophical concern with life has to reference the body however life cannot be reduced to bodily presence. Racism, for example, understood philosophically can be thought in terms of that reduction of life to the presence of body to be excluded. The excluded body is not bare. It has been injured and thus marked in advance by forms of exclusion. Injury is the exclusion of justice. The body – though there is never just the body since the racialized body is contrasted to bodies which, for the services of racism, are produced in order to be excluded – becomes the occasion for the denial of life (to those now racialized bodies). The history of racism continues to harm actual bodies. The recent emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement attests to the need both to note the history of violence to bodies and the continual attempt to normalize such violence through arguments that link normativity to the need for policing. Racial violence has involved and continues to involve the literal denial of physical life. Even in those occasions when the physical body remains unharmed, racism entails that life, in the sense that it is always already inscribed within processes of appearing, is still being denied. Injury still prevails. The clear consequence of claims of this nature is that the excluded body has to be understood in terms of a denial or refusal of the actualization of the potentiality to appear (knowing that appearing is always relational). What is at stake with racism etc., might best be thought of therefore as an ontological crime rather than simply an instance of the morally reprehensible. The clear intent of such a description is that it ties together the ethical and the ontological.¹⁹ Moreover, that intent is committed to the proposition that both the ethical and the ontological are necessary in order to give a biopolitical account of racism. For racism etc., to be combatted philosophically what has to be incorporated into any account are grounds of judgment. The contention here is what this is only possible if the ethical and the ontological are interconnected.

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¹⁸The German translation of *The Human Condition* is, of course, called *Vita Activa*. The 'space of appearance' is translated as '*Der Raum des Öffentlichen*'.

¹⁹ I have tried to present a sustained argument for this position in my Benjamin 2015

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In broader terms therefore the biopolitical is the continual interarticulation of the ontological and the ethical in which the body has to be located in order that actions in relation to it become loci of judgment. What is involved in the biopolitical thus construed is the relationship between *bios* with its twofold reference to both life and the body. The term *political* must also be allowed a form of complexity. The political alludes as much to politics as modes of organization having their own history, as it does to the *polis* which can be understood not just as the place of human being but the recognition that human being is always already placed.²⁰ Within the biopolitical it is essential to note that the two constitutive elements are not there as a simple opposition. One mediates the other. There is an ineliminable reciprocity. In regard to the political it should also be noted that the affirmation of original placedness – again this the position that inheres and structures the formulation *to be is to appear* – does not however demand the literal presence of the word *polis* or even a direct relation to the political (where the latter is understood as a set of programmed activities linked to governance). Indeed, as significantly it can be argued that within the Greek term *bios*, in certain important instances, a reference to the interconnection of place and life place can be found. Two examples, one from Dionysius of Halicarnassus and the other from Heraclitus will indicate firstly the placed nature of *bios* on the one hand and the non-necessity of the term *polis* in order to think the placedness of human being on the other.

In the *Antiquitates Romanae* of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, in a passage describing the plight of the Arcadians, Dionysius writes of them fleeing from a deluge. As a result of that disaster, they were dislocated. The consequence of that dislocation was not a momentary dispossession and subsequent dispersion but a relocation. Relocation as the recovery of place means that their movement could be imbued with a certain quality insofar as, to use Dionysius's formulation, they then 'established their place of dwelling on the island of Thrace' (ἐν δὲ τῇ Θρακίᾳ νήσω τοὺς βίους ἰδρύσαντο).²¹ Again, the actual language of the sentence is central. The use of *bios* with the verb ἰδρύω, should be noted insofar as what is being stated has a certain precision; namely, they settled in a specific place in order to live there. Thus, they settled in order to have a life. This is what *bios* means in this context. Earnest Cary's translation of the line as 'established their abode' is obviously accurate. However, it has to be understood as meaning that they established a place in which they were then to live. ἰδρύσαντο is translated as 'established'. Equally it can mean built. Herodotus writes using the same verb form to describe

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20 The most important initial work announcing the centrality of place for philosophical thinking is Malpas 2018. 8

21 Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1937, *Roman Antiquities*. 1.68.3

the building of a temple (*Histories* 4.149.2) *Bios*, in this context, has the sense of the interconnection of living and placedness. Indeed, here the use of *bios* entails that living and placedness must be thought together. If the argument were extended it would be to claim that there cannot be a conception of place that is not simultaneously one that is not the locale for a form (thus by extension 'forms') of life. *Bios* in this context names this precise condition. To be, is to be in place, thus to have a placed life. To be displaced therefore gives rise to a situation to be overcome. *Being-in-place* becomes integral then to a description of life. It is a formulation that while always having particularity - in both a positive and negative sense has unconditional force. (Negative is the sense that the Arcadians having been displaced may have remedied their condition by displacing others.) It is, of course, precisely this understanding of displacement that allows forms of settlement that displace to be judged. There are two possible interrelated elements; To settle, in the first instance, and then in the second, to be displaced because of the settlement of others. At work here therefore is what can be understood more generally as *differential modes of territorialization*. The presence of the differential must be understood however in relation to the centrality of *being-in-place* as an integral part of human being. *Being-in-place* as that which has unconditional force become the ground in relation to which these *differential modes of territorialization*, which includes settlement and displacement, can then be judged.

In Heraclitus there are a number of references to the city that link it to a sense of commonality. Implicit in Heraclitus, for example, is the recognition that commonality – perhaps even plurality - (which will emerge in the following as 'the people' (τὸν δῆμον)) has to be thought in relation to place and thus as underscoring the already present being-in-place of human being. However, as Heraclitus makes clear place brings the regulative with it, Fragment 44 reads as follows:

It is necessary that (χρή) the people (τὸν δῆμον) fight for its law (τοῦ νόμου) as they would defend the city walls (τείχεον).

Heraclitus's use of χρή ('it is necessary that' – an impersonal verbal form) indicates a defining position that will be true in all instances. In other words, the force of Fragment 44 is that it indicates the presence of 'wall' and 'law' has entailments that must have a form of universal validity. Furthermore, Heraclitus uses a specific term to refer to 'the people'. They are not present as a group, or amorphous crowd. The latter in Greek would be οἱ πολλοί. Here 'the people' (τὸν δῆμον) are citizens and residents, the people of a place. The Fragment becomes complex at this exact point. In the first instance what is being enacted is the claim that the 'people' are only ever present in terms of sense of original placedness that defines human being. At this point the complexity emerges. This description

of placedness as a defining quality is accurate. Nonetheless, it needs to be recognized that differentials of power are operative within the organization of actual places. In the ancient world that would be evidenced by, for example, the identification of separate and restricted slave quarters on the scale of both the house and the urban plan. Hence the actualization of placedness only ever occurs within differential modes of territorialization. The slave's displacement, the slave here as marking the dis-placed, entails both the possibility of the slave revolt as an undeniable part of Greek life (though equally Roman life), and that the presence of that possibility gives rise to the need for forms of policing. Indeed, Arnaoutoglou Ilias has argued that 'the main element fuelling suspicion and fear was the everyday close co-existence of slaves and citizens, at home and in the agora'.²² While there was the occupation of the same place, the housing of slaves involves fundamental differentiation from the housing of citizens.²³ There is a tension, therefore. On the one hand, there is the recognition of the general condition – i.e. being in place, occupying a place as intrinsic to human being, a space disclosed and maintained by the city wall. Here being on place is tied to the possibility of justice. There is, of course, the other possibility. The presence of slavery and ostracism means that this positioning is also precarious. Here being-in-place defines and allows for the possibility of injury (in-jury), i.e. the refusal of justice. The two exist at the same time. The city walls disclose the space in which the *potentiality-to-be* can be acted out. Equally, those walls include and exclude in ways that can, in certain defined instances, make that potentially necessarily unactualizable.

As has emerged the 'city walls' have a doubled quality. The 'wall' can be understood as naming the city as the place of commonality and therefore as affirming human being as *being-in-place*, whilst at the same time giving that sense of place material presence. The wall discloses the particularity of place and simultaneously underscoring the unconditioned nature of *being-in-place* as proper to the being of being human. The particularity of placedness understood in terms of differential modes of territorialization can be judged in relation to the unconditioned presence of *being-in-place*. There are other expressions of this position in the Greek world. Famously Thucydides, in rallying the Athenians at a moment of hardship wrote:

For men, (ἄνδρες) and not walls (οὐ τείχη) or ships which are empty of men (ἀνδρῶν κεναί), constitute a city (πόλις).²⁴

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22 Arnaoutoglou Ilias. 2007

23 A philosophical study of the architecture of slavery remains to be written. Valuable source material is provided in, Ault 2005; Joshel & Petersen 2015. See in particular Chapter 6. And, Ian Morris 2001

24 Thucydides, 1923 (VII. 77)

It is important to note here that both when Thucydides writes of the 'wall' and in the invocation of 'rigorous laws' (ἡ νόμων ἰσχύι) (III 45.7) as not standing in the way of 'human nature' it is clear that what are referenced are conditioned instances.²⁵ Leaving open as a consequence the interpretation of both the 'wall' and '*nomos*' in terms of the unconditioned and as providing both the conditions of possibility for human plurality and at the time constituting those instances as judgeable. For Thucydides the wall is that which discloses the space of human sociality; there cannot be one without the other.

The added significance of Fragment 44 is that 'wall' and 'law' (*nomos*) are presented together. In the context of the Fragment neither is given a determined content. What counts as the content of *nomos* remains open. The argument has to be that even if the content of any set of *nomoi* may differ, indeed differ radically, *nomos* designates what can be described as one of the necessary conditions of human sociality. Sociality depends upon *nomos*. This is what the Fragment is staging. The presence of *nomos* may be taken as normative. This is not however true for the content of any one *nomos* (*nomos* as the singular instance of *nomoi*) – i.e. the particularity of already determined and particular law, norm or convention – since content, even if it cannot be revised at a specific historical movement, is intrinsically revisable precisely because it can be judged. Indeed, within all actual political configurations, *nomoi* are potentiality subject to radical transformation. What is not subject to dispute is the presence of *nomos* itself. It defines human being by making human being possible. *Nomos* cannot be separated from the 'wall' in the precise sense that *being-in-place* and *nomos* are necessary conditions. Even though it can be argued that both 'place' and *nomos* might be actualized in terms of exclusions and separations (as occurs, for example, in any discussion of settlement), both of which would therefore stand against the unconditioned nature of appearing and place as the locale in which the *potentiality-to-be* is actualized. What cannot be eliminated is the conception appearing as that which 'predates' and 'precedes' any conditioned instance. There is a necessity. What this means, as has already been made clear, is that what cannot be eliminated are the conditions that allow for any one instance to be judged.

The position here is that *being-in-place* as the place of the *potentiality-to-be* are forms of abstraction that set the measure. Taken together they have an effective presence. Furthermore, having an unconditioned quality means, to recall the argument that has already been advanced, that *being-in-place* as the place of the *potentiality-to-be* has to hold in every instance. To be precise, what this means is that

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25 Thucydides 1920, (III 45.7. cf. 45.3): 'In a word it is impossible, and a mark of extreme simplicity, for anyone to imagine that when human nature is whole-heartedly bent on any undertaking it can be diverted from it by rigorous laws (ἡ νόμων ἰσχύι) or by any other error'.

there would not be a moment in which human being was actively present that could not be judged in terms of the anoriginal placedness of human being. (Namely placedness as always already present ontological condition.)²⁶ Again, it follows that central to its presence is that *being-in-place* functions as a ground of judgment. At every moment, or in every situation, it become possible to refer to the presence – and thus it would always have to be the immanent presence – of *being-in-place*. The reason why judgment is necessary – and it should always be remembered that judgment should not be conflated with description – is that differentiations within modalities of placedness always call on judgment. After all, what can always prevail as normalized are restrictions on appearance or the displacement of persons and peoples from pre-existing settlements or lands. In addition, what also continues is the refusal to acknowledge that already enacted displacements have a maintained presence. Furthermore, climatic and political disasters mean refugees pressing on borders and which then result in the construction of new and highly policed border conditions. (Thus, the issues causing and resulting in refugees remains unaddressed.) What can be added here is that there also the continuous creation of atmospheres that seek forms of inclusion and exclusion on the ground of either race or gender. The latter are continually reconfigured despite modes of material aestheticization that appear to resist them.²⁷ In general what is occurring is the refusal to allow for the actualization of the *potentiality-to-be*.

What can be concluded from these already present differentials of power occurring within and holding together the interrelationship between politics, bodies and place which is in sum the biopolitical, is that they are counterposed to *being-in-place* though only insofar as they are differential *modes of territorialization*. To be clear, the distinction is between, on the one hand, a generalizable state of affairs, namely the unconditioned nature of *being-in-place* as intrinsic to the definition of human being, and, on the other, the presence of specific instances of human placedness, where the latter are articulated within differentials of power. One important consequence of allowing for the presence of differentials of power as constitutive of modes of territorialization means is that these modes with their necessary connection to forms of life can be changed. In other words, it is only because judgment is ground in the unconditioned that the world then takes on the quality of that which can be changed. The world is changeable because other modes of territorialization are possible. This latter point needs to be understood as indicating that the world has inscribed within it – as a quality of the world – the possibility of its transformation.

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²⁶ On the 'anoriginal' see Andrew Benjamin 2017

²⁷ In this regard see Nathan Bell, 2020

There is an inevitable ambivalence within this set up. Its presence means holding to one side the necessity of identifying transformation with progress. After all, there is always the very real threat that the other direction in which the world's transformation might lead is towards the worst.²⁸ Noting the opening to the worst does not obviate the possibility – potentiality - that it is the world, in contrast to heaven, is the site, indeed the only real site, of justice. A justice that will always be to come, in the precise sense that the world must remain open to the continual possibility of justice's actualization. The capacity of the world to be transformed might be understood as the anti-Gnostic gesture *par excellence*.²⁹ The world's transformation is then the reorganization of life. The full force of the exhortation 'choose life', is its link to the future. The passage from *Deuteronomy* ends 'so that you and your children after you will live'. This position needs to be understood as claiming firstly that human being is relational across time as well as within any present, and secondly that futurity can be identified with the continual possibility for the actualization of the *potentiality-to-be*. Surpassed therefore is that insistent presentism that would define life in terms of the gratifications afforded by the now.³⁰ The 'now' is recast in terms of its openness to the future. That opening, again, is not just the choice of life, it is equally the recognition that life is anoriginally placed. The actualization of the *potentiality-to-be* depends upon place. Being cannot be thought other than in relation to *being-in-place*. As a result, the future – here the relational nature of human futurity, and thus the complex continuity of relations with the other-than-human - necessitates the future of place.³¹ Choosing life therefore necessitates the affirmation of the anoriginal placedness human being.

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²⁸ On the concept of the worst see its systematic discussion throughout Lawlor 2015.

²⁹ For a study of the endurance of forms of Gnosticism see Styfhals 2019.

³⁰ The most sustained critique of presentism can be found in Fritsch 2018

³¹ If the first prompt for this project is the work of Hannah Arendt, what emerges here is the other. Namely, the indispensable book of Jonas 1984

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Is Politics Possible Today?

Verónica Gago

Abstract: This text is an attempt to bring together some scattered notes to think about social reproduction as a general perspective and not as a set of sectors or tasks. This becomes possible based on understanding recent feminist struggles also as a challenge to their sectoral confinement and epistemic marginalization.

The perspective of social reproduction has been generalized in recent years thanks to a political comprehension of its centrality, similar to what happened in the 1970s. The pandemic was, in turn, the confirmation and an attempt to deny that centrality.

The political centrality that social reproduction has achieved, the re-emergence of this “idea-force,” is not only an academic debate, and even less a technical one: it refers to characteristics that contemporary feminist struggles have addressed and confronted, with the capacity to make the accurate diagnoses of forms of exploitation, domination, and violence of contemporary capitalism.

Keywords: Feminism – Social Reproduction – Strike – Neoliberalism

The question that brings us together in this dossier, “Is politics possible today?” already includes an answer folded within it. It starts from the suspicion that no. Its formulation once again calls into question the affirmation that there is always politics, in one form or another. The question does not speak of what politics, it just asks about politics in general, but that absence of an adjective is full of meaning. We understand it as transformative politics, revolutionary politics. Today, however, it is easier to accumulate arguments and find an empirical basis for that argument that no, there is no politics, or that politics has become impossible today. That is why concepts such as “capitalist realism” popularized by Mark Fisher (2009) are so effective, prolonging that famous phrase by Jameson from the 1990s that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Indeed, it is increasingly possible to better describe everything that capital *can do*, all the ways in which it *is able to appropriate* from what we do, how it even conquers moods, resources, and legitimacy. From this analytical lens, an arsenal emerges that ranges from deception to exhaustion, crossed by the complexity of contemporary impotence that Paolo Virno (2021) accounts for, as always, with exquisite precision. Nothing, I insist, seems to have more force of reality than that total reality of capital: which can be verified in the exhaustion of bodies, unlivable mandates of happiness in the midst of precarity, and the ironic skill in accounting for the inefficiency of everything that attempts to oppose the existing order. There seem to be no lack of arguments for so-called “militant depression” (to use Eric Fassin’s (2020) formulation), nor awareness of the long-held inconsistency of alternatives.

Undoubtedly, there is a saga of defeats that explain and tie together the preponderance of this type of analysis, as well as the attraction of these discourses. Those words would not take place, would not take on flesh, if there were not an experience of political defeat capable of hosting them, of endowing them with explanatory force. Are we still referring to the defeat of the 1970s, with its different variants around the world? Is that the temporal reference for those who make that analysis? Everything seems to indicate that yes, it is. Is that defeat – that, in Latin America, took place at the hands of state terrorism – projected onto other closer and smaller defeats? The introjection of defeat undoubtedly provides a type of lucidity, a way of qualifying words with history.

The term coined by Étienne Balibar (2019) on characterizing the current moment as “absolute capitalism” capable of combining instability and violence, manages to take to the extreme and, at the same time, place in tension, this triumph of capital that is shown to be on the brink of crisis and with increasingly predatory dynamics. Arguments about the ecological devastation wrought by contemporary capitalism multiply. As Jason Moore (2015) argues, based on a world-ecology perspective, that devastation is a condition of possibility for the extreme cheapening and devaluation of nature and labor as global imperial policy, capillarized – following Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen’s argument (2021) – as an “imperial mode of life.” That level of advance – toward the absolute, toward the complete destruction of the planet, seems to make the question about the limit, which would make capital finite, obsolete. Michael Lebowitz (2005) differentiates the barriers that capital installs to overcome in respect to the *limit*, following Marx’s argument: the only limit is the working class, he said. The lack of a limit would then be an indication that there is not a working class that would make finitude a principle. There is already a history to this argument: several “goodbyes” to the proletariat and diverse ways of analyzing the processes of “deproletarianization” as a key element of the neoliberal offensive.

Deproletarianization, however, can be thought of in two ways: the desalarization of large sectors of the population and the modification of the subjective attitude workers hold toward their activity, which no longer seen as simple subordination, but rather as the realization of a certain autonomy of the self. Here the problem arises of how capital has tried to translate, neutralize, and metabolize those active principles of insubordination and refusal practiced by the struggles of the 1970s. It is not only defeat, but, as Boltansky and Chiappello (2006) argue, assimilation.

I want to counterpoise recent feminist struggles as another place from which to *simultaneously* characterize contemporary capitalist violence and to uncover the deployment of a capacity for political action. I emphasize this double meaning: on the one hand, the astuteness of feminist struggles to become a majority without abandoning

minoritarian vectors and to establish a *limit* under new forms. On the other hand, re-establishing terms that put the notion of war in the center of political analysis and, from there, conceptualizing violence in a systemic way. Here I find two political novelties that are worth highlighting. In passing, I want to insist on the question of why, when it comes to asking about politics, the most recent feminist struggles are, in certain great leagues of thought, given a marginal character, as if they were only added to provide a note of color. The epistemic violence of this gesture is endless and is not sufficiently recognized in its dimension of laziness and deliberate ignorance.

To elaborate both arguments (about the capacity of political action and the characterization of violence), I would like to focus on elements of the feminist perspective that inquires into *social reproduction* and shifts that field to the center of analysis and political intervention. It is as if reproduction were a new form of Third Worldism, since it is linked to a reconceptualization of exploitation and it does so at the global level, while multiplying the notion of territory to which it refers. Undoubtedly, this is connected to what Maria Mies (1986) theorized as realities of “super-exploitation”: when capital not only appropriates surplus time and labor in respect to “necessary” labor (that is, surplus value), but also advances over the appropriation of the time and labor necessary for the production of subsistence. Threading together the forms of exploitation of “women, nature, and the colonies” in a simultaneous sequence, as the German theorist did, articulates the intersections of gender, race, imperialism, and class on which the systemic reproduction of capital depends. It posits other interpretative keys for thinking about the dynamics of proletarianization not recognized as such. But, above all, it reveals the strictly *political* character of its visibilization and valorization, as well as its decline in organizational dynamics.

I add, as a thesis, in the heat of today’s feminist struggles, that the conjunction of realities of popular economies on our continent, as ways of organizing the reproduction of the majorities outside of the forms of waged integration and in conditions of urgency, creates a new zone of convergence between the dynamics of precarious labor and the work of social reproduction. In this way, popular feminisms disputing remuneration and the gender mandates of social reproduction become mutually implicated with popular economies that render visible the conditions of unpaid work beyond the household. One can be read in light of the other and, at the same time, they put each other in tension. The conjunction of feminism with dynamics of the popular economy pushes toward a popular feminism and feminist dynamics related to the precarization and informalization of labor operate as an antidote, as an open struggle, against the reactionary forms in which the end of the “patriarchy of the wage” seems to be dealt with, including within subaltern spaces. This concretely expands the contents of social

reproduction, situating conflicts around housing, the neighborhood, and land as key, although not the only, axes of struggle. In this way, it replenishes the politicized and capacity of leadership that emerges from reproductive economies, as Angela Davis (1983) has indicated regarding the racialized genealogy of labor.

From these conjunctions, we can locate reproduction as a contentious field, even if the word itself seems to be the opposite of discontinuity and *novelty*. Immediate and social reproduction, as well as interdependence are also managed and that is where the dispute takes place. It is from here that debates about social reproduction from decades ago, especially those launched by the Wages for Housework Campaign in the 1970s, are revitalized and updated today (Federici and Arlen, 2018). Similarly, these debates displace thinking about reproduction fundamentally dedicated to capital, which, for a long time, was more discussed than the concept of social reproduction established by Marxist feminists as a perspective that was critical of the reproduction of capital. I will not go into a systematic outline of the debate here, but what I am interested in looking at is its current emergence as an effect of a particular state of forces.

It is notable that the feminist perspectives that, for some time, have placed reproduction in the center of the political question, have proposed it as a way to *re-enchant the world*. This is precisely Silvia Federici's formulation (2018): to re-enchant, she says, is to "discover logics and reasons distinct from those of capitalist development." As if changing the world would require, first, a politics of enchantment. I do not want to suggest a linear distribution of re-enchantment against the capitalist realism mentioned at the beginning. Rather, the maneuver is more complex: that feminist proposal of re-enchantment involves, in turn, the most precise readings of the contemporary forms of patriarchal-racist-capitalist violence. By this, I mean that is not a matter of posing reproduction as a sphere that is exempt from violence, or of the common as an uncontaminated space, but rather almost the opposite: it is there where predatory machines swarm that experiment with virulent extractive operations of capital because that is also where there are concrete politics of confrontation, of the demarcation of *limits*, and of new dynamics of organization of workers and of the forms in which exploitation is confronted when it is understood not only as tasks mediated by the wage.

It is on this plane where we can glimpse the constellations of reproductive fabrics, as Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2018) calls them, that capable of articulating struggles over resources and other affective, subjective, and organizational economies for the defense of what is considered essential for life. The notion of defense, in fact, can be thought of as a political declension of the word *limit* to capital that seems, time and again, to vanish. The notion of fabric elaborated by

the Mexican philosopher allows us to glimpse a generalizable concrete totalization capable of unfolding toward the entire tapestry of life, in which multilateral and vital links of connection develop. These fabrics are not exempt from disputes: there are constant attempts to drain their vital energies and resources to increase valorization by assembling them with forms of exploitation.

Now, where could that ethics, or better, that desire be lodged if it does not work in a subjectivity capable of being open to the possibility of having a concrete place of action, of orienting in a material and everyday sense that mundane and existential re-enchantment? Putting it another way: could we hypothesize that the terrain of reproduction is a preferred terrain for current forms of (new and old) proletarianization and that, not by chance, the dynamic of extraction and exploitation has been especially merciless with reproductive labor and the forms that are assimilated to it? Thus we concretely see the reorientations of neoliberal capital toward the reproductive, reinforcing its conservative alliance (see Melinda Cooper 2017). Formulas regarding an “extractive” type of capital, as the contemporary pattern of valorization, can be read in a similar light.

Then, how does the notion of social reproduction allow us to confront the idea of the *end of the working class* that leads to discourses of capital as *infinite*, ratifying its natural or divine presupposition? How does the notion of social reproduction allow us to *expand* the reading of labor under processes of informalization and, therefore, understand other logics of conflict with capital? Is it possible to locate an “absolute limit” (J. Fujita Hirose 2021) there?

These questions aim to maintain that politics is possible from a plane that has been—and continues being—characterized as non-political and, on the other hand, signal it as a plane that is majoritarian (it is impossible to escape reproduction), that has been minoritized in the sense of subalternized. Today feminist struggles that value social reproduction have made it possible to project those minoritarian vectors toward modes of re-comprehension of the general, connecting productive and reproductive circuits. Therefore it is also from there that we can think strategically about social reproduction as a laboratory of neoliberal, patriarchal, and colonial violence. Identifying social reproduction as a surface of dispute over value also allows for relaunching forms of unionism, union tools capable of incorporating, in organizational terms, other experiences of labor. It is the sequence of feminist strikes (2017-2022) that has served as a *dress rehearsal* for this process.

On Reproduction

Rosa Luxemburg (1951 [1913]), in a pioneering way, identified the expansionist issue of capital as its inherent and unstoppable tendency toward appropriation. Reading Luxemburg, the question arises again and

again of “how far?” What else can be absorbed and metabolized by that dynamic that raises barriers only to overcome them, to continue running forward? Her concern with reproduction is for the expanded reproduction of capital. Luxemburg starts with Quesnay, she continues with Smith and then Marx, to point to their gaps and think about “the specifically capitalist method of colonization.” Hence she uses the figure of an “incessant *ritornello*” to locate the logic of the accumulation process. In this way, she investigates capital as a global territorial assemblage whose characters do not only include capitalists and waged workers, but rather is precisely “expanded” based on non-capitalist territories and populations. In this way, the issue of the “expanded” reproduction of capital is directly linked with the problem of capitalist expansion, with its delimitation of what is produced as an “outside”, as Luxemburg noted. At the same time, the expansion of reproduction allows us to have a point of view from the outside, a way out of capital’s perspective and, simultaneously, a way of reading its imperial voracity. The notion of reproduction is at play in that ambivalence.

But, additionally, she opens up the question over how workers are produced as consumers, as a key issue for reproduction. Capital can by force, she says, appropriate the means of production and also force workers to become the object of capitalist exploitation. What it cannot do through violence is “force them to buy its commodities,” that is “it cannot force them to realize its surplus value” (353). We could say it as: it cannot force them to become consumers who realize the surplus value of those commodities that they have produced and that they must re-encounter in the market.

However, there are ways. Luxemburg provides historical examples: the destruction of the “formations of the natural economy” and, in particular, the dispossession of lands to put an end to the self-sufficiency of peasant economies, along with mortgage debts on farmers in the United State, and Dutch and British imperialist policy in South Africa against Black and Indigenous populations. These are concrete forms of political violence, tax pressure, and the introduction of cheap goods: a key trident for the *expansion* of reproduction from the point of view of capital, but also in the determination of the labor force, its needs and desires. A sort of moebius strip – to use a figure beautifully elaborated by Suely Rolnik to speak about the colonial unconscious – connects and at the same time allows for imagining discontinuities in those logics of reproduction, production, and consumption to the extent that the reproduction of capital supposes the reproduction of that which is not capital: life force, the very power of the body of labor.

Marx and Engels raised the problem of the reproduction of the working class to think about the very production of “free” workers. We can recall those paragraphs where Marx, for example, references the opiates with which women drugged children to be able to go to work or, later, the

impact of the introduction of children into factory working days. Silvia Federici has systematized the need to read Marx and take him beyond his blind spots regarding the exploitation that takes place in the sphere of reproduction (not only when women and children enter the factory). She critiques him for excluding reproductive labor in the process of value creation, limiting reproduction to the consumption of goods included in the wage. Or rather, within the notion of the reproduction of the working class, she argues, it seems that only the consumption of goods (those recognized as necessities) counts, but not the labor involved.

Without a doubt, that displacement of the very notion of reproduction toward social reproduction that allows for reading Marx beyond Marx is a political displacement. That concept has acquired a critical status thanks to the insistence of feminist struggles of the 1970s. Federici explains it clearly: “What made the discussion of social reproduction by wages for housework theorists and activists in the 1970s ‘revolutionary’ (in my view) was not the field that they examined, but what they discovered, which is the existence of a large area of exploitation until then unrecognised by all revolutionary theorists, Marxist and anarchist alike. It was discovering that unpaid labour is not extracted by the capitalist class only from the waged workday, but that it is also extracted from the workday of millions of unwaged house-workers as well as many other unpaid and un-free labourers. It was redefining the capitalist function of the wage as a creator of labour hierarchies, and an instrument serving to naturalise exploitative social relations and to delegate to wage-workers power over the unwaged. It was unmasking the socio-economic function of the creation of a fictional private sphere, and thereby re-politicising family life, sexuality, procreation” (2019).

Two forms of “expanded” reproduction converge to widen the perspective that only locates the reproduction of capital as a problem between waged workers and capital: the imperial dimension signaled by Luxemburg and the reproductive dimension systematized by Federici. In other words, we can *directly* read an international order in the conditions of social reproduction. The “smallest” aspect of daily life also responds to the structural. The fact that these two zones – the domestic and the global – are so strategically connected also brings us read the gender dimension (intertwined in social reproduction) and the colonial dimension (structural in the imperial mode) as key points that seem to have been temporarily sutured by the patriarchy of the wage and its national-state regimes. However, today, they can clearly be seen in a newly imbricated way.

In that sense, I want to hypothesize that the current cycle of feminist struggles contributes elements for the re-emergence of this “idea-force” of social reproduction, understood as a political concept: that is, it illuminates and signifies disputes lead by thousands and thousands of women and feminized bodies on that terrain. We can return

to Luxemburg because she provides extremely prescient clues on the function of credit and the dynamic of consumption in relation to the map of colonial expansionism. These two points – credit and colonization – must be emphasized as fundamental elements for the *expansion* of the reproduction of capital, on the one hand, but also to understand, in Federici's words, current attempts to "colonize social reproduction." Here, again, I think that contemporary feminist struggles, particularly through the politicization of public debt and households as devices of governance point to social reproduction as the place from which to make intelligible *and* to confront both financial exploitation (structural adjustment policies and usurious credit) and the domain of possible futures they involve.

It is fair to call this process *financial colonization* of social reproduction since it positions the most impoverished and precarious populations as the territory of conquest and makes the dependent on debt for their everyday economy. When the debt relation spills over toward below, the effects of the debt taken by states come cascading down. That is, the dispossession and privatizations that are preconditions of state indebtedness are translated into compulsory debt for subaltern sectors, that now access goods and services through the mediation of debt. This has the effect of modifying the relation between income and debt, as well as between debt and access to rights. The purpose is to turn life into an accumulation of debts: that which we pay for our countries and that which we pay personally.

A whole variation of the concept of reproduction thus opens up when it is not a matter of only thinking about it from the point of view of capital and the world split between workers and capitalists. It presents complex folds when we comprehend it from the present, in the heat of the massification of feminism, in popular and feminized economies on our continent: the proliferation of communal and neighborhood bonds, of organizational forms and cooperatives that assemble, in changing ways, with the dynamics of struggle, but also with popular entrepreneurship and initiatives that create infrastructure or maintain certain ancestral practices in new contexts. In turn, social reproduction exceeds the limits of the household, even of communities, to be able to be understood as the articulation of forms of doing, of obtaining incomes, of disputing recognition, and organizing the supply of essential services. This is also due to a fundamental feature of contemporary neoliberalism: the deepening of the crisis of social reproduction that it produces is cushioned by an increase in feminized labor, unpaid and subjected to the blackmail of family and individual responsabilization. The privatization of public services or the restriction of their scope means that those tasks (health care, feeding, child care, etc.) must be supplied by women, lesbians, travestis, and trans persons as unpaid or badly paid and obligatory work.

On Immanence

Similar to Luxemburg's displacement of the characters of workers and capitalists, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) propose another displacement in *Anti-Oedipus*: "As Marx observes, *in the beginning* capitalists are necessarily conscious of the opposition between capital and labor, and of the use of capital as a means of extorting surplus labor. But a perverted, bewitched world quickly comes into being, as capital increasingly plays the role of a recording surface that falls back on (se *rabat sur*) all of production" (11). How does capitalism itself – in the language of the French philosophers – propose itself as the quasi-cause of everything that exists? It is a matter of a specific mode: functioning as an "enchanted surface of inscription." Capital thus manages to convert its unproductiveness into productivity through modes of appropriation and exploitation, demonstrating a fundamental vector: velocity, embodied by money. Another vector, undoubtedly, is the violence capable of appropriating unpaid labor and of usurping territories.

Here the "axiomatic" question of capital as a logic of incorporation of everything that opposes it and rises up against it, as a permanent machine of translation and codification of struggles, seems, at times, to better explain the dynamics of neutralization than those of violence. Can immanence be non-capitalist? Zeynep Gambetti (2022), pointing out the weight that falls on this concept, distinguishes three aspects that come together in Deleuze and Guattari's work talking about immanence: (i) the self-perpetuating movement of capitalist accumulation processes, (ii) the most treacherous feature of micro-fascisms, and (iii) paradoxically, one of the conditions of resistance and revolution.

Is it possible to wrest control of the use of that term from capital and think about the terrain of social reproduction as an "enchanted surface of inscription"? It is a matter of enchantment in the sense proposed by Federici: that is, competing against the fetishist enchantment of capital (of its full, yet empty, body). Reproduction as an enchanted surface of inscription can be visualized, almost metaphorically, as the world's skin. It has a *general* character to the extent that it involves everyone because, precisely, the desire to live, the persistence of existence, is at stake in its *production*.

Judith Butler (2019) has recently read the *1844 Manuscripts* in this key to bring together arguments against only interpreting Marx in anthropocentric terms. Another way of reading Marx beyond Marx. Her question revolves around the concept of Nature as the "inorganic body" of the human body. The human body participates in and, at the same time, is differentiated from that inorganic body: nature becomes a means of human life. Butler writes, "when Marx then claims that 'Nature is the inorganic body of the human', he is claiming that only as inorganic can nature keep the human alive" (13). The human is not the other of Nature, but rather exists to the extent that it maintains "a continuous interchange

with nature” and, therefore, “no way of conceptualising life outside the framework of this interchange” (13). If there cannot be a human body without the body of nature, their interdependence becomes evident in a key that Butler emphasizes: in this text by Marx, human’s relation with nature is not that of pure domination of nature, but of an *extension* of it. Nature as an extensive body includes the human. The inorganic is an effect of a sort of perspectivism from the human body (because Nature, in itself, is organic): “it starts to become inorganic once it starts to sustain the human at which point it is the human life that is sustained and animated by nature” (14). But to the extent that the human is sustained by nature, it “becomes nature in a distinctly non-anthropocentric sense that was always a potentiality of its living version”. The conclusion is radical: there are not two natures nor two bodies, but rather “a perpetual oscillation of perspectives (organic/inorganic)” (14). There are not two separated substances but rather a variable relation between organic body and inorganic body that enable ways for life to persist. Why is this argument fundamental? Because the reproduction of life is inseparable from a fabric that is expressed as the permanent interchange between the living body and the body of an inorganic nature. An interchange that, Butler says, is constantly threatened or destroyed by the mode of economic and social organization. Her reasoning leaves us in the field of reproductive labor, in the possibility of the reproduction of life as a surface of inscription of an interchange of bodies.

The dispute with capital is a dispute on the very plane of immanence. If the immanence of capital is the logic of indefinite expansion and *simultaneously* that of its emptiness that is filled with acts of appropriation, we can rethink that surface of inscription in relation to reproduction, in which it would be another type of inscription, also of enchantment. I bring up these different theoretical perspectives to show how the concept of reproduction thus allows us to read: 1) a plane of immanence, 2) a potencia of generalization; and 3) a field of violences.

Going back to Violence

The dynamic of social reproduction as a terrain of unpaid, obligatory work associated with gender mandates becomes a prism for understanding the generalization of conditions of precarity and subalternization in which hierarchies of race, class, and gender intersect. More than a secondary or subsidiary form of exploitation, the forms of reproduction labor have become a direct terrain of super-exploitation.

In turn, it is in the practical negation of certain dynamics of reproduction linked to sex-gender mandates that opens the possibility of the de-domestication of reproductive labor (the de-domestication of the household), as well as of the reappropriation of public-common resources. We see it practically in how dynamics of care, work,

cleaning, and health care are organized in different territories, in the tapestry of networks distributing agro-ecological food, but also in the *accompaniment* of processes of denunciation, demands, and self-defense. These are not isolated experiences, they are made invisible because they invent and provide architectures, platforms, and infrastructure of goods and services in territories that have been dismantled.

Additionally, in many cases, they experiences are fundamental for the articulation of state resources, which cannot be made effective if they are not assembled with these prior dynamics. However, at the same time, they are financially exploited (Cavallero and Gago, 2019). But it is also on the terrain of reproduction where certain anti-extractive dynamics take place: both to demand to put a stop to the dispossession of territory and to detain the extraction of multiple forms of rent (household debt and real estate speculation, for example).

At the same time, levels of violence increase especially in areas of reproduction. If, at one time, a set of institutions had managed a certain degree of pacification (patriarchy of the wage, the maternal mandate, etc.), today, to the contrary, we can identify them as arenas of everyday war. I want to return to one of the threads that I posed above: I maintain that the notion of war has been placed in the center of political analysis again by the feminist perspective, enabling a characterization of contemporary violence in a way that is systematic without being demobilizing. It has also been posed again as an analytical lens for thinking about how it can be disarmed, to cease being in the middle of its repositioning as a binary device of symmetrical groups.

Much has been written about the ways in which neoliberalism has successfully been able to modulate subjectivities. After the defeats of the 1970s, the neoliberal triumph seems to have been based on the annulment of conflict, on the sparkle of consensus and agreement. Foucauldian notions such as biopolitics became key to explain this internalization of government of the self to adapt to the mandates of valorization. A first counterpoint emerged from Achille Mbembe's theorization of *necropolitics*, providing an account of how that biopolitical rule is not universal.

However, I want to propose that it has been the feminist thought of authors such as Silvia Federici, Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, and Rita Segato, who have brought back the interpretative key of war for thinking about contemporary violence. They have done so by conceptualizing a war against women and, from there, building a framework for analyze new types of war, thus also making it possible to read *other wars*. Reviving the term of war for talking about the "state of permanent warfare" against certain bodies and certain territories has allowed for popularizing Federici's thesis regarding the extent to which the devaluation of life and of labor driven by the phase of contemporary globalization shapes a neoliberal violence that has not been subsumed in devices of subjective

pacification nor is it only understood in the register of societies of control. The concept of “new forms of war,” capable of comprehending the violence against the body of women and dissident bodies and its connection with the economies of violence of illegal capital, as Segato proposes, renews the lexicon, as well as strategic thinking about a war that is no longer that of two clearly identifiable groups in a single arena of contention. Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar has characterized it in relation to the systematic repression against the fabrics of communitarian and communal reproduction and its analogy with cruelty toward women. In this sense, anti-extractivist struggles have identified wars of conquest of territories, displacements of populations, assassinations of leaders of conflicts, and connection of control of territories with the body of women, lesbians, travestis, and trans people. Accumulating the narrative in this way adds another dimension to the perspective of war (see Mina Navarro’s work among others).

With this I want to emphasize, that it has been the feminist debates, hosted and escalated in mass mobilizations, that have posed neoliberal violence as part of that conceptualization of war. Those debates consider gender-based violence as a structural key of an ongoing war, and an update of the variations that have occurred in the very dynamic of what we understand by war. Thus, as I have been investigating with Luci Cavallero (2020), the financial war that is unleashed under the capillarization of debt in households in order to manage impoverishment is articulated with the narco-world and its logics of territorial and patriarchal violence. The terrain of deployment of war is the same that appears as the space of re-enchantment: that of social reproduction.

This diagnosis of violence generates a line of demarcation of (*self-*) *defense*, a radical question about practices of justice. However, what I am especially interested in thinking about are the political forms of struggle that arise from identifying and disputing that violence. Recognizing that diagnosis of the forms of violence allows feminist struggles to mobilize an understanding of patriarchal-colonial-extractivist capitalism starting from everyday life. Uniting scales, weaving together dimensions, and, in this way, innovating in the articulation of minoritarian vectors with a becoming mass-scale. I mentioned this point at the beginning because it seems fundamental for understanding how feminist struggles have achieved a transborder massiveness, of multiple temporalities and spatialities – capable of intervening in the local, national, regional, and global conjuncture – and have also been able to become a component of other mobilizations, protests, and uprisings.

Thus we see that massiveness, on the one hand, is not homogeneous, at the same time as it has allowed for escaping from fragmentation. This is achieved by integrating a multiplicity of conflicts from practices and struggles that historically have been categorized as “minoritarian.” With this, the opposition between minoritarian and

majoritarian is displaced: the minoritarian takes on a mass scale as a vector of radicalization within a composition that does not stop expanding. But, at the same time, feminism becomes a vector of radicality within broader movements: today, for example, we see it in the popular and Indigenous revolts in different countries on our continent.

The feminisms of the South have carried out a sustained exercise of transversal alliances that were able to expand in practice both the strength of statements and the capacity for action. In fact, I think it can be argued that if we can see reactionary action somewhere it is in the decomposition of those alliances.

Contemporary fascism advances against alliances with politics of segmentation of identities, creating divisions among channels for resources and recognition in the midst of an economic crisis. The transnational capacity forged by a common understanding of what sexist violence means in articulation with labor, financial, and institutional violence, among others, is achieved in conjunction with slogans about precarity. In this way, there is a dynamic of connection between a class condition that is not restricted to national borders nor folded onto groups already recognized as workers. In recent years, the feminist movement has built a new type of internationalism, that overturns scales, scopes, and forms of coordination of a movement that expands without ceasing to be situated. An *internationalism* that projects the current feminist movement onto the masses, positing the attack against the social reproduction of certain bodies and territories as a fundamental key. An *internationalism* that becomes transnationalism because it is made up of alliances that do not strictly adhere to the borders of nation-state geometry, but also because they are dissidents in respect to the frames of an abstract notion of class (in which it is supposed that there are shared objective interests) or of the people (in which it supposed that there is a homogeneous amalgam of national affection).

That internationalism enables a movement that is both unitary and plural: capable of finding, for moments, common vectors of meaning, effectively bringing together the movement's action and, at the same time, understanding that this terrain on which we fight consists of the multiplication of dissimilar situations, of diverse landings. In any case the *slogans that make movement* (here I am reformulating the idea of the Chilean feminist Julieta Kirkwood (2022) who speaks of questions that made a movement) is a decisive point. Slogans have a spatial and temporal validity, but their force lies precisely in connecting bodies and statements. When we read slogans that make sense across borders, they indicate dates (in which those words express a moment) and bring together theses that organize a way of understanding what happens and even orienting it. This has happened with "Ni Una Menos," "Nos queremos vivas," "El violador eres tu," "No son 30 pesos, son 30 años," "Tocan a una, tocan a todas", "EleNao," as well as with the popularization

of slogans such as “It’s not love. It’s unpaid work.” In all of them we find a set of unique elements that express very specific conjunctures that, at the same time, are able to be almost immediately translated into others. They express, without a doubt, incorporeal transformations that are translated into ways of experiencing violence, self-defense, insecurity, collective force, the dispute over everything that makes up the perseverance of living in increasingly urgent contexts. These slogans imply transformations in bodies, they materialize thresholds in links, they propose a collective horizon. And they do not lose their relationship with that common plane of the reproduction of life.

By Way of Conclusion

This text is an attempt to bring together some scattered notes to think about social reproduction as a general perspective and not as a set of sectors or tasks. This becomes possible based on understanding recent feminist struggles also as a challenge to their sectoral confinement and epistemic marginalization.

The feminist strike provides us with a specific point of view about social reproduction. What does that mean? That the feminist strike functions as a practical experience but also as an analytical lens to produce understanding and political valorization of reproductive labor. As in the 1970s the Wages for Housework campaign enabled a novel political capacity to point out the existence of a large area of non recognized exploitation, just as the Third World struggles made visible whole areas of unpaid labour and un-free laboring populations, I believe that the current feminist movement succeeds in showing the scale of neoliberal precarisation in terms of the crisis of social reproduction, while also embodying the political commitment to confront it. And, it is not a coincidence that this movement emerged from the global South.

The perspective of social reproduction has been *generalized* in recent years thanks to a political comprehension of its centrality, similar to what happened in the 1970s. The pandemic was, in turn, the confirmation and an attempt to deny that centrality (Malo, 2021; d’Alisa, 2022).

The activities of social reproduction, exacerbated in the pandemic moment as a state of global alarm, endow feminist struggles an inevitably present dimension, as a strategic plane of confrontation with capital. It is what is necessary here and now to sustain life, to guarantee the everyday flow of doing. In that sense, they provide a concrete dimension of action that does not delegate the possibility of change to the future. To be able to take these questions seriously, it is once and again necessary to dismantle the perception that *feminist and antiracist politicization* is a sectoral and minoritarian politics. I will also add that is on the plane of reproduction where battles over property take place, particularly

to discuss, as feminist struggles in Latin America have indicated, ownership of the means of reproduction.

The concrete struggle for common and public use of goods and services and the super-exploitation of labor that social reproduction requires today have rendered reproduction visible as a strategic sphere over which capital's systematic dispossession takes place. It is also social reproduction that allows for reading a dynamic of neoliberalism that no longer only adjusts to the logics of entrepreneurship of the self and its subjective modulation in adaptive terms, but rather new tendencies of direct violence, formulating logics of war in specific territories. And it is the feminist movement that has been denouncing these new logics of war.

Capital – and the offensive led by finance and employers – has used the global pandemic to reconfigure forms of labor, modes of consumption, the parameters of income, and sex-gender relations. With this text I sought to bring together some elements for a hypothesis that we have been developing collectively: that we are facing a restructuring of class relations, which takes the sphere of social reproduction as its main stage. This includes households but also reproductive work that is carried out beyond the walls of the house, in impoverished and financialized territories, self-managed economies that, at the same time, demand public resources and seek to sustain infrastructure of care and support against precarity.

The political centrality that social reproduction has achieved, the re-emergence of this “idea-force,” is not only an academic debate, and even less a technical one: it refers to characteristics that contemporary feminist struggles have addressed and confronted, with the capacity to make the accurate diagnoses of forms of exploitation, domination, and violence of contemporary capitalism.

Translated by Liz Mason-Deese

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Politics Today: 'Only a Suffering God' Can Help Us

Saroj Giri

Abstract: A world without racism, sexism, ethnic nationalism or other particularisms; completely nonbinary, multicultural and miscegenated. This might be the world we are supposed to all aspire for. But what if such futuristic freedoms are only the proverbial good intentions that pave the road to hell, an irreversible hurtling into the “time of the end”, little distractions from what is a wholesale ransom. Against such a future which somehow never ceases to hold out a painfully bedraggled promise, we must then be able to pose the question: How can we make sure that the future will not hold a promise? Why does it seem almost impossible to annul the future that is given and actively produced today? It might be time then to move towards inverting the Apocalypse and posit a “suffering God” in order to kill all Gods that produce the future today. We therefore propose a politics of the now-time, following the insights of Walter Benjamin. The ongoing Bhima Koregaon affair in India might provide us a glimpse of what such a politics might look like.

Keywords: Futurism, fascism, theology, Walter Benjamin, Agamben, Badiou

Politics is a flitting possibility.

It is as flitting as Benjamin's conception of the image of the past.

“The past”, he says in the Theses on the Philosophy of History,

can be seized only as an image (bild) which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. [. . .] For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.¹

It is possible then that the image of the past is not recognized by the present and is irretrievably lost – “never seen again”. Benjamin also suggests that “the truth might run away from us”. He is countering the historicist's claim that “the truth will not run away from us”, and, adding with tremendous clarity, “that is the exact point where historical materialism cuts through historicism”.² Benjamin here seems to be emphasizing on contingency: the image which flashes up, giving you a chance, and yet might disappear never to be seen again.

Should we then say that Benjamin is doing an internal critique of historical materialism by emphasizing on contingency and multiplicity -- against, say, the “determinism” and the certainties propounded by a

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¹ Benjamin 1968, p. 255.

² Ibid., 255.

particular kind of Marxism, and upholding freedom and an open-ended future?

Mind you Benjamin wrote this in 1940, escaping the deathly fangs of Nazism. He died shortly thereafter. Perhaps sensing that he was running short of time, Benjamin made sure to clearly put out his most heartfelt feelings about the political situation of the time. He is not just writing against fascism, but also critiquing what went on in the name of anti-fascism, as with, say, the Social Democracy of his time. That is why he is at pains to properly delineate historical materialism: “the exact point” which distinguishes it from historicism and social democracy. So he cannot just be pitting the supposed determinism and repressive character of fascism against the contingency and freedom proposed by the anti-fascists and progressives. Widening the perspective a little bit, we can say that he is not following the logic of the “thesis of totalitarianism” which clubs communism and fascism together since both are supposed to be dictatorships as against a (capitalist) democracy. But he is showing the shared presupposition of fascism and liberal capitalism, fascism and social democracy --- that both are invested in the futuristic-accelerationist model following from the very logic of capital.

Where historical materialism diverges from this futuristic-accelerationism, where it sharply “cuts” through this historicism, is then of great significance. He is challenging the historicist notion of a future which works by positing a past as a presupposition — this is of course what allows the historicist to claim that “future will not run away from us” since, well..., it produces and posits its own past. The past oozes out from the future – dystopic and grotesque! The “Future” is deterministic, lacking contingency, in the sense that it produces its own ersatz past, a past which is a derivative of an axiomatic future. In a deeper sense, then, Benjamin is critiquing the notion of the supposed open-endedness and contingency of the future, the future as the repository of freedom, as compared to the past which is supposedly already “done”, “finished”, fixed, the idea that the past is the past and we cannot do anything about it.

Benjamin is in fact doing something which might put off the votaries of “progressive politics”, in the 1940s and today. He is rejecting the supposed expansive “contingency” of futuristic freedoms, and embracing what many would think is a “regression” to the past. The “past” is today mostly invoked by the right-wing populists, isn’t it? And to add to it, Benjamin is not really calling for hastening the dialectic, speeding it up, if such a thing can be imagined, the forward march of history and so on. Rather, as we find in his notes published as part of The Arcades Project, he is really focused on the idea of “dialectics at a standstill”.³

Radicals love to quote Benjamin that, “every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism”. Now we have a better sense

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³ Benjamin 1999, p. 912.

of what is the barbarism he is referring to precisely: futuristic freedoms? Surely, I think of the barbaric destruction of Aztec civilization and the Indian civilization by Western colonialism and imperialism. Or of the ongoing destruction of indigenous (adivasi) communities in India due to rapacious mining corporations, and so on. Surely, such is barbarism. But when you grasp this barbarism in terms of its basic inner logic, which includes an embellishing guise, “the Eden of the innate rights of man” Marx describes in *Capital*, one can see that many in the camp of progressive politics have been ensnared by this document of civilization. And that is precisely Benjamin’s thrust in the Theses.

If Social Democracy carried some of the same basic presuppositions of fascism at the time, then today when we talk about the “threat of fascism”, do we not want to ask: Who or what is the equivalent of Social Democracy today? What is antifa and what are its presuppositions? Where is the “cut” of historical materialism today? This essay is about following up the pointers Benjamin provided that would help in answering such questions for our present time. Then perhaps we need to challenge the framework today of progressive politics vs. right-wing populism, of democracy vs. autocracy suggested by those like Timothy Snyder in the wake of the ascendancy of Donald Trump to political power⁴ What if today fascism appears dressed as anti-racist, non-binary and multicultural?

The services of theology

In this light, the politics of the now-time I propose here seeks to speak from within the image (bild) Benjamin proposes. It is located in the present, one into which the past gushes in torrents, in leaps and bounds --- away from the notion of the present in linear continuous time, something you can mark and locate in the calendar. Here you have what Benjamin would call a monadic constellation, pregnant with tensions — one where “dialectics is at a standstill”. The future which inevitably enters here is not the axiomatic future which treats the past as a retroactive presupposition, but one which is more like the activity of the “weak messianic power”. It has to be necessarily “weak”, the fertile revolutionary moment of “dialectics at a standstill”.

From the vantage point of the politics of the now-time, we have to ask: Does our present recognize itself as intended in the image of the past? Does it come close to a realization that “our coming was expected on earth”, that “there is a secret agreement between the past generations and the present one”?⁵

.....
⁴ See for example, his 2017 book providing a “how to” guide for resisting tyranny (Snyder 2017).

⁵ Benjamin 1968, p. 254.

Such a moment would no doubt be rare, not least because what Benjamin calls “the services of theology” are not enlisted by historical materialism, indeed actively disavowed. To identify and foreground theology as providing its “services” might be the way for historical materialism (some might say, the way of), if we listen to Benjamin carefully. Such a practice of historical materialism however seems quite elusive. Many critics have pointed this out. We can think of Cedric J. Robinson’s *Black Marxism* which critiques Marxism as having overlooked the question of religion and faith. Marx, it is argued, is more in dialogue with Antiquity than the medieval radical tradition:

By evacuating radical medieval philosophy from socialism’s genealogy, Marx privileged his own ideological rules of discursive formation, providing a rationale for distinguishing the scientific socialism concomitant with the appearance of capitalist society from the lesser (“utopian”) and necessarily inadequate articulation of socialism which occurred earlier....⁶

We are alerted to the significance of medieval theological resistance to the emergence of the first seeds of capitalist property and legal paraphernalia. One can also note Cornel West’s attempt to relate black theology with Marxist thought, or for that matter the very important exchange between Ali Shariati and Frantz Fanon on the relation of Islamic egalitarianism and Marxism in the context of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

One comes very close to detecting a strong but largely disavowed theological element in Foucault’s infamous “political mistake” in his praise of the Iranian regime in the 1970s. The “Muslim” style of politics signalled for him a new form of “political spirituality” not just for the Middle East, but also for Europe.⁷ Feminists like Maxine Robinson and Simone de Beauvoir sharply criticise Foucault for his “faux pas” in overlooking the gender dimension of religious authoritarianism. Critics point to a related “faux pas” in Baudrillard’s invocation of the theocratic singularity of 9/11 terror attacks as an understandable response to “power (which) has been so formidably consolidated by the technocratic machine and one-dimensional thought”. We read:

All those singularities (species, individuals, cultures), which have paid with their deaths for the establishment of a global system of commerce ruled by a single power, avenge themselves by transferring the situation to terrorism.⁸

.....
⁶ Robinson 2001, p. 115.

⁷ Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 3.

⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 170.

In both Foucault and Baudrillard, we notice a tacit and surreptitious conflation between the theological or religious and the non-Western societies supposed to be traditional and anti-modern. This radical valorisation of the non-West as some kind of a basis for counter-power might please postcolonial theorists but in fact involves a very naive and illicit conflation.

Then at the level of what in the Indian subcontinent is called the “vernacular”, or the popular community, we find the criss-crossing of Marxist/communist practice with lived religious practices. What is crucial is the rejection of the high literary traditions within both Marxism and religion, and the turn towards say a lived tradition of Islamic Sufi mysticism as we find in large parts of India and Pakistan.⁹

With Benjamin though it is not about interrelating theology and Marxism, or religion and materialism as such — which can seem ideologically motivated, doctrinaire and deeply unfulfilling, the work of a Marxist academic seeking theoretical nirvana! He takes us directly to the theatre of the world, with an infectious messianic urgency in the midst of the dynamic flow of social, political forces and other intensive materialities. The services of theology can appear as the service of historical materialism to itself, or of theology servicing itself towards the ends of historical materialism. It might not be out of place to remind ourselves of Frederick Engels's engagement with the Peasant War in Germany as also Ernst Bloch's highly original work on Thomas Müntzer. Perhaps more than Engels, Bloch seemed quite keen to open up historical materialism to the services of theology.¹⁰

Moment of danger: Bhima Koregaon

So, from Benjamin's perspective we must ask: What if we are already living in a period where the services of theology abound and it is just that we are unable to see it?

Benjamin says, the past can be seized only as an image (bild) — which means that the present relates to the past not just in a temporal, continuous sense, but where “the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical, in leaps and bounds”.¹¹ So we want to know if there are certain conditions or situation that could generate such a dialectical relation

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9 Raza 2022.

10 Alberto Toscano highlights Bloch's rather expansive perspective on theology or religion, a point of difference with Lukacs or even Engels. “Bloch does not see the theological impetus of the ‘revolution of the common man’ of 1525 as the mere index of socio-economic immaturity... Rather than accepting the disjunction between (premature) political content and (sterile) religious form, Bloch finds in Müntzer the paradoxical union of theology and revolution, without the one serving as an instrument for the other (Wu Ming 2010, pp. xv-xvi)

11 Quoted in Agamben 2005, p. 141.

between the past and the present, generating the time-of-the-now, or now-time (jetztzeit). Benjamin seems to suggest that such conditions can be traced to “a moment of danger” in the present. To recall the past is not to recall the past as it really happened, “the way it really was”. Rather,

“it means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger.”¹²

I am not sure we have clear directions from Benjamin about what he means by “a moment of danger”. Yet some of the happenings recently in India reminded me of such a moment. I had written:

Here in the midst of the struggle, in 2021, in a moment of danger, the 1818 Battle of Koregaon flashes up in the consciousness of the “lower castes”: it is not the battle, “the way it really was”, what actually happened, but as it seizes hold of our memory in the present”.¹³

So, there is the Battle of Koregaon which took place in 1818 in Western India, where “lower caste” Mahar soldiers defeated the “upper caste” Brahmin rulers. And then there is the Bhima Koregaon Conspiracy Case which refers to the arrest of left-wing activists and intellectuals starting from June 2018.¹⁴ The arrests were carried out under draconian extraordinary laws, through an exercise of what can be called the sovereign exception. Here was a moment of danger which seemed to slowly assume the shape of a monadic compression of the present and the past, what in Benjamin is called the time of the now, or now-time (jetztzeit).

In this politics of the now-time, “caste” is extricated from being another register in the bad infinity of marginalities like race, class, gender, or queer as, for example, in so-called intersectional theory, but is now an index of “a secret agreement between past generations and the present one”. The “lower caste”, it can be said, is the depository of historical knowledge such that the class struggle, inflected by caste, will now be “nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren”.¹⁵

Against the futurism of a class struggle too focused on the image of liberated grandchildren, we have here a politics generated by “dialectics

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¹² Benjamin 1968, p. 255.

¹³ Giri 2021, p. 25.

¹⁴ Giri 2022.

¹⁵ Benjamin 1968, p. 260.

at a standstill", the point where historical materialism draws on the powers of theology. No doubt, the futuristic document of the Indian Constitution is being mobilised in the legal battle to defend the "rights" and "liberties" of those arrested. No doubt, the arrests are playing out as a media spectacle on prime-time TV channels, the "breaking news" of a Hindu nationalist state dismantling the "conspiracy against the nation" by anti-national "urban Naxals". It is also a major talking point in the hypermediated 'culture war' infested by right-wing populists and radical left wokes.

And yet the past is being called to presence from within the bosom of these techno-legal abstractions — this calling into presence of the past ensures a break with the "left progressive" stance of "fighting authoritarianism" through a debilitating dependence on the futuristic juridico-political apparatus tied to capital. Is this not a radical rupture within and against "left progressive" politics?"

So let us provisionally state: Politics is possible through a capture of the "now-time" which simultaneously breaks with the futuristic abstraction of the law and the economy — where the sovereign exception is no longer disavowed but has exposed itself as the basis of normal democracy: as Carl Schmitt would say, it must be reckoned to be not a "degenerate decision" but a "genuine" one.¹⁶

In our case here, the capture of the now-time takes place through a commemoration — or rather an event of commemoration. The 1818 victory is commemorated every year in Koregaon as a festival and popular event of "lower caste" masses. The arrests and use of extra-judicial violence had taken place in the aftermath of the commemorative events of 31 Dec 2017 and 1 Jan 2018.¹⁷

Given the extra-ordinary circumstances due to the use of sovereign violence by the state and dominant powers, the commemoration in the name of Bhima Koregaon now becomes the site of a wider interrelationship between the past, present and the future. Commemoration is now no longer about human beings "who take inventories of their past as of lifeless merchandise".¹⁸ Instead,

.....
16 For Schmitt sovereignty involves a genuine decision and not a degenerate one. He critiques those who emphasize on "merely a degenerate decision, blind to the law, clinging to the 'normative power of the factual' and not to a genuine decision." Schmitt 2006, p. 3.

17 Interestingly the "lower caste" Mahar soldiers fought and achieved their victory in 1818 as part of the British colonial army against the "upper caste" Indian rulers. This complicates the usual narrative of anti-colonial struggle since here is a progressive victory for the oppressed which is part of what was also a victory for a colonial power. So this commemoration becomes controversial. It is opposed by India's elites, and the anti-colonial left too is uncomfortable with it. One section of the revolutionary left however went ahead with participating in it. But since the right-wing authoritarian government started carrying out arrests around it starting 2018, Bhima Koregaon has now become a rallying point for much larger sections of the left.

18 Benjamin quoted in Jameson 1974, p. 73.

commemoration now brings back the fullness of the past, in the present, where the flow of thought is arrested into a monad, putting “dialectics at a standstill”. Commemoration seems to herald the “messianic cessation of happening”, a cessation pregnant with tension, as though the dialectical flow has taken a deep breath — rather, like an animal which gathers himself before lunging.¹⁹

Death as an externality

The discourse of life, liberty and rights as enshrined in the Indian constitution is being deployed by lawyers in order to defend the arrested activists against the state’s prosecution. And yet given the particular relationship with the past and to historical oppression, Bhima Koregaon simultaneously prescribes the politics of the now-time, no longer homologous to late capitalism’s cult of life and liberties, to what Foucault would call the sovereign’s power of fostering life rather than deciding on life and death. The power which works by giving life can no longer keep the movement enchanted and thereby limited within its scope of futuristic freedoms. In consonance with Wendy Brown’s thesis on the “states of injury” and “wounded attachments” we now find that the jailed activists in the conspiracy case (for example Stan Swamy) define a political subjectivity outside of such “states of injury” and outside of the law and the constitution.²⁰ One is reminded here of the subject-position of Bobby Seale (who was not represented by a lawyer) of the Black Panther Party not just vis-a-vis the racist state, but also with respect to the other activists (who were represented by lawyers) called the Chicago Seven during the 1969 trial. With Seale, the state of exception or sovereign violence can no longer be counterposed to the normal functioning of the rule of law — rather we have to confront the non-law or the legalisation of violence, what Benjamin would have called mythic violence.

The positioning outside of the “states of injury”, outside of the subjectivity enunciated by the violence-preserving law and the liberties it offers, opens new possibilities. There is now a possibility of veering towards a trope where now life will not converge with the sovereign power and its life-giving glory to be venerated by all. Instead, it will now be replenished by the power of death, the power of what Badiou would call “death as an externality”.²¹ Now life is not about immanently carrying the possibility of death, but of a sharp separation from death — where death is what instils life in life, death as an externalised force. We will come to it below.

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¹⁹ Quoted from 1 Corinthians 7, in Agamben 2005, p. 68.

²⁰ Wendy Brown 1995.

²¹ Badiou 2015.

The subjective self-destitution of the “lawless rebel” (arrested activists were suspected to be lawless “urban Naxals”) and the “civil society activist’s” willingness to break with the mould of life and liberty, the willingness to exit what Marx called “the Eden of innate rights of man”, means that now one breaks with late capitalism’s boldest moves on preserving life, the cult of life.

Now “mythic violence” is directly counter-posed to “divine violence”.²²

Radical as such a subjectivity involving self-destitution or divine violence might sound, it does not in itself ensure the break with the futurism of capital, the futurism of progressive politics, or the futurism of fascism. This is where the relationship with the past, the fullness of the past in the moment of redemption, enters the picture. Now we know: the relationship with death as an externality must be seen as cohering with the citability of the past in all its fullness involving the rejection of the futurism of the law and capital.

This is where the weak messianic power enters history. Agamben explains it in terms of the passing of the figure of this world, not really another figure or another world.²³ Highlighting the Pauline *hos me* (“as not”), he gives the instance of “weeping as not weeping”. He explains: “The weeping is pushing toward the weeping, the rejoicing toward the rejoicing”; “it revokes the factual condition and undermines it without altering its form”.

What is involved is a kind of a fertile immobility, “the immobile anaphoric gesture of the messianic calling”. And again: “the vocation calls the vocation itself, as though it were an urgency that works it from within and hollows it out, nullifying it in the very gesture of maintaining and dwelling in it. This and nothing less than this, is what it means to have a vocation, what it means to live in messianic *klesis*”.²⁴

For us, though, Bhima Koregaon is both the “immobile anaphoric gesture” of the weak messianic power as well as the subjective volition of divine violence. Such would be the politics of the now-time, in consonance with a historical materialism buoyant with the services of theology.

Socio-historico-mythical unconscious

Let us now draw the wider theoretical determinations of such a politics of the now-time.

Consider the following alarming statement from Agamben:

.....
²² Of course, we are referring to Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence”.

²³ Agamben 2005, p. 25.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

Today humankind is disappearing, like a face drawn in the sand and washed away by the waves. But what is taking its place no longer has a world; it is merely a bare and muted life without history, at the mercy of the computations of power and science.²⁵

Agamben points to the destruction of humanity and history — in fact, of sociality itself. Such a destruction of history and sociality is also what one associates with the rise of the neo-feudalism of tech-capitalism or what Edward Snowden calls the crypto-fascism of the Central Bank Digital Currencies.²⁶ Some would go further, as would Agamben, and point to the pandemic lockdown and vaccination as the work of a totalising power imposing an intensive colonisation of human life.

Recall Žižek's rather optimistic and upbeat take on Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity is Near*.²⁷ He would say that while the AI-based Singularity might take over everything yet the minimal human subjectivity will persist, cannot be erased:

“Everything will be taken of me, or from me, including my dreams. But I will not be dead. I will maintain a minimum pure distance. This will be the preserve of new freedoms”.²⁸

Looks like Agamben does not see much of a possibility of this “minimal pure distance”, such an “outside”. Indeed, he overlooks one crucial dimension. While he is right that capital undoubtedly is parasitic on the destruction of the social and the historical, he forgets that it also mobilises these registers in the historical struggle between capital and labour. It would be wrong to assume that this historic struggle is over or that capital is able to fully detach its requirement of labour-power from all forms of human sociality and history. There is a tendency in capital to always disavow its necessary mobilisation of (and hence the attachment to) the social and historical dimensions, as also of the mythical. This needs unpacking. Otherwise, we might end up replicating the accelerationist-futurist paradigm of capital and the techno-legal apparatus, precisely, “the computations of power and science” which Agamben wants to critique. “The bare and muted life without history” might not yet be already all that “mute” and is perhaps still marked by an interplay of both life and history.

²⁵ Agamben, 2020.

²⁶ A perversion of cryptocurrency, writes Snowden, “central bank digital currencies will ransom our future” (Snowden 2021).

²⁷ Žižek 2020.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 762.

Politics of the now-time must therefore expose the hidden assumptions of the accelerationist-futurist paradigm, something like its socio-historico-mythical unconscious. We must expose the social and mythical relations that are the crucial support to the capturing machine. (Foucault and Baudrillard's flaw above is to view the two registers in complete isolation and not in their mutual interpenetration, portraying the "technocratic machine" as a pure codified abstraction without a dialectical "outside".) We will see below that postcolonial immigrant's relation with capital carries the weight of the world, the plenitude of the past, sociality and history. This much we already knew: that multiculturalism is the vehicle through which capital sought to engage with the culture and the dense notion of the social which the migrant carried with them into the metropolitan countries. We must carry this insight forward and beyond its intended thrust.

Futurism and fascism

But first let us start here by highlighting the integral connection between fascism and futurism which today's left progressive politics seem to have completely forgotten — partly because they are too engrossed in focusing on fascism's relationship with political authoritarianism at a very facile level of electoral democratic wins and losses.

A good place to start from is perhaps the insights of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who suffered incarceration at the hands of the Nazis in Germany. Writing from prison in fascist Germany in 1944 Bonhoeffer famously proposed that "only a suffering God can help" us now.²⁹ God is suffering. God also must be suffering. God is not available for transfiguration, for putting a veneer over this world. With the human world all shattered, living an infernal hell under Nazism, it cannot be that God is left unscathed.

Is Bonhoeffer taking away the last hope of God and the Almighty who can save? For one might end up imagining that "a suffering God" would mean that there is nothing to look forward to, particularly after the Holocaust. That there is no hope. Poetry and singing are no longer possible after Auschwitz.

Bonhoeffer further writes:

"For most people not to plan for the future means to live irresponsibly and frivolously, to live just for the moment, while some few continue to dream of better times to come. But we cannot take either of these courses.

.....
²⁹Writes Bonhoeffer, "The Bible however directs him (man) to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only a suffering God can help". And also, "It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world" (Bonhoeffer 1959, p. 164, & p. 166).

It might seem extremely dis-empowering to not “continue to dream of better times to come”. But is that really so?

We are still left with only the narrow way, a way often hardly to be found, of living every day as if it were our last, yet in faith and responsibility living as though a splendid future still lay before us”.³⁰

The course available then is to live in faith and responsibility in the present and not displace attention to the future as the sole repository of freedom. Living every day in full fidelity to the present, without an axiomatic future, is the way to the “splendid future (still lay) before us”. Future is not axiomatically given, for it to then retroactively posit the past or the present.

Today however we are living in a culture saturated with the notion of an axiomatic future, or what we can call futurism. The only way to live, it seems, is by planning for the future or rather to let the future plan you! At the flamboyant bombastic level, we know of the Elon Musk kind of futurism. It involves “the making of alternative futures by situating imaginaries of humanity becoming a multiplanetary species in the present realities of political economy”.³¹ Then you have those like Peter Thiel who thinks that we are not accelerating enough. He argues that we are not innovating enough, we are not making breakthroughs, we are stuck in the horizontal expansion of One to Two and not vertical expansion, what he calls Zero to One.³² Andreessen’s essay “Its time to build”, very popular on Twitter, similarly pushes for a “full-throated, unapologetic, support for building new technologies”.³³ The message is clear: Our present and our past are what the future is parasitic upon.

Another sphere where the model of futuristic freedom has taken massive strides is with regards to gender and trans rights. Kadji Amin points to the manner in which non-binary identification within gender theory — and, I would add, marginalities discourse as a whole including the habitual reduction of the “working class” into “class identity” — lends itself to the “neoliberal identity machine”.³⁴ A dystopic scenario need not be ruled out. It is as though “class”, “gender”, “race”, “non-binary” are produced by a code-generating machine which itself guzzles what these “identities” really stood for in an earlier time or within another more expansive register.

.....
³⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

³¹ Palmãs, 2022.

³² Thiel 2014.

³³ Andreessen 2020.

³⁴ Amin 2022.

So let us ask: Do we have any grounds to believe that Bonhoeffer's proposal (taking the "narrow way" of fidelity to the present, living every day as if it were our last...) holds good for a break with not just the fascism of his times but also with the fascist logic at work today? If we have grounds for doing so, then this would mean that Bonhoeffer's proposal holds good even when you do not have full blown fascism Nazi-style.

Surely, there will be those who will argue that Bonhoeffer's proposition holds true only for Nazi-style fascism which blocks all possibilities of a good future. They might say, under liberal capitalism, we have a different situation — it is not fascism we are living under (Biden victory will save us!) hence it might be fine to "plan for the future". And is not fascism really about raking up the "glorious past" though a regressive politics (as with, it will be argued, "Trump's white supremacist politics") while anti-fascism is about breaking with the past through a progressive politics? Fascism is irrational and backward looking, while anti-fascism is rational and forward looking, futuristic!

Is that so?

The thing is that futurism and accelerationism seem to be the tissue connecting fascism and capitalism. We might here read with benefit Walter Benjamin's eleventh Theses on the Philosophy of History. He shows that Social Democracy, its anti-fascist politics notwithstanding, was invested into precisely those features of fascism which pushed the working class into the ecstasy and excitement of technological advancement.

The conformism which has been part and parcel of Social Democracy from the beginning attaches not only to its political tactics but to its economic views as well. It is one reason for its later breakdown. Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological progress constituted a political achievement.³⁵

Social Democracy's "political tactics" might be ideologically anti-fascist but their "economic views" are seeped in those that are upheld by fascism. For the working class, moving with the current or riding the stream of the technological development, being the advanced vanguard of the accelerationism of capital, creates the ecstasy and excitement inseparable from their investment into the fascist myth.

One person who seemed alert to this nexus between fascism and futuristic freedom in the post-WW2 period was Pier Paolo Pasolini.

.....
³⁵ Benjamin 1968, p. 258.

One can read his film *Teorema* (1968) as really exposing this nexus. It shows that the much-vaunted individual freedoms and gender-fluid self-exploration as a critique of the traditional social order have largely meant exposing the deeper self and socio-familial structures to the determinations of capital.

End of humanity, not of capitalism

Bonhoeffer's sentiments can be captured through an expression used by Slavoj Žižek, the "inversion of the Apocalypse" — the Apocalypse is not coming but we are already in it.³⁶ Such an insight as the point of departure makes the belief in the future redundant and forces us to really probe what is going. It frees the past from the historicist hubris of "the truth will not run away from us", opening us to the power of the past and the "weak messianic power" of the calling.

Future, the impassible God, capitalism — this triad can be said to capture pretty much every shibboleth and the zeitgeist of our times. Without a suffering God, without the capacity to invert the Apocalypse we will forever be invested in the promises of capitalism and can never imagine the end of capitalism --- worse, we will be led astray by the false promises of anti-fascism peddled by today's left progressive politics.

Paraphrasing a quote attributed to Fredric Jameson we can say that it easier to imagine the end of the humanity or the world but not the end of capitalism. Be it climate disaster or an apocalypse due to a Frankenstein monster or a hurtling asteroid from space: popular culture is replete with such premonitions of the end of humanity or of life on earth. Such anxieties of the end of humanity is however underlain by the belief that the future will deliver. The future is an inexhaustible store-house of freedom and deliverance. What we have is some kind of a post-human iteration of the idea of Progress.

Consider American radical politician Alexandra Ocasio Cortez's statement linking climate change with the supposed urge among young people not to have children.³⁷ Or the climate change group BirthStrike for Climate which declares: "climate change is making me rethink whether I want to be a mum".³⁸

Their approach is, "the climate situation is so bad, how can people still engage in normal socialisation and community life", "how can they for example still have families or have children". On the face of it, this is a perfectly valid expression of outrage at the prospect of ecological disaster. And yet one can detect a convergence with the essential logic

.....
³⁶ Žižek and Gunjević 2012.

³⁷ Quoted in the story on singer-songwriter Blythe Pepino of BirthStrike for Climate. Dow 2022.

³⁸ Ibid.

and thrust of the same productive apparatus responsible for climate change. And that is a tendency to reduce basic forms of human sociality into a negotiable calculus based on the contingencies of elite activism. Second, that it overlooks how it is precisely forging such deep human solidarities at the local, community and familial level that could lead to autonomous action outside the capturing machine of capitalist accelerationism, which guzzles more energy, perpetuates consumerism and basically colonises human sociality and social communication.

Anything which is not subject to the Coming Singularity or the algorithm of AI, or not part of the New Green Deal, that is, outside of the machine's control and modulation, say things like childbirth or natality that still retain some kind of a distance from the capturing machine are tacitly assumed to share an automatic homology with sexism, racism, and right-wing politics. It is not difficult to imagine where theology would be placed in this discourse --- surely, on the side of right-wing politics. Such radicals would be aghast at the suggestion that historical materialism must avail of the "services of theology", seeing in it nothing but an attempt to legitimise the nexus between left-wing and right-wing authoritarianisms.

Interestingly, there are positive developments from our perspective in gender theory. For example, there is an attempt to wean away trans and nonbinary "identity" away from the dogma of futuristic freedom that you can supposedly chose whoever you want to become, or identify as. Against this, there is an emphasis on evolving forms of sociality that are not a derivative of "the neoliberal identity machine". Kadji Amin is therefore critical of how

nonbinary discourse has doubled down on the notion of gender as an internal, psychic identification, adding the corollary that nonbinary identification is "valid" regardless of outward expression.³⁹

Then he suggests that

What is therefore necessary is to repair the historical wound opened by the cis/trans binary by creating one or more socially legible gender categories — based on presentation and behavior, not self-identification alone — for those who want to transition from men or women to something else, something with positive social content rather than something devoid of it, as nonbinary currently is.⁴⁰

.....
³⁹ Amin 2022, pp. 114-115.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 116.

He also writes that we must

relinquish the fantasy that gender is a means of self-knowledge, self-expression, and authenticity rather than a shared, and therefore imperfect, social schema.⁴¹

Clearly, Amin's propositions are solid steps towards a critique of futuristic freedoms that capital constantly generates. One can read his emphasis on sociality as a critique of the positions taken by BirthStrike for Climate which we discussed above.

The postcolonial immigrant

Conceiving the end of humanity but not of capitalism comes naturally — a zeitgeist — and feels like the most obvious thing to do. One reason for this is that capital is able to disavow some of its real dependencies on the social, historical and the mythical and instead present itself as self-reproducing and self-contained — a self-representation which actually underpins much of the presuppositions of today's progressive left politics. This was part of the self-image of Western societies in the post WW2 period. If it was the “society of the spectacle” for Guy Debord, then for Baudrillard it was a passage “from a metallurgic into a semiurgic society’ ... in which signs take on a life of their own and constitute a new social order structured by models, codes, and signs”.⁴² It is as though value is generated purely through “real subsumption” of labour in a society supposedly veering towards Marx's “general intellect”, without a dialectical “outside”.

Nothing is served if I simply point to the immigrant labour entering the Western societies in droves since the WW2 — and claim to show the disavowed “outside” to, say, Baudrillard's “semiurgic society”. For what is more to the point is the mythical, social and historical relation to global capital that the immigrants hold.

To begin with, the journey of postcolonial immigrants to the shores of the Western countries itself is mythical, the stuff of so much stories, movies and novels. Clearly, there is no time to imagine the end of humanity or of capitalism — there is so much going on here, so much to look forward to in the search for the proverbial “better life”.

The primary image from the viewpoint of migrants relevant here is not that of Fortress Europe but of Mama Merkel, always so happy to bring in migrants to be put to work in Europe. Big companies were pleading with Merkel to bring in migrants based on the kind of work skills they

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⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 117-118.

⁴² Best, Steven 1991, p. 118.

possess. Mama Merkel inspired the Syrian migrants in 2015 so much that they would name their children Angela Merkel.⁴³ Yet the same Mama Merkel would make sure to please the technocratic bosses of EU in pushing Greece into a debt trap.

Indeed, here the mythical and historical registers were completely in your face as Merkel is glowingly compared to Ashama Ibn Abjar, the Righteous King, from African history:

“Some posts carry the hashtag #Merkel_TheEthiopian, a reference to the story of Ashama ibn Abjar, a benign Christian ruler who gave shelter to Muslim refugees in the kingdom of Axum (now northern Ethiopia and Eritrea) at the time of Muhammad. Other images are photoshopped to contrast the German politician’s compassion with the perceived heartlessness of Arab leaders.”

That is a lot of meat to chew on.

Now consider this: For every statue of a former colonialist like Edward Colston which is toppled by the radical left wokes in the Western world in the name of decolonisation and anti-racism, there are at least a few of these colonial masters who are routinely celebrated or rehabilitated as having led the way for the empowerment of those trapped in the oppressive structures of pre-colonial India. Lord Macaulay (one of the key architects of the ideology of the “civilising mission” and the “white man’s burden”) for example is a hero to the “lower caste” Dalits in India. Chandra Bhan Prasad poignantly proposes that, radical “lower caste” saint-reformers were supported by Macaulay in order to oppose the oppressive Brahminical traditions.⁴⁴ Macaulay’s proposal to compulsorily teach English as part of public education as also the establishment of the rule of law, the Indian Penal Code, are not just positively evaluated by India’s oppressed but heralded as milestones in their liberation.

A recent BBC report on small town India reads: “English Goddess for India’s downtrodden”.⁴⁵ It then mentions that the bronze statue of the Goddess is modelled upon the Statue of Liberty.

I do not need to give more “evidence” of the social, historical and mythical registers that are at work in the relationship between global capitalism and migrant labour from non-Western societies. The question to be posed is this: How does this capital-centric mythical movement of millions of masses from the postcolonial world in the post-WW2 period compare to the past mobilisations of working masses, some of them under fascism?

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⁴³ Oltermann 2015.

⁴⁴ Prasad 2007.

⁴⁵ 15 Feb 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12355740>

Between the two world wars leading unto fascism, huge masses of working people were mobilised in extreme fascist ecstasy, in what Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe have called “the Nazi myth”.⁴⁶ Now that the Western working class is derided as redundant “deplorables” (Hillary Clinton) by the captains of Wall Street, it is surely the postcolonial immigrants who are the new candidates to occupy if not the “fascist myth” then, to begin with, at least a warm mythical relation with capital. Whether through a purely politico-representational “insurrection” (like the Jan 6 Capitol Hill riots) or some such disruptive mechanism, the white “deplorables” can at least temporarily occupy centerstage, remains an open question. Much of it devolves on sheer numbers and demographics and things like the birth-rate of the white population — no wonder then, in the heated culture wars, the question of abortion gets framed not as a question of women and their rights but in terms of white genocide or even black genocide. Not completely unrelated here is the bitter and often uncivil contestation over trans-women vs. natal women. The Great Replacement underpinning the Great Reset, QAnon would say!

As of now, the white “deplorables” might sign up for right-wing racist populisms but perhaps not the accelerationism and futurism led by the multicultural, non-binary, gender-fluid, pro-abortion technocratic machine! Enter the postcolonial immigrant!

I had earlier pointed out, in the context of the United States, the Capitalist International of Silicon Valley and the Postcolonial Immigrant.⁴⁷ At the time too, I found it very important to add a caveat: the postcolonial immigrant or the “model minority” in this Capitalist International cannot but reinforce the social death of the black in the United States. Toni Morrison trenchantly pointed out:

Every immigrant knew he would not come as the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group -- and that was us.⁴⁸

In this context, the Afro-pessimist approach of writers like Denise Silva and Fred Moten are very important for us here.

So if new fresh blood is pouring into the veins and arteries of capitalism each passing day, we know where it is coming from. One half of humanity is busy supplicating itself to the futuristic God of non-binary capitalism!

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⁴⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990.

⁴⁷ Giri 2017.

⁴⁸ Morrison, Toni 1989.

Non-binary, antiracist fascism?

In the eleventh part of the Theses, we noted above, Benjamin goes on to critique the ideology of the “improvement of labour” which, for him, already “displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism”. Today, this ideology of the “improvement of labour” is manifest in the systemic necessity for capital to focus on the improvement of the lot of the postcolonial immigrant worker, through multiculturalism, diversity, and fight for racial justice. It is possible then that the multiculturalist ideology “displays the technocratic features” of fascism or its equivalent today. This might run counter to not just the shibboleths of liberal politics today but also to “common sense”. For we are trained to think that it is only racism and not multiculturalism which might be seen as coterminous with fascism.

Recall here that some writers like Kenan Malik and Žižek regard multiculturalism as the cultural logic of multinational capitalism. Why stop at that? What if it is something far more and far worse than that? It could be that we are encountering anti-fascism itself as the political logic of multinational capitalism — antifascism as ambient consciousness, the conscience of our times, ostentatiously proclaimed as the moral compass by everyone from Putin to Biden, Jeff Bezos to George Soros.

A little reflection will make it clear that the political firmament based on the “progressive” idea of opposing 1930’s style blood-soil-and-race fascism provides fertile soil for capitalism today. We discussed the circumstance: Accelerationism and futurism can today mobilise and deploy the working class without having to resort to the rhetoric and unity of the nation or a volkisch community. Historical fascism’s accelerationism mobilised the working class through the racist Aryan myth and anti-Semitism. But today fascist total mobilisation can very uncontroversially ride on the back of multiculturalism, and more so, on the mythical nexus between the postcolonial immigrant and capital, white-washed with multiculturalism but whose underbelly is anti-blackness.

So we can say that Capital has found the perfect solution: The possibility of detaching racism from the fascist project and ushering in the “pure” logic of capital — more than that, it could cannibalise on anti-racism itself making it the basis for perpetuating the rule of capital.

Almost all CEO’s from Silicon Valley who are spearheading the technocratic machine are vocal about opposing Donald Trump and his racist policies, particularly on immigration. Jeff Bezos and others of his ilk would publicly demonstrate their support for Black Lives Matter, duely acknowledged by some activist-leaders leading to a dystopic leftist alliance of oligarchs and activists! They mobilise tropes about opposing the Nazi-style fascism, asking for more powers for themselves in the name of their broad vision of anti-fascism!

What some observers have called neo-feudalism or tech-capitalism must therefore be understood as a component part of this catastrophe

without a racist Holocaust, a multicultural fascism, not of pure blood and race, but a highly miscegenated, non-binary one. Yanis Varoufakis recently used the term techno-feudalism, explaining: "What we are experiencing is not merely another metamorphosis of capitalism. It is something more profound and worrisome".⁴⁹ I would urge those like Varoufakis to also take account of the wider political firmament of anti-fascism which underpins the self-righteous claims of techno-feudalism.

Politics of the now-time must cut through this rhetoric of anti-fascism.

Badiou, Agamben

It does look like capitalism has found the way to end humanity without the enchantment of fascist mythologisation. But this peculiarity might be driving some thinkers like Agamben to yearn for a kind of re-enchantment or re-mythologisation as a counter to this new fascism. This is of course notwithstanding the fact that Agamben for sure would agree with our thesis of the suffering God, of the need to invert the Apocalypse.

We know his pandemic writings, one where he was referring to "faith" as a way to counter the depredations of the technocratic machine during the lockdown in 2020. He wrote that the Church "has forgotten that one of the works of mercy is that of visiting the sick. It has forgotten that the martyrs teach that we must be prepared to sacrifice our life rather than our faith and that renouncing our neighbour means renouncing faith".⁵⁰ Put faith over life: that was his message. If the Church had gone out among the public to attend to the dead and the sick during the pandemic, it would have surely gone some way to expose and counter the juggernaut of the "cult of life" of the pandemic lockdown. The totalizing stranglehold of the technocratic machine on the discourse around the virus, masking and then vaccination was indeed extremely disturbing.

When most "thinkers" had carted away their independent mind, Agamben's gesture of opposition seemed to have opened a tiny "space of truth" against the futuristic-accelerationistic capturing machine.

My problem here is not that Agamben invokes faith or something on the register of the religious if not the theological. Rather, it is that he seems to assume that faith, tradition or the mythical are somehow automatically an "outside" to the operation of capital and the capturing machine — which has strong affinities with the kind of "mistake" made by Foucault and Baudrillard we saw above. (In the case of Foucault, the mistake was with regard to Islamic theocracy; in Baudrillard, terrorism as not subject to the logic of equivalence.)

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⁴⁹ Varoufakis 2021.

⁵⁰ Agamben 2020a.

This is where Badiou points the way towards a novel subjectivity as a real “outside”. His thesis of death as radical externality is a better position than one emphasising on some kind of a prescient value of pristine life, or of the social and the historical, as we find in Agamben. It seems to be able to escape the empiricism of human sociality and life as a given, flat cathartic-mimetic proliferation. Such a proliferation of endless iterations might look like a radical heterogeneity or radical alterity but it is actually well allied to big capital’s cult of life which understands death as the cessation of life, as always internal to life.

For Badiou, “death is something that happens to you; it is not the immanent unfolding of some linear programme.” Death is not the cessation of life, the natural terminus of life, but “death is something which comes from the outside”. Badiou wants to defend a “thesis that upholds the absolute exteriority of death, that makes death radically non-immanent”.

What Badiou wants to negate is the idea of the finiteness of life, thereby opening up the possibility of immortality. Writes Badiou: “The idea of immortality is that in this world — the world that prescribed the intensity of an existence proper to this world — x is dead, but that does not mean that he is dead in every world”.⁵¹ Death does not and cannot mean death in every world: this is a tremendously powerful concept. Here Badiou points to sociality and history enriched not just by life as it is empirically lived, say as a “form of life”, or life which the pandemic lockdown wanted to protect and endlessly valorized — but also life as the immortality brought about by death, a negation of the finiteness of life. In some ways, one can say that Agamben’s invocation of faith was meant to carry, at the formal level, a similar function, of inaugurating another realm, power and life which is not completely exhausted by the life which the pandemic lockdown was out to supposedly defend --- the life as defined by the technocratic machine. And yet it is clear that Badiou’s approach is more convincing as it seems to provide a more fundamental break with the systemic logic.

Time-of-the-now and divine violence

That is, the way out of this fascism without mythologisation, fascism without the “Nazi myth” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy), is not by way of seeking re-mythologisation of supposedly the good kind which would foster sociality and history in the empiricist sense — since that would be stuck in the Aristotelian cathartic-mimetic proliferation homologous to capital’s horizontalist logics and again, Agamben’s “muted life without history”.

In order not to get sucked into this empty proliferation even while breaking with the technocratic machine, the politics of the now-time must be aware of the convergence between the thesis of death as an

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51 Badiou 2015.

externality and grasping the flitting image of the past in a moment of danger. This is what it means to have dialectics at a standstill, the monadic configuration pregnant with tension, like an animal which gathers himself before lunging.

Against the fear and paralytic hope fomented by capitalist futurism we must assert our ability to still dwell and inhabit moments in the Benjaminian image (bild), where the past and the present are in a dialectical relationship, in dialectical “leaps and bounds”. Bhima Koregaon is precisely such a dwelling, staying, inhabiting where the “vocation calls the vocation itself” — that is why the memory of the 1818 Battle in the present is not really limited to the “past” but is part of the time-of-the-now, “an image (bild) of the past recognized by the present as one of its own concerns”. But this “immobile anaphoric gesture of the messianic calling” attains a felicity only when illumined by the dialectical powers of divine violence.

Finally, the redundancy of humanity, and, by extension, of the past, its un-citability, is homologous to the disavowed mythic relation between the postcolonial immigrant and big capital. Retrieval of the pivotal role of the socio-historico-mythical dimension, the unconscious, in the reproduction of the present seems to facilitate the Benjaminian relation with the past, the way for historical materialism to keep replenishing itself with the “services of theology”.

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Is Politics Still Possible Today?

Karl-Heinz Dellwo

Abstract: The article presents an analysis of the present conjuncture and demonstrates how its current warmongering is a symptom of the current, ongoing, fundamental lack of political alternatives. It indicates that the inability of capitalism to solve the problems it creates leads to a self-annihilating path from which there are no exit strategies – to make way for new forms of organisation the present way of organizing and destroying the world has to die.

Keywords: Bellicism, Green Capitalism, NATO, Russia-Ukraine War

M., German Jew and Communist, thus doubly exposed at the Nazi extermination strategy, refuses to seek shelter from the bombers of the allied forces during the 1945 air alert. Instead, he watches the bombardment of Frankfurt unprotected from a balcony with a glass of champagne in his hand.¹

„There is no social group in capitalism which would have a transcendent ontological predetermination.”²

„For example, seen from today (i.e., after Marx), politics is a necessary purge.”³

Are we lost? The question easily imposes itself: one only need follow the rapid developments in the present world that by now, apart from the inner and outer limits of its own capitalization, push toward waging wars. What do we have to say? Or maybe differently, what will we have to say? Actually, everything, because our life is at stake. Nothing less. A historical epoch seems to have reached its end. We experience the failure of the 20th century. In our time, the repercussions of a world of escalated age-old exploitation wherein everything has been subjugated to the transformation of nature and life strike out in always tougher, unambiguous, conspicuous ways. But exactly this is what is lacking socially: a substantial answer, a taking of a position in relation to a different foundation of life. In view of such fundamental issues, there is only a gap. In the `70s of the last century, the author of these lines belonged to those who raised the system question as a real question of power. The “other” was no utopia, but something that was concretely imaginable and indispensable. There was an “outside” to the capitalist

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¹ I owe this real story to my friend Thomas Seibert, a philosopher from Frankfurt, who has been told this story by the daughter of the person concerned.

² Kurz 2013, p. 26. [All translations from non-English sources are provided by the translators, F.R. / H.H.Y.].

³ Barthes 1989, p. 88.

world in many-faceted shapes: the Soviet-Union that resulted from the October Revolution, Maoist China, Cuba, the struggling anti-colonial movements, a political-cultural rift in the cultural centers themselves out of which gushed out entirely new fantasies of life. With the “outside”, there also existed the category of politics that it represented. It seems a long time since then. The opposites have been flattened or have corroded themselves. Nothing new gushes out of the world. Everything seems known and old. The world, as it is, seems to have become without any alternative. Thereby, politics – the attempt to organize the life of man outside of a lashed down rationality of a system that has gained independence – has also disappeared.

System on Autopilot

Years ago, the technocrat Draghi, and for the sake of general pacification after Donald Trump who rinsed into the most dangerous office for mankind in the world repeated a maxim of Alan Greenspan: “Italian fiscal politics runs on autopilot.”⁴ The globalized economy has become so autonomous that it is no longer of central significance who holds the power in the political system of capitalism. What was meant to pacify is insidious in its consequences: politics is what has become secondary and implies a deception about its power to organize [*gestalten*]. It does not organize, it only administers from a subordinate position the driving forces of an independent globally oriented economy which are becoming chaotic and delimiting; the driving forces of a system that posits itself as a “new nature”, as “industrial eternity.”⁵ Often, this borders on insanity. The waging of global wars becomes a normal option for some. Here also lies the reason why the political-social main-stream in Western society moves to the right, to the point of establishing new fascist governments of the old kind, such as the alliance between the Fratelli d’Italia, Lega Nord and Forza Italia, which is now likely to follow the government of resigned prime minister Draghi, who at the time head of the ECB celebrated the imposition of capital as “automatic subject”⁶ of society. Following in the footsteps of the technocratic actors, the ideological right is now gaining positions of political power in the societies. With their old fascism they are competing with what one can also call “technocratic fascism”, the rearrangement of human being under an all-embracing factual constraint, so that the external structure of man becomes its internal one. Pasolini called this the “anthropological mutation”,

4 <https://intermarketandmore.finanza.com/draghi-il-pilota-automatico-e-il-fiscal-compact-53690.html>.

5 This is a term of Alberto Moravia to whom Pier Paolo Pasolini refers to later. Cf. Pasolini / Bachmann 2022, Vol 1, p. 87; Vol. 2, p. 124.

6 Marx 1982, p. 255.

a mutation that was for him more annihilating than the old fascism, because the subject here has become an object entirely and does no longer recognize its own subjection.⁷ The ideology of the right is effective because it draws on envy and resentment that become the foundation of mood in a closed system, that is in a system without eligibility of cognition, and that are never directed against the circumstances but only ever against the other. The human being whose entrapment has become its lifeworld nevertheless needs something for the soul. This is provided by the old right-wing ideology and its constant mediatic bombardment of solidarity. The right cannot generate changes in the economic megamachine that has become autonomous, Draghi is right: they fail vis-à-vis the “autopilot.” But they can play off the interests of some against those of the others in an increasingly crude manner and drive the carousel of misanthropy to a new, higher level. Claiming “interests” is in its structure always reactionary because it negates from the outset the relationship to a shared whole as the only position committed to solidarity.⁸ The phenomenon is evident in many states. When the existing society which is perceived as the existing world is *without alternative*, when the laws of capitalist economy have become irrevocable, it makes no sense to anybody anymore to think or even attempt to position herself outside of this new nature. Any action, even if it aims at what is called “social balancing”, is based on the wrong foundation.

This is the problem of the Left: it acts within a system whose self-running potency is so overwhelmingly strong that any attempt to control it is like attempting to direct the launching of a large container with a few hands. The problem of the Left is its permanent and egoistic lie that its parliamentarism could make possible anything fundamental against the raging machine of global capitalism. The lie is recognized. This is why the social significance of the Left is becoming increasingly marginal. The longer they hold on to it, the more ridiculous they become. We all very well recall the rise and fall of Alexis Tsipras and of the left-wing alliance SYRIZA in Greece, its adjustment for a capital-conform Europe. Anyone who wants to reassert the currently bleak spectacle of a politically bankrupt Left only has to look at the rapid de-politicization of the German Linkspartei whose positions on Ukraine and Russia are now more or less congruent with those of other bourgeois parties. So, what

7 Cf here Pasolini/Bachmann, esp. Vol. 2, p. 142: „Here material wealth and enjoyment promise ... a liberation from the burden of human existence, a sort of deal with the Devil, since this liberation comes with the grave sublation of freedom to be anything else than a consumer of superfluous goods and thus a mere factor of bourgeois relations of production.”

8 Cf. Also Alain Badiou: „Communism, this is the universal vocation that is included in a localizable period of the politics of emancipation. The question of communism is that of political action if one knows that this action cannot be reduced to the pursuit of interest of this or that group.” Badiou 2012, p. 13.

does one need such a Left for? The other parties continue to propagate their submission to the god of free market economy as expression of a self-chosen conviction, which is in the meantime again transferring from civilian into military armament the standard work attire. The pace with which ideological feel-good positions of a political force dissolve in the course of the transition to realpolitik can be studied through the Green Party. At the beginning of their political rise, their turn towards the parliamentarism of the bourgeois system was still marked by the emancipatory waves of the 68 revolt and the resulting promise to adapt the political-economic system to the needs of the people. The old attitudes and positions from the last revolt in the system of Western capitalism from the 1960s were quickly institutionally ground down in the integration process. The claim to be different from the previous old parties has long since shifted into the domain of the decorative. Every "march through the institution" to date has ended with the victory of the institutions, which have on their side the supremacy of the real, which has grown historically and has in the meantime become totalitarian. From within its own logic, this real can no longer be transcended. The impossibility of transcendence from within the system forces everyone in the end to adopt the old code of power and violence as condition of their own political existence, which cannot do anything but perpetuate the existing world.

What is being revealed here seems to be more than just the everyday corruption of a political class that, having finally arrived at positions of power immanent to the system, does nothing but execute constraints and passes this off as "decision" and "will". In Germany, the new Bellicism has more or less taken hold of the entire new political middle class. Many a politician who was recently still trying to propagate "green capitalism", wherein everything that will change all by itself for the benefit of humanity, without any account as to why the catastrophic state of the world today exists in the first place; she mutates into a weapons expert and publicly acts as a hired representative of the weapons industry. The new Green politician sits in a tank and has therein found the skin in which they feel safe. The world is seen from the perspective of the battlement and hoped-for military superiority. Politics is exhausted here in the victory over an opponent and in the reactionary need to triumph. She is joined by the mainstream media, an army of warmongers, all the more disgusting since they cool their petty courage from the base by calling *on others* in Ukraine to fight and, in their own country, propagandistically create an atmosphere of alternativelessness to the victory over Russia. They satisfy themselves in the effects of the others and gamble with downfall: there is little more despicable than this cowardly battle cry from the base.

Hatred of Russians

In no other country can the hatred of Russians be so quickly reactivated as in Germany⁹, which is now involved for the fifth time in subjugating Russia to its version of Europe from the West.¹⁰ The category of the new political middle class, the children of the first post-war generation, is formed by those who were still directly associated with the first Nazi generation. *Pars pro toto*: Ursula von der Leyen. She did not need a single day after the start of the Russian war in Ukraine to reissue the old Nazi slogan that Russian industry should be destroyed and Russia should be turned into an agricultural country.¹¹

One could also have seen in this war – which had been looming for a long time – a catastrophe so that one would have asked oneself where one's own responsibility lies for allowing the processes leading to it run their blind course and why one was not capable of developing a strategy of common security interests. But none of this – or at best only a little – has happened or is happening. There was obviously no longer this attitude as significant political force, but all the more that of the successive expansion of one's own militarily secured sphere of power and of one's own social culture, if one were willing to grant to liberal capitalism an independent culture (which must at least be put into question, otherwise there would not be the possibility of the openly fascist turn in the individual societies that can be expected again also in Europe today, after having been witness to the social reality of the USA for so long). Instead, a switch to a military mode of attack bursts open as if one had been waiting for it.

War as Clearance

The velocity with which here old Nazi slogans could be activated and with which a politically more or less ignorant new political- and media caste change tack from praising “green capitalism” to war mode points to a historical rottenness of the existing condition and awakens strange associations with the prewar period and of the outbreak of the First World War. When the event took place in 1914, all previous social barriers opened up and seemingly levelled all differences: except for a marginal minority, everyone wanted to participate in the war. Something had

9 What shows itself here is also how deeply rooted and virulent in society this ideological topos of the Nazi-Reich still is, especially with those from the 3rd generation after Hitler.

10 A continuity of three centuries: 1707 (Karl XII.), 1812 (Napoleon); 1914 (Central Powers Germany and Austria-Hungary); 1941 (German Reich).

11 In the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung [FAZ] from the 25th of February 2022: “Ursula von der Leyen openly says: It is about destroying the industrial basis of the country.” Cf. FAZ, 25.02.2022, EU-Sanktionen: Banken, Flugzeuge, Raffinerien – so vergilt Europa Putins Angriffskrieg, authored by Thomas Gutschker, Brussels. Ironically this was then annotated: “actualized on the 25th of February at 04:49” – one could here also just cite the Fuhrer: “from 5:45 on, we are shooting back.”

obviously come to an end and because nobody could organize the end, the vast majority of society expected the event when it occurred: the social democrats defected to the imperial rule [*Kaisertum*] (and never substantially recovered from this betrayal). The Kaiser, as is well known, no longer knew any parties, only German defenders of the fatherland. The young people oriented themselves toward the national-idealistically mystified battle of Langemarck in November 1914, a military action stupidly organized by the German army that had no relation to the possibly achievable goals but came with great sacrifices which were used again to feed a mendacious patriotism. The twenty years before the commencement of the First World War are reminiscent of the twenty years before the commencement of the new bellicism. The early capitalist imperial state was bobbing along, society was dull, mothballed, and had no active answer as to how to shape the future because a change of the trinity of God, Kaiser and fatherland to a self-modernizing capitalism found no internal forces which were willing to implement it. The outbreak of the war was the result of a disintegration of an old period that had long since set in and progressed. Mariupol is only geographically distant from Langemarck in Belgian Flanders. In the mendacious mystification, this time not by a supreme army command but by a NATO-affiliated brigade of journalists from the base, the places are almost congruent with each other, although it is somewhat more difficult to make a politically and morally decent battle group out of the Bandera fascists and of the right-wing radicals and neo-fascists who have streamed in.

Tighten the Belt and Goebbels's "Stew Sunday"

Here perhaps another background for the apparent war-mongering of a part of the new political and media caste presents itself: they weary of everything. They long to be redeemed from the impossibility to present that which cannot be changed within the system as something that is under their control and could be changed into bliss. The new love for bellicism and for the dream of military victory against competing systems also reveals that there is no solution for their postulated project of a capitalism that suddenly begins with the human being and no longer with abstract value. They have known it for a long time; they will mess up all their promises and, as in the past, deplete every social, ecological, political position which would contradict the political or economic laws of market logic. Everything that has been rejected forever yesterday has since long become possible again: nuclear power, continual use of the fossil fuels of coal, oil, and even gas fracking. This is the central administration of the energy economy as part of a new war economy, replacing the winter aid organization of the Wehrmacht: "Freeze for

Victory!"¹² Renunciation is propagated from above. In a venerated morality of a new now willingness to accept privation, strangely pertinent analogies emerge such as that of the "Eintopfsonntag (Stew Sunday)"¹³ to which the National Socialist leadership urged the population in October 1933. This new social duty propagated from above and linked to the demand to also donate 50 pfennigs for the winter aid organization was intended to be a community-building action against the enemy, which was even religiously charged in the Second World War by redefining the "Stew Sunday" to be the "Opferonntag (Sacrifice Sunday)."

Politics has for a long time divided itself into two completely distinct spheres: there is the politics of the getting-to-power and there is the politics from the standpoint of power. In the end, both have very little to with one another. But above all: neither has any sovereignty vis-à-vis the economy and exists as such only as external image of itself. The task seems, in the sense of Roland Barthes, *to drain life away* and to transfer all power to the rule of valorization.

Climate change and "Green Capitalism"

Since the seventies of the last century the world knows that permanent economic growth will lead to climate changes with catastrophic consequences for mankind, and that the industrialized societies, oriented toward high levels of consumption, which have characterized in Western states the life of man since over one and a half centuries are not transferable to the rest of world without resulting in enormous destruction of life. Much has been said, little has been done. The annihilating relation of capitalism to nature leads to repercussions that have in the meantime acquired the character of the event, i.e. are detached and independent from the normal processes in societies. The limits that are now being placed on the system and its societies occur as if coming from the outside, as if they were consequences of uncontrollable natural catastrophes. They are not the product of any inner design but uncontrolled consequences that become independent and that concern everybody and subject everyone under a paradigm, which forces them to change their previous life. The pandemic of the last two

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12 Consider two examples out of many: Georg Friedrichs, chairman of the GasAG Berlin: "It is best to shorten showering, rinsing, hand washing"; whoever is "young and well-trained will get through the winter well with two jumpers and a bit of stair climbing." (Source: <https://exxpress.at/energie-manager-raet-fuer-den-winter-haendewaschen-verkuerzen-pullover-anziehen/>, 13.08.2022) – interestingly, after society was almost driven to constantly wash its hands long and thoroughly because of the Pandemic, here the washing times are shortened.

Karin Göring-Eckardt (Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen): „Now: briefly shower, turn it off, soap, wash away, ready... We will have to learn to live with constraints (source: https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/innenpolitik/id_100033020/katrin-goering-eckardt-gruene-die-einschraenkungen-sind-nur-der-anfang-.html, assessed on 13.08.2022).

13 Cf.: Eintopfsonntag, <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eintopfsonntag>.

year was such an *event*. There is nothing to suggest that these *events* will not continue to accumulate. One can also fill this with hope, but this does not change the primacy of negative experience.¹⁴ However, it is not only the repercussions of the destruction of nature that puts a spoke into the wheel of the global capitalist system like a saboteur. The laws within the economy are also pointing in an ever more obvious way to their inner limits. It has been apparent for years that the capital, which is forced to produce new capital, in its entirety no longer knows where it can continue to multiply in the productive sector, and it therefore unavoidably deploys the surplus capital in models of speculation. Wars, bad harvests, famines, and natural catastrophes can also be financialized – if only through currency speculation. The 2001 speculation bubble in the IT-sector was an expression of this. But even more so were the toxic finance products which led to the stock market crash of 2008.

Capitalism without growth is like gravity without attraction. Part of the lie of “green capitalism” is the unresolvable contradiction between the development of microelectronics and the robotization of labor processes linked to it which leads to an increasing expulsion of human beings from this labor process, who then in the future, degradedly, will have to see for themselves to get by. These processes take place globally. The impossibility of “green capitalism” is reflected on Europe’s doorstep in the thousands of drowned refugees, who have refused – just as masses of other people will continue to refuse – to surrender to the fate of being part of the surplus population, this ever-growing part of humanity, which is useless for the economy of a capitalism that became independent, and who are neither needed as labor force because machinic labor does the same better nor as consumer because they lack the means to participate in consumption.

Capitalism was never a social project, but at the beginning it augured that everyone would profit from it and that the living conditions of mankind would be gradually improved. These are the snows of yesteryear. The new reality is marked by exploitation and exclusion. Exclusion is the need of the hour. To this end we have FRONTEXT and PUSHBACKS at our borders, in and the world’s new camps in other regions. With increased productivity, the cake to be distributed gets smaller and smaller. This paradox is explained by the global reduction of the use of living labor and the constant increase of capital in the production process.

14 Cf. Badiou / Tarby 2017, pp. 17ff. For Badiou the event is always linked to an opening of possibilities: “A political event is something that makes appear a new possibility, which escapes the domination of the possible through the governing power.” Ibid., p. 19.

The Downfall of the West

The inability of capitalism to solve any major social problem in the world has been obvious for a long time. The political-military caste can also no longer impose any political order. It was still able to do so easily, with a high death toll, in the 60s and 70s of the last century, then clearly failed for the first time in Vietnam and this led to changed military and power strategies. This limit of transferring one's own political ends onto other culture by means of using power was recently demonstrated in the failure of the twenty year long NATO-war in Afghanistan, a war, which was not allowed to be called a "war" for many years, like the speech-conventions concerning the Russian war in the Ukraine. The model of "green capitalism" is based on a reorganization of the world starting from the West, which should politically follow the pattern of a leopard skin: the black dots on this skin are the centers of the world, where the previous prosperity is *più o meno* defended and maintained, while the rest of the skin represents the zones of ecological and economic destruction, wherein there will be no human solution anymore. This also has a military consequences: the high-tech Western system sends from its secure centers drones into the yellow areas, largely without any risk, to kill enemies or those who one suspects to be such in the name of an absolutely mendacious morality and a legal self-justification with thousands of collateral damages, and increases the hate and the hope of its downfall almost exponentially among millions of people who possibly are afraid of the West but will never ever become its friends again.¹⁵

There is no need to have any illusions about the destruction of the world as a terrain friendly to life: the future will be determined by countless millions of refugees, who cannot survive fifty degrees and more temperature increase, whose regions are burnt, dried out or flooded and who, after having lost all means of livelihood, are forced to flee with all their might into regions and to fight for their place there, where they see a chance of survival for themselves. Against this process that will certainly not follow any left-wing orientation but rather that of naked survival in all forms of its raw and brutal expression, the Western states have unsuccessfully attempted, as in Afghanistan, to establish corrupt proxy regimes, which execute their interests, keep the masses off their back, and promise in their green capitalist prosperity zones in the old centers of the world further respite from the historically inevitable disintegration.

The acceleration of the destruction of the ostensibly civil orientation of the European systems is rapid. The reaction to the Russian

¹⁵ It should be noted that Madeleine Albright, US foreign minister, replied to the question of the journalist Lesley Stahl on the 12. May 1996: "We heard that half a million children died (because of the sanctions against Iraq)", "I think it is a very hard choice – but the price, we think, it is worth the price." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJtSpev8zWk>

offensive war¹⁶ in Ukraine is not explicable solely by the fear of the wars, which the West, usually under the leadership of the USA, has brought into the world, and that also return to its own territory. For the first time, as it was mentioned in several reactions, it was not the West that was attacking somewhere in the world to assert its interests, but for the first time in decades the West was confronted with an offensive war directly in its own realm of power. The turn of the inner-imperialist competition between the – current – three great powers to military confrontations refers to a newly emerged end-time consciousness, which in turn shows the becoming conscious of the disintegration of its own position in the world. When Nancy Pelosi politically hyped her travel to Taiwan as struggle between “autocracy and democracy”, one can see that the course is set for a final confrontation with which the West wants to stop its own downfall, which lost its outward invincibility already in 2001 in front an audience of billions of the rest of the world with the destruction of its symbolic economic headquarters in New York. The hegemon that remained after the collapse of the Soviet Union has itself in the meantime become a victim of the processes of capitalist globalization. Already Trump's “Make America Great Again” was a flailing attempt to shake off the mercilessness of a world market that – and therein remained determined by the hubris of the white population that assumed to always be among the winners – has become independent from one's own country and to pass it on, at least largely, to other countries. The Biden government is pursuing the same goals but is clearly more aggressive in aligning economic potency with the military, and attempts to compensate its own weakening through a renewal of the Atlantic alliance. Russia's war of separation against the West will, without a doubt, be successful on this level: the separation is historically posited and creates a new global situation. The orientation of the gaze of the masses of billions on the West will change fundamentally. Under the new hegemony of the non-subjectivity of the globalized market, which replaces the dominance of the bipolar world of the 20th century, we are left with splintered individual blocs whose present aggressivity for mankind will be measured by how increasing or decreasing it is. It is decreasing in the West, in Russia probably also, since after the established separation the country will remain technologically of second if not third rank.¹⁷ Russia's victory in the war of separation will be a Pyrrhic victory that will have to be paid for

¹⁶ This war is not the first war on European territory after 1945. If one neglects the civil wars in the dissolving Yugoslavia in the 90s, the first offensive war in Europe is the NATO-war against Serbia in 1999, which happened without UN mandate and in which the NATO-states de facto align themselves with the fascistic UÇK of the Kosovo-Albanians who later have been accused of not only drug and organ trafficking but also of serious war crimes. Cf.: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/U%C3%87K>.

¹⁷ As increasing one does have to describe China, which because of its economic strength, which has certainly not reached its peak, does not need to follow any strategy of military aggression but is all the more defined by the West as new central enemy.

by other concessions on the world market and will make Russia become something other than what it should become in the plans of its elites. This is also holds for the NATO-system. The end of any war situation is usually different from what its actors plan to achieve.

Russia's War of Separation from the Defensive

When I attack the West here, the point is not to put the Russian offensive war against the Ukraine as secondary. The causes of this war are multilayered. Their lie far before the war that has now broken out. Armament and agitation of the thoroughly corrupt Ukrainian elite by the USA and parts of their European allies as further outpost against Russia and / or exploitation of the imperial weakness of the West by Russia for the sake of strengthening one's own position in the world. Recall here also Barak Obama's 2014 definition of Russia as a "regional power" in response to its occupation of the Crimea, when he also defined Russia's action also as action "not out of strength but out of weakness."¹⁸ All this will belong to its causes. But to me such explanations alone do not appear to be sufficient to me. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had fallen into the defensive. This war of separation is a war from the defensive with tremendous consequences for millions of people. Like every war, this war is also to be designated a crime. Its general background is the disintegration of the previous world order after the decline of the USA as the seemingly victorious hegemon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But no military operation will stop this disintegration. Unlike 1945, in this war there will be no victors, no matter how it ends. Therefore, I, certainly no pacifist, consider any military fighting out of this conflict, which the West as well as Russia must keep below the threshold of an atomic war (which is why no one will leave the field as victor), as the most barbaric option at whose end the Ukraine will be left as devastated as Lebanon was after its diverse wars. Here, I do not share the conviction of my friend Slavoj Žižek, who in June 2022 posited the alternative "Strengthening of the NATO vs. Pacifism" – saying that "we need a stronger NATO – but not as a prolongation of the US politics."¹⁹ What is that supposed to be? NATO exists only as prolongation of US politics! Is it better to go down a wrong path than to admit that all developments are currently rolling over us and we are left empty-handed? Is it an option to act for action's sake, to find a way out, when this very action is determined by those who represent a false world and want to prolong it?

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¹⁸Translator's note: Cf. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/25/barack-obama-russia-regional-power-ukraine-weakness>.

¹⁹ Zizek 2022.

What is to be Done?

Are we lost? It has to be said— at least as far as Germany is concerned – that a large part of the political elite has, for better or worse, existentially affiliated itself with the USA in order to win or to perish with them.²⁰ What has been for years the dogma of German conservatism, that the Atlantic alliance stands above all and must not be questioned, is rather today the basis of a green-liberal generation of politician, who in their political gormlessness are as remarkable as they are highly dangerous.

There should be no illusions about the prevailing consciousness of metropolises. The public propaganda is firmly in the service of system bearers. But it is not simply a manipulation of social consciousness through constant medial bombardment that bestows on this potentially suicidal politics a military clarification of the global situation which is in favor of obsolete and in its privileges untenable western. Such a bipartisan approval even from the side of the population. Through the social life-reality determined by the leap to the 24-hour day of capital, the destruction of an autonomous political consciousness is largely complete. Pasolini's already mentioned disillusioned realization from the beginning of the 1970s that "an anthropological mutation" is taking place in man with the industrial establishing of a consumer society can be regarded a long established fact. In place of traditional values that developed over centuries, such as fidelity, renunciation, devotion, obligation to others and everything else with which human beings committed themselves to each other, the hedonism that negates common sociality is now posited with an exclusive horizon of individual satisfaction of compensatory pleasures, which are superficial as they are trivial, and have today lost any relevant relationship to the past as much as to the future. With the obligation to others, the empathy toward them is also dissolved. This is how the West can be described: without empathy towards the vast majority of mankind.²¹

We will not have the privilege, like M., without fear in face of our own danger – but finally escaping our impotence – to watch the demise of a barbaric world brought about by force from the balcony, with a glass of champagne in hand. The power that could do this is today not foreseeable, even though the processes have announced themselves which will upturn everything in the world. We have no reason not to be pessimistic. All attempts since the October Revolution to fight for a real process of liberation in the world in such a way that it becomes its own power have succumbed to the world conditions, which – and here I return to Marx:

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20 Annalena Baerbock: „We must build a stronger, irreversible transatlantic partnership for the 21st century." Cf. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/annalena-baerbock-wirbt-fuer-trans-atlantisches-verhaeltnis-auf-augenhoehe-a-2a208707-e456-4911-83ab-6c059e43430a> (assessed on 03.08.2022).

21 Cf. Pasolini Bachmann 2022, p. 350 ff.,

obviously lacked the maturity of the times. What appears today to be necessary in the first place is deceleration and retardation as central condition for being able to intervene at all in the process of decay that has long been set in motion. Nothing will come of what is today called the political space of action. These are lost positions. From there only the logic of the system will be executed. These positions will perish with the old conditions, in form and content. We must have no illusions that the new socialism, which we need, could emerge as a derivative of the old system. It must emerge as a rupture and therefore as radical negation of the conditions or it will in turn be eaten up. We must look for what can constitute this rupture. Our thinking and acting only makes sense today if it is so against the times that nothing of its method or content can be integrated the existing system.

The condition for this politics is the turning away from the conditions of our times. We will not succeed in running a repair shop for a self-destructive process. Thereby we would only perish included in its conceptlessness. This world is historically ordained to die. It destroys itself, but our task is to anticipate this destruction and to inscribe the existence and the necessity of an *outside* into social relations.

Of course we say NO to the war. We say NO to a belligerent Russia! NO to the NATO, NO to the attempt of the US-American elite to reassert the hegemony in the world, NO to the oligarchic elite in Ukraine! NO to capitalism as continual foundation of the life of mankind. We say NO to everything that is not determined by the rupture with the wrong world. This is a path to return to what one could call *politics*.

Freedom for Julian Assange!

Karl-Heinz Dellwo
(Oristano-Torregrande, Beginning of August 2022)

Translated by Frank Ruda and Heather H. Yeung.

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The Will of the People and the Struggle for Mass Sovereignty: A Preliminary Outline

Peter Hallward

Abstract: Debates about the nature and value of popular sovereignty have returned to the centre of political discussion in recent years, in many parts of the world, and the once-revolutionary idea that sovereign power rests with 'the will of the people' is now a widely acknowledged principle. Just what we mean by either 'will' or 'people', however, let alone this combination of the two, remains obscure and controversial. This article aims to reclaim the slogan from reactionary attempts to hijack it, and to retain it as a useful way of assessing claims to democratic legitimacy. In order to defend an actively and forcefully democratic practice of political will, it draws on the work of Rousseau and Marx, on the legacies of the revolutions in France, Haiti, and Russia, and on the broadly voluntarist accounts of political agency and capacity advanced by figures like Robespierre, Blanqui, Luxemburg, Lenin, and Gramsci.

Keywords: sovereignty, democracy, political will, the people, the will, volition, the masses, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, Rousseau, Marx, Robespierre, Blanqui, Luxemburg, Lenin, Gramsci.

As everyone knows, our situation is shaped by overwhelming problems that we largely recognise but are not yet willing to address. These problems all stem mainly from the relentless consolidation of capital's grip over people and the planet. Whether it's a matter of exploitation or inequality, of forced migration or climate catastrophe, of a new arms race or newly invasive forms of state power, even the most dire warnings and statistics have lost their capacity to illuminate or provoke. The suicidal consequences of our current race to the bottom are increasingly obvious to all who are compelled to run it.

It should be equally obvious, however, that we are now moving towards a position where we could change course – if we wanted to. We could change course if we are actually willing and determined to do the things that such change demands. Ever since the hopes raised by revolution in 1917 were deflected and then dashed, the question has been: does a sufficient mass of people want to end capital's insatiable drive to accumulate profits at our expense, or not? The answer remains uncertain but the question will not go away, and it is rapidly turning into a related but more pressing question: do enough of us want to survive at all?

What do we most want? What are we willing to do in order to achieve it? And who might this be, this 'we'?

¹ *Author's note:* This is a partial working sketch of the argument of a book I began to write back in 2005. The manuscript has ballooned, over the years, into a completely unworkable mass of notes and digressions. I have drafted this outline while working on a condensed version of the book, which Verso should publish in 2024. I'm very grateful to Tracy McNulty and Nick Nesbitt for sending rushed comments on an initial draft.

I Reclaiming a formula

Though widely co-opted by conservative nationalists and reactionary populists in recent years, the old revolutionary appeal to 'the will of the people' still remains the simplest, clearest and most suggestive way of grasping the promise of popular sovereignty, and the most incisive means of clarifying what's at stake in arguments about competing conceptions of democracy.

Both 'will' and 'people' are notoriously indeterminate and contested notions, and for most of European intellectual history the idea that they might be combined was absurd. The guiding thread of this project, nevertheless, is that they are each best clarified and adopted precisely through their combination, by thinking the one through the other. A *people* can be understood, then, simply as the collective actor that comes to share in the formulation, organisation and imposition of a common will or purpose. A people in this sense comes together in the making of a common cause, with no other limiting or filtering or differentiating criteria, in unqualified commitment to the principle that 'an injury to one is an injury to all.' A political *will* can likewise figure, from this perspective, as the collective capacity linking mass desire, commitment, and action through direct and inclusive participation in such a common cause. The formation of a 'will of the people', in short, can be understood as the generalising or popularising of a volition or purpose. The relative clarity and strength of such a will, its 'will-power' so to speak, will vary with its generality, scope, and extension, on the one hand, and with its intensity, force, and concentration, on the other.

Although several other thinkers had pondered the connotations of a 'common mind' and a *volonté générale* before him, Rousseau remains a primary point of reference here, and his work helps to formulate a series of tensions and challenges that have confronted many subsequent revolutionary actors, starting with leaders like Robespierre and Toussaint Louverture. But Marx is equally essential, as an analyst of the material conditions under which people, in a society structured by capital's social relations, might strike to *make* common cause. To appeal to Rousseau without Marx risks futile exhortation; to rely on Marx without Rousseau is to depend too much on the historical equivalent of a natural force. We need them both, and many others too; a partial list of figures whose projects might be understood as integrating some of the moralising drive of a general will together with the political mission of a global proletariat would include Luxemburg, Martov, Lenin, Zetkin, Gramsci, Du Bois, Mao, Sartre, Fanon, and Che Guevara.

The main obstacles that have helped to prevent the sort of generalising that Rousseau and then Marx anticipated can themselves be understood as a series of four distinct but mutually reinforcing anti-democratic or aristocratic ramparts. Drawing on a way of speaking that became current during the French Revolution, and in keeping with

Robespierre's definition of 'aristocracy [a]s the state in which one portion of the citizens is sovereign and the rest subjects,'² they might be crudely listed as the fourfold aristocracies of blood, skin, property, and nation. Each of these ramparts have helped to obstruct or at least contain the rise of a genuinely popular sovereign authority. Taken together, and combined in each case with recourse to the oldest and most ubiquitous of all mechanisms of divide and rule, patriarchy, their abiding power remains fundamental to the current configuration of class rule. Taken together, they continue to invest the involuntary circumstance par excellence – the mere place and contingencies of one's birth – as the main determining factor that still shapes a person's life.

If we consider them in chronological sequence, these four barriers to the massing of a popular will were most directly challenged by the successive revolutions in France (1789-94), Haiti (1791-1803), Russia (1917-20), and then, after China, Korea and Vietnam, in Cuba and other fronts in the wider national-liberation or Third World projects (1950s and 60s).³

Blood. Feudal social relations bequeathed a relatively immobile social order, one defined by inherited or purchased social positions and the reproduction of caste-like estates, in which transmissions of privilege could still be justified in part through appeals to the mythology of 'noble blood'.

Within its limits, many elements of this first obstacle were tackled by the French Revolution, its abolition of privilege and its assertion of legal equality.

Skin. Consolidation of European colonial holdings in the Americas, combining the expropriation of indigenous peoples together with the importation of a new enslaved labour force, erected the further rampart that some French revolutionaries denounced as an 'aristocracy of the skin'. In the decade that followed their massive uprising in 1791 the slaves of Saint-Domingue overcame this rampart by imposing universal emancipation, winning independence from France, breaking up the great estates, and undermining the material basis of 'race'.⁴ Du Bois' path-breaking account of Black Reconstruction picks up here where C.L.R. James' famous telling of the Haitian Revolution leaves off. The slaves whose mobilisation and general strike decided the outcome of the American Civil War followed in the Haitians' footsteps, but lacking a comparable monopoly on coercive force, they were prevented from pursuing an egalitarian agenda in the 1870s on the basis of a redistribution of land and property.

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2 Robespierre, 'On the Silver Mark' (April 1791), in Robespierre 2007, p. 7.

3 Although these sequences make up four distinct chapters in the book-length version of this discussion, there is space here in this outline to consider only the revolutions in France and then Russia.

4 C.L.R. James' student Carolyn Fick brings out the grassroots quality and scale of these achievements in her *The Making of Haiti* (1991).

Needless to say, many elements of this second obstacle persist to this day.

Property. The Russian revolutions of 1917 went on to challenge the 'aristocracy of wealth' and property that had sustained the Tsarist autocracy, and by transferring 'all power to the Soviets', i.e. to councils of workers, soldiers, and peasants, they instituted a government no less responsive to the will of the people than the one overseen by the Jacobin-dominated Convention of 1793.⁵ No less than August 1792, the insurrection of October 1917 consolidated a long-running push to organise and assert mass sovereignty. In the face of enormous challenges, however, it wasn't long before the new Bolshevik government usurped this popular sovereign authority, imposed party discipline upon the loose-knit councils, and converted regrettable but justifiable emergency measures into enduring authoritarian institutions. Top-down attempts to institute socialism by decree managed to decapitate the old patrician classes but did not so much eliminate as rework the capital-labour relation itself, through to the slow consolidation of a more centralised 'state capitalism'.

All aspects of this third obstacle, of course, have only been reinforced in the years that followed the eventual collapse of the USSR.

Nation. Upholding and reinforcing these first three barriers, the nation-state persists, both through and after the revolutions in Russia, China, and Vietnam, as a further and more subtly internalised rampart against a fully generalised will of the people, one that the great national liberation movements of the post-war period sought to challenge on its own terms. Though regularly derided by a hostile metropole, the efforts and achievements of the revolutionary mobilisations associated with figures like Castro, Che, Fanon, and Cabral should speak for themselves, and they continue to inspire some of the most fruitful critical engagement with the prevailing global order of things.⁶ The kind of patriotic internationalism that prevailed most especially in Cuba proved difficult to replicate, however, and over the last forty years, the world's most powerful nations have had little trouble maintaining their dominance over less powerful ones. For most intents and purposes the nation-state remains the primary field and horizon of any consequential will of the people – but also, and in keeping with its essential class purpose, it further remains the primary means of ensuring that such a will is kept securely within its sanctioned place, contained within its borders, and channelled through its existing mechanisms of representation. From the French and Haitian through to the Russian and Cuban, each of the great modern revolutions was waged in the name of universal principles, as part of a global or at least tri-continental struggle; but in each case, the

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⁵ Robespierre: 'And what an aristocracy! The most intolerable of all, that of the rich' (Robespierre 2007, p. 7).

⁶ See for instance the enthusiastic reception given to Getachew 2020; cf. Prashad 2008.

threatening 'contagion of revolution' was quarantined within the limits of its national point of departure. Today, whether it's in the US, the UK, Brazil, India, Turkey, Italy, Russia, Israel, Pakistan, Hungary, Sweden – i.e. almost any place you might care to mention – reactionary nationalisms still help to compensate for the predations of transnational neoliberalism. Arguably it is now the nation, more than race or caste, that provides a global capitalist class with its most important ideological bulwark.

One of the main goals of the present study is to listen as far as space allows to the actors involved in these revolutionary sequences, and to foreground some of their many remarkable efforts and achievements. The aim is not to fetishise or romanticise these sequences, and I don't mean to suggest that they represent the only consequential forms of political will, or to propose them (with all their baggage and limitations) as templates to imitate. I refer to them here because they dramatise, within their own particular situations, and in the most emphatic terms, both the capacities and limits of mass political engagement. As Lenin put it during the events that convulsed Russia after 1917, 'the history of revolutions is always richer in its content, more varied, more many-sided, more alive, more ingenious' than the history and practice of even the most effective organisations or 'the most conscious vanguards of the most advanced classes.' And this advantage is perfectly understandable,

since the best vanguards express the consciousness, the will and the passion of tens of thousands of people, while the revolution is one of the moments of special exaltation and tension of all human faculties – the work of the consciousness, the will, the imagination, the passion of hundreds of thousands of people spurred on by the harshest class struggle.⁷

Trotsky's version of this observation likewise emphasises the same two key factors, in recognition of the primacy of political mass psychology – or in other words, of the primacy of class volition. As he notes in the preface to his *History of the Russian Revolution*, 'the most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historical events', thereby interrupting the ordinary routine of rule by their authorised governments and representatives, whether these be kings, ministers, or bureaucrats. At the same time, the distinctive 'dynamic of revolutionary events is directly determined by swift, intense and passionate changes in the psychology of the classes' participating in it. Taken together, from this perspective 'the history of a revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.'⁸

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⁷ Lenin 1966, p. 95.

⁸ Trotsky 1932, preface.

Nobody has made this general point better than Blanqui, who in the mid-nineteenth century, in terms shaped by his experience of the usurped victories of July 1830 and February 1848, repeatedly affirmed his belief that only active and engaged participation in revolutionary change (as distinct from gradual progress or piecemeal reforms) can overcome the profound inertia that sustains the status quo. By the simple but far-reaching fact that it is indeed *established*, he notes, 'the established order is a barrier that conceals the future from us and covers it in an almost impenetrable fog.' 'Only the revolution, in clearing the terrain, will reveal the horizon, slowly lift the veil, and open up the routes, or rather the multiple paths, that lead to the new order.' Utopian hopes or aspirations alone, however alluring their formulation, will never suffice to make the transition from theory to practice. Only direct participation in revolutionary practice can transform diffuse wishes into a focused will. 'Right up until the moment of death and rebirth, the doctrines [that will serve as the] bases of the future society, remain vague aspirations, distant and hazy glimpses', for 'nothing illuminates the way, nothing lifts the veil of the horizon, nothing resolves problems like a great social upheaval.'⁹ Again, if 'a revolution improvises more ideas in one day than the previous thirty years were able to wrest from the brains of a thousand thinkers', 'this is because a revolution transforms a glimmer that once floated like a cloud in the minds of a few into a light that shines forth from the minds of everyone.' Such is the basis for Blanqui's indomitable optimism. 'We must march on. When the masses encounter an obstacle they stop, gather themselves together, and overturn it. This is the history of the past; it is also that of the future.'¹⁰

This project aims to acknowledge, then, the significance of revolutionary mobilisations for the analysis of political will. But it also aims to acknowledge their limitations, and to consider how some of these very achievements came to be re-purposed as new barriers to the wider goal of a fully inclusive democratic politics, i.e. as barriers to the consolidation of a political will unbound by *any* geographic marker. Such would be a will organised and sustained, finally, as the '*will of people*' without any delimitation at all (apart from the exclusion of those who themselves oppose such a fully generalised will, by insisting their particular powers or class privileges). By contrast, the great national revolutions remained precisely that, and were thus limited by their

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9This is one of the several ways that Blanqui echoes a principle recognised by Spinoza, one subsequently emphasised by Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Badiou, and then in different ways by more recent scholars like Nick Nesbitt, Tracy McNulty, and Bruno Bosteels: 'Nothing positive contained in a false idea can be annulled by the presence of what is true' (Spinoza 2002, p. 323 [*Ethics* book IV, proposition 1]; cf. for example Nesbitt 2022, p. 107; Nesbitt 2008; McNulty 2009; Bosteels 2011). Mere truth alone isn't sufficient to displace what is false or deceptive; the composition and intervention of an engaged collective actor remains an essential operator in any passage from the one to the other.

10 Blanqui 2018, all cited in Hallward 2017.

national (and all too often nationalist) limits – the usurpation of the French and Russian revolutions by Napoleon and Stalin is paradigmatic here. And although it's well-known that it was the massing of militant women who played a decisive vanguard role in these events, for instance in the October 1789 march on Versailles or the defiant celebrations of International Women's Day in February 1917, some of the nationalist limits of these sequences were further reinforced by the gendered priorities of their leadership. Notwithstanding the role of figures like Claire Lacombe and Pauline Léon, the Jacobin sequence in France did little to challenge Rousseau's own thoroughly conventional conceptions of virility and femininity. The Russian revolutionaries were less blinkered, but despite the significance of figures like Alexandra Kollontai and Clara Zetkin, or of Catherine Breshkovsky and Maria Spiridonova, it's no secret that their world was again dominated by male actors. I hope it goes without saying that an appreciation for Jacobin and Bolshevik achievements and resolve isn't intended to suggest that revolutionary war or national liberation movements are the only forms that political will might take, to the exclusion of struggles led by, for instance, climate activists, indigenous land defenders, trade union militants, landless workers, and many others. The revolutionary sequences take pride of place here simply because their leading actors regular frame them in the explicit terms of a will of the people, and because they illustrate in no uncertain terms what the realisation of such a will might involve.

Apart from the enormous power of all those who remain determined to resist it, another thing that today makes such realisation seem so difficult and remote is the fact that resistance to a voluntarist emphasis on a general or popular will isn't just as old as entrenched bourgeois opposition to both Rousseau or Marx, or to the legacies of the Jacobin and Bolshevik revolutions. It goes back much further than that, and can be traced to some of the earliest explicit accounts of the will in what becomes the 'European' tradition – the thoroughly individualising or anti-generalising conceptions of *voluntas* developed by the Stoics and then Augustine and other Christian theologians. The Stoics help to consolidate and then popularise a conceptual pairing that will persist, in one form or another, via the Reformation and the subsequent rise of *laissez-faire* or possessive individualism, through market-conforming liberalism and on to more recent and still dominant anti-collectivist neoliberalisms. This pairing combines a private freedom or 'inner citadel' of rational self-mastery along with an equally rationalised public submission to the causal forces that apparently determine one's destiny as part of the wider and irresistible course of things. As Jessica Whyte shows in a compelling study, what remains most characteristic of our own neoliberal morality is the way it combines narrowly circumscribed inward freedoms with unconditional submission to general market outcomes and their social consequences, however catastrophic these might be –

consequences that appear to impose themselves on people as a kind of inescapable destiny or 'fate'.¹¹

To this day, to the extent that a notion of the will is accepted at all, it's generally as a merely individual faculty, on the model of utilitarian or consumer choice. More political appeals to voluntarism are routinely condemned as complicit with disastrous motifs of anthropocentric mastery and control, as an echo of the fatal hubris that prevents us from relating to the earth and the species we share it with. Aversion to the very notion of a general will, and to the concepts of sovereignty and command that are associated with it, remains almost ubiquitous across European political philosophy in particular, especially in the calamitous wake of fascistic acclamations that sought to dress themselves up as the 'triumph of the will'. A very partial list of principled opponents would include Adorno, the later Heidegger, Arendt, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Agamben. Even more engaged thinkers like Sartre or Badiou, for all for their investment in collective commitments, try to steer clear of the dubiously 'psychological' domain of the will *per se*. Suspicion of or hostility to the whole cluster of notions bound up with volition, intention, purpose, sincerity, and cause – the cluster that Rousseau tends to bundle together around the notion of *virtue* and the 'force' or strength he associates with it – remains a widely shared reflex across many academic disciplines. So does suspicion of the very categories of generality and universality, whose apparently authoritarian or flattening connotations are routinely condemned in favour of values like difference, diversity, singularity, fragmentation, disruption, complexity, *errance*, and so on. One way or another, aversion to any sort of voluntarism is shared across a very broad political spectrum, from conservative traditionalists (who favour continuity and sedimented habits) to free-market individualists (who embrace the market's capacity to generate apparently 'spontaneous' and emphatically un-willed and unplanned patterns of order and distribution). Those who prioritise the sub-voluntary force of unconscious, neurological, environmental, economic, or technological tendencies all draw on a similar aversion.

II Voluntarist priorities

Against this anti-voluntarist consensus, the main goal of this project is to reclaim and defend the much derided, much dismissed and much misunderstood category of the will, understood as a relational capacity that links, more or less adequately, desires to expectations, expectations to intentions, intentions to decisions, decisions to actions, and actions to consequences. If it exists at all, the will operates as a loosely defined practical faculty, without sharply circumscribed edges

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¹¹ Whyte 2019, pp. 162, 113.

or limits; as a mental capacity it has more in common with something like imagination or desire than it does with say memory or perception. It operates by making connections across distinct domains, and not through confinement to specific tasks. To affirm voluntary and moral action as enjoying a relative autonomy in practice, and thus as irreducible to natural processes, is not to deny the ways that human beings are part of nature, or our kinship with other species. There is nothing about its way of linking of means and ends, and of expectations and outcomes, furthermore, that restricts the will to a merely individual domain – such a domain would figure, instead, as the most restricted and typically most inconsequential dimension of an essentially social and collective faculty. As Gerard Winstanley could see very well, much of what might ordinarily be experienced as forms of ‘inward bondage’ (including ‘pride, hypocrisy, envy, sorrow, fears, desperation and madness’) are in part ‘all occasioned by the outward bondage that one sort of people lay upon another’, and are best addressed by confronting the ‘relation between the oppressor and the oppressed.’¹² Even when it is exercised by an isolated individual, volition is no more solitary a practice than speech, and the extent to which its exercise is atomised or combined, in any given situation, itself varies with its extensity and intensity, and with the ways it is more or less organised, sustained, informed, concentrated, and so on.

The wager of this project is that the most fruitful way of both understanding and participating in political practice is to acknowledge the primacy of political will as determinant in the *first* instance. ‘Insurrection of thought’, as Wendell Phillips recognised, ‘always precedes insurrection of arms’¹³, and if sufficiently determined it may sometimes dis-arm its most powerful opponents.

To stress the first instance isn’t to conflate it with the ‘last instance’ or with every instance. The priority is to foreground concerns and purposes that come to be deliberately shared across groups of actors who commit to a common cause, actors whose solidarity and collective capacity ultimately rests on nothing but the strength and perseverance of this voluntary commitment. However much they might be conditioned by economic pressures and facilitated by conducive circumstances or situations, willed association and collective action are willed or voluntary ‘all the way down’. Their scope and limits remain more or less ‘up to us’ in basically the same sense as any voluntary action.

The repeated insistence on ‘more or less’ here and all through this study is meant to emphasise the relative and relational quality of the will and its capacities. A will is always more or less general, more or less expansive, more or less inclusive, more or less informed, more or less

¹² Gerard Winstanley, ‘*The Law of Freedom in a Platform*’ (1652), <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/winstanley/1652/law-freedom/ch01.htm>.

¹³ Wendell Phillips, ‘Harper’s Ferry’ (1 November 1859), in Phillips 2001, p. 75.

united, more or less committed, more or less determined, organised, disciplined, resolute, forceful, self-critical, etc. Nothing is more damaging than to embrace (or reject) the will as an absolute, as an all-or-nothing package, on either libertarian or determinist grounds. To hold any actor wholly responsible for an action and its consequences is as misguided as the denial of agency altogether. The goal here is rather to discern and highlight the role played by purposeful actors as part of the interminable work of critical reflection upon their priorities, values, and choices, and thus to honour them as the working 'authors and actors of their own drama.'¹⁴ It is to credit them as actors even as they play out their roles in situations that they confront rather than invent: to insist that people make their own history is never to suggest that they make it in circumstances of their choosing. There need be no insurmountable tension between an emphasis on political will and a recognition of the many pressures that operate 'independently of the will' of those affected by them. But unlike some recent readings of Marx, rather than draw out the remorseless imperatives of capital as an impersonal logic and self-contradicting system, the priority of a voluntarist approach would rather be to confront the purposes and actions of class actors themselves – starting with those capitalist actors who, as we all know, quite deliberately put profits before people, and who are perfectly willing to do everything necessary to police the consequences. The markets in coffee, sugar, tobacco and cotton, no less than in oil, cobalt or lithium, were developed and funded by specific people for perfectly conscious reasons. From enclosing landlords to industrial magnates, from William Randolph Hearst to Rupert Murdoch, from Henry Ford to Jeff Bezos, from the Mont Pèlerin pioneers to Koch Industries (such lists quickly become tedious...) – the histories made by such people are not exhausted by referring to them simply as the 'bearers' of impersonal forces or functions.

Nor, more importantly, can we understand the measures taken by the exploited and the oppressed without foregrounding their own expectations and priorities, and the strategic choices they made to advance their ends. Although historians regularly emphasise the often-unexpected and surprising quality of the mass insurrections that occasionally punctuate modern political history, it would be a big mistake to infer that revolutionary mobilisations are themselves essentially 'involuntary' sequences. On the contrary, the great revolutions remain the most suggestive demonstrations of what mass political will involves, and what it is capable of. Not only were pivotal sequences like October 1917 in Russia, or August 1792 in France, or the 1791 Bois Caïman gathering in Haiti, or the campaign in Cuba that began in 1953, etc., all thoroughly planned affairs; more importantly, the mass capacities for deliberation and collective action that made these sequences possible, and that

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¹⁴ Marx 2000, p. 223 [*The Poverty of Philosophy*].

were grounded in the day-to-day relations of solidarity that helped ordinary people endure life in cities like Paris or Petrograd or Havana, are the very stuff and substance of political will. It is these capacities that allowed for collective defiance of ruling class strategies, and it is sustained cultivation of these (thoroughly 'conscious' and articulate) capacities, over many years and in the face of daunting obstacles, that also empowered a critical mass of people to take the initiative on decisive occasions like the Petrograd celebration of International Women's Day in February 1917 or the women's march on Versailles in October 1789.

Several methodological priorities follow from this general orientation.

(a) If the will is to be taken as 'determinant in the first instance', in the analysis of a political situation the first priority should always be to listen to the actors and to try to interpret what they mean to say and do. This involves relating to them as *actors* in both the actional and theatrical sense of the term, i.e. as actors (rather than more equivocal 'subjects', 'agents' or 'beings') who can decide on some aspects of the roles they believe they are required to play, on the stage where they find themselves, in keeping with Sartre's maxim that 'we can always make something of what is made of us.' It involves accepting that any exercise of volition can only be properly understood from the perspective of the actor rather than the observer: if it exists at all, the will is a faculty that can be understood only from the first-person perspective of an I or a we. Direct participation has priority here over detached observation. For reasons that Sartre, Fanon and then Badiou help to explain, only 'partisan' commitment or engagement can illuminate what a willed action involves. If as Rousseau emphasises 'power can be represented but not will,'¹⁵ the implications of his famous critique of representation reach well beyond his contempt for parliamentarism.

(b) If the will is a matter of intentions and purpose, furthermore, then there is indeed no evading the equally Rousseauist (and again thoroughly old-fashioned) questions of 'sincerity' and integrity, for reasons that Robespierre or Martov might foreground as much as Sartre or Che. The risks here are obvious but unavoidable, as matters of trust and confidence have always been essential to any sort of collective commitment; the fates of insurgents like Gracchus Babeuf, Emiliano Zapata, or Charles Peralte (not to mention Lumumba or Allende) dramatise a much wider point. By the same token, intentions can only be assessed via actions, for the will is itself the process, as Hegel argues in the opening of his *Philosophy of Right*, that translates the former into the latter; critical judgement can assess only these translations and their consequences, not their origin or source. Action is the decisive and consequential element of the will.

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¹⁵ Rousseau 1997c, p. 57 [SC 2:1].

(c) An emphasis on actors and action implies an emphasis on capacity and power, power in the sense of *pouvoir* or ability – strictly speaking, the phrase ‘willing and able’ is a pleonasm. If there’s a way where there’s a will it’s because to will the end is to will the means.

(d) To foreground capacity means, in turn, to foreground what is perhaps the great tension in Rousseau’s political thought, and the greatest challenge facing any voluntarist political project: the tension between generality and concentration, or between extensity and intensity. On the one hand, ‘the more the state expands, the more its real force increases’, and ‘the most general will is also the most just’;¹⁶ on the other hand, ‘the people’s force acts only when concentrated, it evaporates and is lost as it spreads, like the effect of gunpowder scattered on the ground and which ignites only grain by grain.’¹⁷

Against the routine investment in difference, divergence, disruption, fragmentation, and so on, the great challenge of our time remains that of simultaneously *generalising* and *concentrating* a common and egalitarian will. Against the array of forces striving to divide and contain, our watchwords should be those of confluence and convergence – an emphasis that is all the more pressing now that we can no longer set automatic store by the hope that was so appealing to an older generation of revolutionaries, of trusting that in time the irresistible current of proletarianisation would, all by itself, help to level and coordinate a global working class. Time is a luxury we no longer have, and Benjamin and Gramsci were surely right when they noticed that the great mistake of their generation had been to believe that it was swimming with the prevailing current, rather than against it.¹⁸ The only way to build a counter-current powerful and massive enough to change the established course of things is to combine every emancipatory stream that is compatible with a shared sense of direction, one that might be willed by people in general. There is no shortcut through the endless, far-flung work of discussions and deliberations that may eventually converge in a common cause – or as Gramsci puts it, there is no sidestepping that ‘endless quantity of books, pamphlets, review and newspaper articles, conversations and oral debates repeated countless times, which in their gigantic aggregation represent this long labour that gives birth to a collective will’ equipped with the clarity and ‘degree of homogeneity’ its realisation requires.¹⁹ Of course each stream and each debate has its own source, its own terrain,

16 Rousseau, 1997c, p. 88 [SC 3:2]; Rousseau, 1997b, p. 8.

17 Rousseau, 1997c, p. 104 [SC 3:8].

18 ‘Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current’ (Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, §11, in Benjamin 2007, p. 258; cf. Gramsci, 1994, p. 110).

19 Gramsci 1971, p. 194.

its own trajectory and élan, but it's only their converging in a common torrent that can lend them the force required to overwhelm the defences of the status quo.

The challenge remains: the more general a will becomes, the more its exercise tends to stretch and slacken. The more a coalition widens to accommodate divergent perspectives, the more likely it is to accommodate compromises with the status quo. A torrent that simply floods its banks (to end this protracted metaphor) risks stagnation pure and simple. This is a problem that the mere political equivalent of gravity will never solve.

III The consolidation of sovereignty

For a long time, following the decline and then collapse of the Roman empire across Europe, diffuse feudal forms of military and ideological control proved generally sufficient to preserve social order and class hierarchies. Local rebellions might extract local concessions, but so long as populations remained overwhelmingly rural and dispersed, and linked only by rudimentary means of communication, there could be little prospect of mass collective pressure to transform the prevailing state of things. As Marx suggests in the famous final chapters of his *Capital* volume 1, things began to change over the long sixteenth century with the growth of commerce and the kinds of originary capital accumulation required for profit-oriented commodity production on a tendentially global scale – colonial conquest and the expropriation of indigenous lands, the transatlantic slave trade, the expulsion of peasants and the enclosure of their commons, anti-vagrancy laws, the growth of a destitute labour force, the expansion of cities and of markets and of an increasingly literate public sphere, and so on. Capital rose together with relatively centralising forms of state authority, as mutually enabling and reinforcing forms of class rule adapted to the newly unsettled conditions of post-feudal society. These are the modern conditions in which it slowly begins to make sense to speak of a 'will of the people', and of the distinctive sort of political struggles that might control or empower such a will.

In addition to their inextricable co-implication in the domains of war, finance, and credit, capital and the modern state share two distinctive characteristics that help to mark them out from previous kinds of rule.

First and foremost, they function on the basis of newly imperious forms of authority, or 'sovereignty'. As Bodin and then Hobbes liked to emphasise, sovereign law should be understood in terms of unilateral and unequivocal *command*, and most fundamentally as 'a command of that person (whether man or council) whose instruction is the reason for obedience.'²⁰ No additional reasons or justifications are required, so long

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²⁰ Hobbes 1998, p. 154.

as the commanding power is indeed supreme or sovereign, i.e. so long as it actually and reliably solicits obedience from those subjects whom it commands, notably in their roles as soldiers, as tax-payers, and as workers. 'Whether the holder of Sovereign power is one or a few or all', Spinoza adds, 'indubitably the supreme right of commanding whatever they wish belongs to him or them' – but only so long as they 'truly hold supreme power', and can indeed oblige others to do as they wish or will.²¹ It's precisely this appeal to the mere will of the commander that testifies to the distinctive modern ambition of absolute sovereignty: unlike any sort of prevailing custom or tradition, and unlike any more or less benevolent or well-informed advice, the commanding power of a law here requires no 'other reason than the will of him that says it,'²² such that best way of defining a law is simply to equate it with the 'the declared will of the Sovereign.'²³

It's essential to remember that capital too is best understood as a social relation of sovereign authority and control, and Marx's simplest definition is also his most illuminating. What is capital? The answer is nothing physical (it's not simply a matter of resources, tools, machinery), but it's also not something abstract or elusive (it's not simply an impersonal logic of domination). In perhaps the most important line of his major work, Marx says that 'capital is essentially command over unpaid labour.'²⁴ Such command is as concrete and deliberate as any social relation can be. As is well known, Marx assumes that in any given society, 'the specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude', or of rulers and ruled, along with all that reproduces and reinforces this relationship.²⁵ It's the particular way that capital compels labour to undertake unremunerated work that distinguishes its rule from that of feudalism and other older modes of production, and it's this specific social relation of command that institutes 'capital [a]s the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society.'²⁶ From its violent origins in mass expulsion and expropriation, capital accumulates at a

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21 Spinoza 2007, p. 202. 'The person possessing the sovereign power to compel all men by force [...] has sovereign right over all men', Spinoza continues, but 'will retain this right, though, for only so long as he retains this power of doing whatever he wishes' (p. 199).

22 Hobbes 1994, p. 165; cf. Hobbes 1998, p. 153.

23 Hobbes 1998, p. 85. Pufendorf makes a similar argument. 'No man can say, *Sic volo, Sic jubeo* – so I will, and so I command – unless ... *Stet pro ratione voluntas* – his will is his reason. We obey laws therefore, not principally upon account of the matter of them, but upon account of the legislator's will' (Pufendorf 1729, p. 59).

24 Marx 1990, p. 672; cf. pp. 424-5.

25 Marx 1991, p. 927.

26 Marx 1993, p. 107.

rate that varies with the scope and intensity of such command, and its other distinctive characteristics – its investment in marketisation and commodity production, its calculation of value according to socially necessary labour time, its compulsion to maximise absolute and relative surplus value, etc. – are corollaries of its capacity to impose itself as the ultimate or sovereign authority shaping social practice in general. In a world commanded by capital, furthermore, it follows that the most consequential powers of mutiny or disobedience (and with them the potential for an alternative power of command, and alternative criteria for social practice) lie primarily with labour, labour in its broad generic sense, i.e. as people in their associated productive and deliberative capacity.²⁷ So long as capital rules the world, ‘the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class’²⁸; by the same token, from a Marxist perspective ‘the working class is revolutionary or it is nothing.’²⁹

If it is to be conceived and respected as absolute, i.e. as actually commanding, sovereign power can only be understood in one of two ways – as transcendent, or as immanent. Either sovereignty in some sense descends from on high, from God or its equivalent, or from some remote ancestral past, and thus commands respect precisely as remote, and unchallengeable; or else, it emanates from the assembled body of the people themselves, as a body that in some more or less literal sense might be understood as having its own needs, wants, and will. Despite the best efforts of the Stuarts in England, of the post-Napoleonic Bourbons in France, and of Metternich and his ilk in Restoration Europe, the struggle between these two conceptions of sovereignty was decided irreversibly, in the two hundred years that separate the 1640s from 1848, in favour of the immanent or popular alternative. In England the narrow door that was prised open by Parliamentary victory in the civil war widened a little more with the new constitutional arrangements of 1688 and then 1832; in France the principle (if not its consequences) was conceded when in 1830 Louis-Philippe replaced the hopelessly autocratic Charles X to become the first ‘king of the French’, and accepted his coronation not as a gift from God but as an ‘expression of the national will’. Louis-Philippe’s own fall, eighteen years later, confirmed the fact that ultimately there is no middle ground, and that a sovereign who foregoes the legitimacy granted by divine right or immemorial custom cannot rely merely on the grudging support of a small fraction of the population. Once top-down autocracy no longer commands obedience, there is nothing for it: the only stable government will be one that at least appears to respect the will of the people it rules. If henceforth

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²⁷ Marx 1991, ch. 7.

²⁸ Marx, *Communist Manifesto*, in Marx 2000, p. 253.

²⁹ Marx, letter to Engels, 18 February 1865 (citing a letter to Schweitzer of 13 February), in Marx 1987, p. 96.

it's the people's will that is to be recognised as the ultimate source of authority, there will be only two broad ways of over-ruling the people – either by controlling the conditions that decide who might belong to them, and how much they might matter; or by shaping what they might want.

The second feature, then, that characterises these two modern forms of command is their relative reliance on consensual or voluntary obedience. It's essential to stress right away the *relative* and partial quality of this reliance. The ultimate sanction of a commanding power remains fear, and the authority of both state and capital rest, in the final analysis, on coercive force. This obvious point is dramatised in any revolutionary or near-revolutionary sequence, and any uncertainty on this score can be quickly dispelled by a brief review of the foreign policy of the state that, after the UK, took on the role of the chief agent and enforcer of capital's global domination – there is nothing subtle about the pattern of US intervention in places like Mexico, Haiti, the Philippines, Japan, Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Iraq... As a wide range of thinkers from Hobbes and Locke to Hume and Smith recognised, however, a government that relies primarily on terror cannot profitably command the workings of a complex commercial society: a prosperous liberal commonwealth is one whose members are better motivated by greed than fear. A population that consents to its taxation, and that agrees to work off its debts, can generate more revenue for its rulers and creditors than one that is merely compelled to supply tribute. By the time England's Charles I tried to tax his subjects without parliamentary approval, the principle that property-owning men could only be required to give up some of their wealth with their consent was well established – and also securely limited, by centuries of reinforcement, to the wealthiest fraction of the male population, excluding women, servants, the poor, the criminal, the colonised, the 'unfit', and so on. When the Leveller spokesman Thomas Rainsborough made the case for universal male suffrage during the Putney Debates of October 1647 (whereby 'every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government'), Henry Ireton countered him with the time-honoured argument aligning political representation with the ownership of private property, the argument that would prevail for the next couple of centuries, and that in most respects still prevails: 'no person hath a right to an interest or share in the disposing of the affairs of the kingdom [...] that hath not a permanent fixed interest in this kingdom.'³⁰ John Locke combined both lines of argument when he concluded that since people are 'by nature all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of his estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent.'³¹

30 *The Putney Debates* (1647), <https://oll.libertyfund.org/page/1647-the-putney-debates>.

31 Locke 1988, *Second Treatise of Government*, §95.

So long as the interests of property were not seriously contested, nor its unequal distribution challenged, so then it became safe to recognise, across a wide spectrum, that a legitimate government is one that derives its 'just powers from the consent of the governed' (Jefferson) and that all 'sovereignty is based on human consent' (de Maistre).³² Since as Hegel recognised 'it is inherent in the principle of the modern state that all of an individual's actions should be mediated by his will', so then 'only he who wills to be coerced can be coerced into anything.'³³ 'External domination can accomplish nothing in the long run.'³⁴ In the wake of the religious wars that ravaged Europe after the Reformation, even an arch-authoritarian Richelieu could see that 'reason' is a more effective way of securing obedience than naked violence: 'it is much more fitting to conduct men by measures that insensibly win over their wills, than by means that usually make them act only when they are forced to do so.'³⁵ By the time they had won their independence from a Britain that had seemed determined (as the rather aspirational Declaratory Act of 1766 phrased it) to assert its 'full power and authority [...] to bind the colonies and people of America [...] in all cases whatsoever', the newly United States of America even went so far as to promise their indigenous neighbours, in the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, that 'their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent.'

Observing the remarkable 'easiness with which the many are governed by the few', Hume's reflections on 'the implicit submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers' have remained pertinent for subsequent generations of rulers.

When we enquire by what means this wonder is brought about, we shall find, that as Force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. 'Tis therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular.³⁶

Since Hume knows as well as Machiavelli that virtually every government we know anything about was 'founded originally either on usurpation nor

32 Jefferson, The United States Declaration of Independence, 1776; De Maistre: 'Sovereignty is based on human consent, for, if a given people were suddenly to agree that they would not obey, then sovereignty would disappear; it is impossible to imagine the establishment of sovereignty without imagining a people that agrees to obey' (De Maistre 1884, pp. 312-13).

33 Hegel 1991, §299A, §91.

34 Hegel 1999, p. 220.

35 Richelieu, *Testament politique* II, 2, cited in Keohane 1980, p. 177.

36 Hume, 'Of the First Principles of Government', in Hume 1994, p. 16.

conquest, or both, without any pretence of a fair consent, or voluntary subjection of the people,'³⁷ so then the essential art of government is simply to present and preserve itself as securely *established*, i.e. as founded upon an opinion that has over time come to be reliably shaped by custom and habit, and on repeated experiences of acquiescence and submission. From this perspective, the people can be trusted to defer to established power, so long as it appears to remain securely established.

The great question then becomes, what does it take to secure established power in the minds and wills of the governed? There is a qualitative difference, of course, between acknowledging the need to harness a sufficient degree of popular consent, in the sense of acquiescence with government proposals, and encouraging active participation in a will to work out what the people themselves might want their government to do. How best to secure the former while discouraging the latter? Given his essentially mechanical and simplistic conception of the will, along with his acceptance of the apparent inability of coercive power to affect a person's inward beliefs or 'secret thoughts', Hobbes had remained satisfied that overt forms of intimidation could reliably 'form the wills' of those subjected to sovereign authority.³⁸ But this is the limitation of Hobbes' absolutism. Reluctant and inwardly 'involuntary' obedience is still obedience, but it offers a state threatened by seditious subjects (or capitalists threatened by unruly workers) a less stable foundation than one populated by 'sincerely' deferential citizens. The sort of brazenly authoritarian power justified by Hobbes wasn't powerful enough actually to allow England's Charles I to impose unpopular religious forms or to extract the payment of unauthorised taxes; Louis XVI and Charles X of France and then Nicholas II of Russia would likewise discover, in turn, the futility of declaring 'it is legal because I will it,' once this autocratic 'I' cannot actually command either financial credit on the one hand or a loyal army on the other.

Over the long revolutionary era that begins in the 1640s, more actively *willing* obedience becomes the great object of modern statecraft, just as capital's particular concern is with the exploitation, in Frédéric Lordon's apt formulation, of 'willing slaves'. By creating a desperate and dependent workforce, capital's originary accumulation paved the way for newly 'voluntary' means of exploitation. 'Hunger will tame the fiercest animals', noted Joseph Townsend with satisfaction in 1786, in a suggestive tract condemning his contemporaries' version of welfare. The repeated and inescapable experience of need teaches 'obedience and subjection' to even the most resistant labourers. Whereas the kind of overt coercion required to sustain chattel slavery is expensive and risky, 'hunger is not

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37 Hume, 'Of the Original Contract', in Hume 1994, pp. 188-89.

38 Hobbes 1994, p. 109; cf. Koselleck 2000.

only peaceable, silent, unremitting pressure, but, as the most natural motive to industry and labour, it calls forth the most powerful exertions.' Best of all, the kind of 'free labour' undertaken to stave off hunger is precisely willed from within, rather than imposed from without. 'The slave must be compelled to work but the free man should be left to his own judgment and discretion', and allowed to enjoy the comforts of his inner citadel – so long as he remains firmly confined within its limits, and deprived of any possibility of acting or combining to change the relations of production themselves.³⁹ Free workers can be trusted to submit to what are quite properly called 'market forces', 'market imperatives', or 'market discipline', so long as they can do nothing to protect themselves collectively from their consequences. Building on the conditions established by its originary accumulation, capital does everything necessary to ensure that the direct pressures of need and scarcity become quasi-ontological conditions of working class life.

The imposition of such imperatives across all sectors of society was one of the epochal achievements of that 'great transformation' which, as Karl Polanyi demonstrated in his landmark study of Victorian political economy, enabled the enduring triumph of market mechanisms at the expense of quasi-Jacobin projects of collective action and social change.⁴⁰ The great virtue of market forces as understood by the classical political economists is precisely the way they appear to generate unwilling or 'spontaneously ordered' outcomes as not only necessary but as justifiably or 'providentially' necessary. They determine not only what happens but what should happen, and it is then left to consumers and producers to follow the Stoic emperor's advice, and to 'teach yourself to be at one with the things ordained for you.'⁴¹

If capital too operates essentially as a form of sovereign power, if it is 'essentially command over unpaid labour', then as Marx understood with particular clarity, properly enforced and supervised voluntary subjection can be more efficient and reliable and thus more profitable than reluctant compliance with brute force. Again, it's essential to stress that coercive power remains essential to capital's exploitation of labour, as the blood-soaked history of its originary and ongoing accumulation demonstrates all too well, and as the deployments of state power in the service of capital confirm to this day. As Winstanley could see well before Marx, when workers 'dare to work for hire' they enrich those who use or employ them, and thereby 'lift up Tyrants and Tyranny' (and by the same token, 'by denying to labour for hire, they shall pull them down

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³⁹ Townsend 1786; cf. Polanyi 2001, pp. 118-21.

⁴⁰ Polanyi 2001; see also McNally 1993.

⁴¹ Marcus Aurelius 2002, book 6, §39.

again').⁴² Established on the twin pedestals of patriarchy and slavery, far-reaching mechanisms of divide and rule continue to differentiate working populations by race, gender, and nation, and Marx recognised that any direct challenge to capital's rule would always be met by one version or another of a 'slave-owner's revolt'. 'Free labour' is most profitably and 'competitively' employed when it is disciplined by exposure to the full coercive force of what Heide Gerstenberger calls 'market violence', and long-standing comparisons between 'wage slavery' and chattel slavery remained routine well into the nineteenth century.⁴³ Abraham Lincoln still spoke for many of his contemporaries when he condemned the loss of independence associated with working for someone else.

Once securely in place, however, i.e. once fully internalised and normalised within the bounds of that civic body whose consent capital deems essential to its operation, the 'invisible threads' and 'golden chains' of waged employment can begin to bind 'free workers' more securely than the blatant shackles of plantation slavery or colonial expropriation. If appropriately managed, the 'silent compulsion of economic relations' proves more difficult to resist than overt reliance on soldiers and police.⁴⁴ So does a suitable combination of apparently arcane financial pressures and credit mechanisms, provided by a deliberately under-regulated banking industry. The more powerful states may retain nominal control over sovereign currencies and national fiscal policies, but as everyone knows the international financial markets are allowed to operate with supra-sovereign authority and with supra-national impunity. Left unchecked, the omnipresent threat of capital flight, and of downward pressure on credit ratings or currency evaluations, serves not only to foreclose the sort of left-reformist policies associated with figures like Corbyn and Mélenchon but even to discipline overly reckless lurches to the right, like that briefly attempted by the UK's hapless Truss and Kwarteng double-act in the autumn of 2022. To talk of 'taking back control' while bond markets are left to govern governments is an exercise in distraction pure and simple.

As Chomsky and many others have repeatedly pointed out, corporate leaders have long understood the need to win 'the everlasting battle for the minds of men' by 'indoctrinating citizens with the capitalist story' and inoculating them against the dangerous lures of socialism or collectivism.⁴⁵ The ideal employee of a capitalist employer, like the ideal citizen of a modern state, is one who is willing not only to enforce its

⁴² Winstanley, 'The True Levellers Standard Advanced' (1649), <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/winstanley/1649/levellers-standard.htm>.

⁴³ Gerstenberger 2014.

⁴⁴ Marx 1990, pp. 719, 769, 899; cf. Leipold 2022; Lordon 2014; Mau 2022; Wood 2005.

⁴⁵ Chomsky 2014; cf. Chomsky and Waterstone, 2021.

rules but to internalise its values, to fight for its interests, to fund its expenses, and to pay off its debts. Best of all would be citizen-employees who do these things in the earnest belief that they are doing them on the basis of their own free will, and who remain fully invested in the relative advantages they enjoy, as citizens, and as salaried, by comparison with all those who are deprived of citizenship or employment or both.⁴⁶ The supplementing of familiar kinds of labour-disciplining machinery and automation with newly artificial forms of both intelligence and volition, meanwhile, seem to herald further forms of social control whose implications may defy prediction until the very moment they are imposed.

After Hobbes, Rousseau and then Hegel mark clear stages along the path towards more penetrating forms of psychic power, culminating in those myriad projects (deployed in prisons, armies, factories, corporations, advertising strategies, social media platforms...) to engineer or 'manufacture' consent that continue to accelerate. Since a law is the expression of a will, and since 'morals alone penetrate internally and direct wills,'⁴⁷ so then Rousseau understood that the real foundations of political power rest on the available means of directing wills – whether it's to the advantage of a privileged few, or in favour of the common good. 'While it is good to know how to use men as they are', he insists, 'it is much better still to make them what one needs them to be; the most absolute authority is that which penetrates to man's inmost being, and affects his will no less than it does his actions.'⁴⁸ At the limit, the most effective forms of subjection would be those sustained by the energies and enthusiasms of the very people subjected to them, with a minimum of resistance or critical distance. As for those who might be seen to lack a will of their own, like the 'lunatics and idiots' evoked in Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (and by implication, like all those 'savages' that Locke and then Mill's compatriots would colonise in the Americas, Asia, and Africa), their consent can be taken for granted, as directed by their guardians and overseers.⁴⁹

Capital's unprecedented hegemony rests on the way its powers of command draw both on unprecedented means of coercion and on unprecedented means of manufacturing consent. The more fully its neoliberal agenda is implemented, the more any given government's options are decided by whether global investors and lenders have confidence in its credit or 'credibility'. Authoritarian neoliberalism will remain hegemonic, all over the world, for as long as it can persuade a sufficient number of people that there is still no alternative. It's becoming

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46 Cf. Byung-Chul Han 2017.

47 Rousseau 1994b, p. 71.

48 Rousseau, 1997b, p. 13.

49 Locke 1988, *Second Treatise of Government*, §60; cf. Chatterjee 2004.

increasingly difficult, however, to disguise what this hegemony involves, and to deflect attention from what it is and what it seeks, as the power that one class wields over others. Its power to command rests in the end, no less than that of Charles Stuart or Louis Capet, on the willing obedience of its people. But who are these people? And what is their will?

IV Who are the people?

'The people' as a term can mean anything from a rigidly defined ethnic community to a seething mob of the resentful poor, and as a result the phrase 'popular sovereignty' itself remains equivocal. The ambiguities of usage (*peuple*, *populus*, *demos*, etc.) go back to antiquity, and have only multiplied over the past two centuries, and especially the past several decades, with the remarkable consolidation of 'democracy' as a globally recognised (and thus utterly vacuous) criterion of any legitimate form of government.⁵⁰ I propose here to simplify this semantic diversity by naming its two poles as starkly as possible, with labels that may sound rather forced or artificial but that should at least help to reduce equivocation – 'realm' on the hand, and 'mass' on the other. Popular sovereignty (to say nothing of 'populism') has been become almost as empty a phrase as 'representative democracy'; the implications of mass sovereignty should offer less scope for evasion.

By *realm* I mean the people treated as an object or observable domain mediated by order, hierarchy, balance, and place. Some of the great thinkers of the realm include Aristotle, Hume, and Hegel. If Hegel remains an especially important philosopher of the realm it's not only because his account of estates and corporations provides most members of civil society with a well-defined place: his great contribution is to have developed a rationalising account of 'free will', precisely, that presents it as actualised only through the 'disposing' of citizens via institutions and practices that fully align their wills with their position in the state.

The term's archaic connotations are helpful. Drawing on its regal etymology, the realm should simultaneously evoke the people in two overlapping dimensions. They appear here first and foremost as the subjects of a kingdom or its post-monarchical substitute, i.e. a differentiated domain in all its localised and geographic complexity, one grounded in the established distribution of property and especially (drawing on further regal associations) of 'real estate', and in the obligations associated with it. Although the implications were perhaps most explicit in legal frameworks that treated serfs as an integral part of the land they worked, as Douglass and then Du Bois pointed out the practice of treating slaves first and foremost as real estate (to be followed by treating them as the targets of redlining, school segregation,

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50 Cf. Dunn 2018.

urban 'renewal', mass incarceration...) continues to shape the social fabric of a country like the United States to this day.⁵¹ The people appear here, second, as classified members of a social 'pyramid' that is ordered from the top down, a model exemplified (not least for Madison, Hamilton and their fellow 'founding fathers') by the Rome's SPQR, in which a sprawling *populus* is mediated and led by a senate staffed solely by members of a tiny patrician or patriarch class.

The recurring norms and values of the realm, whatever its specific form, are those of harmony, stability, security, integration, and so on, on the model of an organic unity. A stable realm is one sustained by balanced interests and 'suitable' expectations. The realm is most fundamentally a place of inheritance and succession, the domain of a properly habitual if not involuntary reproduction, facilitated on the one hand by positive appeals to proximity, nostalgia, mythology, 'culture', and so on, and on the other, by negative strategies of scapegoating, fear-mongering, victim-blaming, etc.⁵² The full psycho-political resources of a realm are most obviously put to the test when it embraces a state of war, and never more so than during the extraordinary imperialist rallying of populations to wage the war to end all wars.⁵³

A suitably secured realm can accommodate a wide range of subjects and interests, so long as they each occupy a well-defined place in the established order of things, and stick to it. In broad terms, these strategies of accommodation might again be analysed in terms of a spectrum drawn between two poles, one rigid, the other more flexible. The most obviously rigid realms, of course, are those that differentiate themselves along the caste-like logics characteristic of ancien-régime France, or of the racialised settler or *criollo* hierarchies adopted in Europe's colonies in the Americas, Asia, and Africa.⁵⁴ Think of *la casta* that prevailed in the Spanish Americas, or of Saint-Domingue's apparent determination, in the last decades of colonial rule, to differentiate between 128 degrees of whiteness. As Tocqueville understood better than many of his Orléaniste contemporaries, however, overly brazen and inflexible forms of class privilege, and excessively unequal distributions of property, offer the privileged little promise of long-term security.⁵⁵

Overt reliance on apartheid-style forms of discrimination is obviously hard to reconcile with even the flimsiest appeals to popular consent, and can endure only as long as such appeals can be dismissed

51 Cf. Kolchin 2009.

52 On this point see Kotsko 2018.

53 Cf. Hedges 2014.

54 See Simon 2017.

55 Tocqueville 2016.

with impunity – this is a condition that for the time being may still apply in territories occupied by Israel, for instance, but it's one that mass mobilisation eroded in the US in the 1960s, and in Southern Africa over the 1970s and 80s.

A more flexible realm is more amenable to the kind of cautious reforms that capital requires of its state. It is better able to incorporate and pacify a wider range of interests, and to address 'legitimate' grievances, notably by tweaking its mechanisms of representation to become more inclusive, more diverse, more respectful of different perspectives, and so on, while leaving the essential class dynamics of the situation untouched. A more flexible and accommodating realm is less liable to the sorts of succession crises that can expose more narrowly hierarchical régimes to revolutionary pressures – think for instance of the way Mexico's Porfiriato died along with its founder, or of how no-one could be found to succeed the last Romanov. By contrast, the pattern of English reforms from 1688 through 1832 and 1867 remains exemplary here. The persistence of the UK's rentier-capitalist order is paradigmatic of a more flexible conception of the realm that grounds itself, in keeping with the principles of Hume or Burke, in the continuity of its settled prejudices and established customs. Sovereign authority in a realm ruled by King, Lords and Commons flows down monarch and aristocracy through the lesser propertied classes and on to the 'deserving poor' or 'hard-working families' – always excluding, of course, those who fall into the place-less and right-less category of the undeserving and the un-integrated, that 'rabble' or 'surplus population' destined, one way or another, for expulsion from the realm. The fascination that the English model held for Voltaire, Montesquieu and other Enlightenment thinkers is well known, and suitably institutionalised respect for the tradition and 'spirit of the laws' endures as an essential part of broadly neo-Burkean conservatism that played such a key role in countering the emphatically 'un-English' democratic revolutions that began in earnest in 1789, and that recurred through the long nineteenth-century.

Lacking time-sanctioned roots in an old-world social hierarchy, American settler colonies were free to experiment with still more fluid configurations of the realm, so long as these could contain the sort of threats posed by indigenous peoples, slaves, and the disaffected poor. Madison and the other framers did everything necessary, as they designed their constitution, to 'guarantee the total exclusion of the people, in their collective capacity, from any share' in government.⁵⁶ The checks and balances urged by advocates of a mixed constitution from Polybius to Montesquieu would help to disarm any tyrannical majority that might threaten the interests of the 'opulent minority' whose ownership of the country entitles them to rule it. The size and diversity of the new

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⁵⁶ Madison 1987, §63.

American republic, furthermore, would happily make it 'less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive' to oppress others, and in particular to challenge the interests of the elite few – 'or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other.'⁵⁷ Above all (and this is a point that Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips arguably understood better than Frederick Douglass), by sanctioning the principle of slavery in its opening article, the US Constitution endorsed a means of social control and division that might compensate for the new country's relative lack of old-style mechanisms of differentiation. Back in a more custom-bound Europe, at least before the mass dispossession of peasants led to widespread vagrancy in the countryside, the social equivalent of a visible 'brand' was usually an unnecessary supplement to perfectly adequate means of discerning status and rank, grounded in inheritance, property, occupation, demeanour, and so on.⁵⁸ In a new world edged by its apparently mobile 'frontier', however, and in which mass combinations of the labouring poor could lead to unrest on the scale of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia (1676), recourse to the 'psychological wage' or 'poisoned bait' of white supremacy soon proved an invaluable means of dividing and ruling the working population. In addition to its service as 'pedestal' of capitalism, racialised slavery and its legacy provided a bulwark of order solid enough to withstand, two centuries later, the greatest challenge yet faced by the rulers of the American realm – the onslaught of civil war and the ensuing attempt at a genuinely democratic reconstruction.⁵⁹ To be held as a 'prisoner of the American dream', as so much of Mike Davis' work has shown, is to remain caught in a uniquely resilient set of psycho-political constraints.

By 'mass' I mean the gathering and combining of anyone and everyone in a common cause, a converging of interests and purposes that proceeds as far as possible by means subtracted from the differentiating categories of the realm and its criteria of distinction and 'refinement'. This is broadly what Rousseau or Robespierre mean by a *peuple*, and what Blanqui or Marx mean by the proletariat. Badiou's formulation is 'generic humanity'.

From a Jacobin perspective, a people is in no sense reducible to a population, i.e. to the inhabitants of an established realm, with its spread of particular interests and divergent opinions. 'People' is rather the name

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⁵⁷ Madison 1987, §10.

⁵⁸ On this point see Foucault's suggestive discussion of the Physiocrat Guillaume-François Le Trosne's considerations (in his *Mémoire sur les vagabonds et sur les mendiants* of 1764) on the use of branding, as part of a disciplinary response to the rise of rural vagrancy in mid-eighteenth-century France (Foucault 2015, pp. 50-51).

⁵⁹ I draw here on Du Bois' path-breaking work *Black Reconstruction*, as well as on the complementary studies undertaken by followers like Theodore Allen (2012) and Noel Ignatiev (2022).

given to a collective actor that emerges only with the invention of ways of transcending such differences of interest and opinion.⁶⁰ For Rousseau's revolutionary followers, the word *peuple* thus remains a semi-technical label, one that becomes meaningless or deceptive once isolated from the generalising exercise of its *volonté*. If a *peuple* is to prevail 'we need a united will [*il faut une volonté une*]',⁶¹ and a people is an actor whose very existence can only be clarified through the expression and assertion of its collective aims. This is why someone like Robespierre can observe in passing that while modern 'Athens still has as many inhabitants as in the time of Miltiades and Aristides, there are no Athenians among them'; likewise 'Rome persists only in Brutus.'⁶² This is also why Robespierre will so often insist on 'this incontestable maxim that the people is good, that its delegates are corruptible, and that a safeguard against the vices and despotism of government must be found in the virtue and sovereignty of the people'⁶³ – the point was less to uphold some naïve faith in the intrinsic decency of ordinary residents of the realm, so much as to embrace the quasi-tautological idea that *if* and where one exists then by definition a people can be trusted to want what they see as their common good.

There are four things to emphasise about this conception of the people, which is so starkly at odds with today's reactionary populisms.

First, the term mass or massing refers here to an actor rather than a thing. What's at issue isn't the classic spectacle of the 'crowd' as an object seen from the perspective of an observer, or from the perspective of the realm (an object that, thus seen, can only seem like an irrational, impulsive and fearsome mob) but rather the massing together of all those who come to share in a common purpose. It is an action-centred category that is grasped better through participation than through observation, condemnation, or sympathy. In each case the participants, needless to say, are and remain individuals in the fully egalitarian sense of the term – one person, one voice. 'Sovereignty resides in the people', Robespierre repeatedly insists, i.e. 'in every member of the populace. Each individual therefore has the right to a say in the laws by which he is governed and in the choice of the administration which belongs to him; otherwise it is not true to say that all men are equal in rights, or that all men are citizens.'⁶⁴ 'Let us make no mistake', Blanqui adds, 'if everything must be done in the interest of the collective, nevertheless everything must be done by the individual. The individual is the element of humanity, like the stitch in

60 Robespierre, 'Sur l'appel au peuple' (28 December 1792), in Robespierre 1958, pp. 198-9.

61 Robespierre 1828, p. 15.

62 Robespierre, 'On the Principles of Political Morality' (5 February 1794), in Robespierre 2007, p. 113.

63 Robespierre, 'Sur la constitution' (10 May 1793), in Robespierre 1958, p. 498.

64 Robespierre, cited in Dunn 2018, p. 115.

a piece of knitting.¹⁶⁵ There can be no other foundation for any collective voluntary project.

Having said that, there's an essential difference between atomised and organised collections of individuals. There's an essential difference between a merely numerical preponderance of opinions (a 'will of all') and a collectively organised determination to pursue a particular goal. For reasons Rousseau helps to explain, 'what generalizes the will is not so much the number of voices as it is the common interest which unites them,'¹⁶⁶ an interest which *may*, if it proves strong enough, come to win over a majority of all the voices in the situation. The only mass worthy of the name results from the converging of individuals who each come to want what any and all others also want, and who understand that determined solidarity alone offers a chance of achieving it. Only such a converging can generate the centripetal force required to keep a multitude of actors on the same page.

Second, a massing of people is something that takes place, in a specific situation at a specific time and for specific reasons, through forms of association that it finds or invents. It may begin in fits and starts, as hesitant or confused, as scattered or dispersed, but a mass action is one that acquires the means of overcoming the barriers that normally keep realm-abiding people apart. In addition to the revolutionary mobilisations in Paris and Petrograd that I'll mention in a moment, and to collective efforts epitomised for instance by the French *levée en masse* of 1793 or the Cuban literacy drive of 1961, paradigmatic examples include the general or mass strikes that loomed so large in the socialist imaginary and experience of the early twentieth century, and that remained paradigmatic for the poor people's movements discussed by Piven and Cloward in their landmark study.¹⁶⁷ Only actions on such a scale can acquire the 'critical mass' needed to overcome the realm's resistance to change. This is precisely why Hegel, no less than Burke or Hume, despised and feared any conception of the people understood in broadly Jacobin terms as the combining of 'many single individuals [...], i.e. as a formless mass whose movement and activity can consequently only be elemental, irrational, barbarous, and terrifying.'¹⁶⁸

Third, in the bald notion of 'mass' there are no criteria for exclusion or difference or rank. Reference to a massing or to 'the masses' prepares for a shift in reference from 'a' people or 'the' people to *people* pure and simple. The sole criterion for membership in the mass is humanity itself,

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65 Blanqui, 'The Sects and the Revolution' (1866), <https://blanqui.kingston.ac.uk/texts/the-sects-and-the-revolution-19-october-1866/>.

66 Rousseau 1997c, p. 62 [SC 2:4].

67 Piven and Cloward 1979; cf. Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, in Luxemburg 2008.

68 Hegel 1991, §303.

in the sense that (as for Winstanley, Rousseau or Robespierre) 'birth-rights' are those that apply to all without exception or qualification. Like John Brown's egalitarian God, the mass is 'no respecter of persons.' A mass cause is one that concerns anyone and everyone in the same way, to the exclusion only of those who remain stubbornly attached to the particular benefits that they may enjoy as a result of their place in the realm. This further distinguishes the category of the proletariat in its distinctively generic and revolutionary sense from merely sociological or non-Marxist conceptions of the 'working class' or the 'working man'; the latter is a dimension of the realm, the former is an avatar of mass. Occupation and status and the colours of a collar are concerns of the realm. Again, it's essential to take into account the full implications of Marx's insistence that, as a political actor, 'the working class is revolutionary or it is nothing.'

Fourth, and most important, there is also nothing in the bald notion of 'mass' that can itself hold a people together, for the simple reason that political actors are moral as well as natural figures. Although in their zeal to distance themselves from 'utopian' alternatives some scientific socialists might occasionally succumb to this temptation, a popular movement should never be understood as exerting a kind of 'gravitational mass'. In the sense of the term affirmed here, when a mass hold together, what holds it is just the purposeful and deliberate converging of its participants in a common cause – in other words, its will. But what is a will?

V What is the will?

No less than the people, the concept of 'the will' – when it isn't simply dismissed as ignorant 'folk psychology' on determinist or allegedly scientific neuro-biological grounds – is notoriously contested and ambiguous. It has been understood as either conscious or unconscious, as appetite or as reason, as compatible with freedom (Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel) or incompatible with it (Hobbes, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Deleuze...), and so on. It is hard to think of any canonical notion in the whole philosophical lexicon that has been more thoroughly disputed.

My own working definition here prioritises simplicity and familiarity over complex arguments in the history of philosophy, and draws on nuances that are captured perfectly well by ordinary English usage, not least those evoked by the truism 'where there's a will there's a way'. At least seven synthetic or linking qualities are essential to this familiar conception of the term:

(1) Like desiring or wanting or wishing, like consciousness in general, willing is always intentional. Willing always involves willing *something*. To will is to will an end that is always more or less distinct, more or less clearly understood, more or less remote, more or less

feasible with the available means and in the face of existing constraints, etc. A will links specific means to specific ends.

(2) Again like wanting, willing is bound up with both lack and desire. A will links biological needs and socially variable wants on the one hand with voluntarily assumed reasons and principles on the other. It would be as absurd to deny the natural foundations of faculties like volition or speech⁶⁹ as it would be to seek to reduce what they are capable of to some kind of reflection or mirroring of these foundations.

(3) Unlike futile wishing or yearning, however, willing involves the *capacity* to achieve what is willed, along with the effort of pursuing it. (The question of whether this effort might be successful, in any given case, is a separate issue). In this sense every exercise of will is relative to its acquired will-power. To be willing is always to be both willing and able. By comparison with French (which has only the one verb *vouloir* to express both want and will), the English language helpfully recognises a qualitative difference between a mere 'I want' (with its dual connotations of 'I lack' and 'I would like...') and an active 'I will' or 'we will' (with its connotations of commitment, promise, project, plan, resolve, the future, and so on). The will is a relative and relational faculty, and it is relative, first and foremost, to its capacity for achieving what it might will. It isn't reducible to the blind pressures of impulse or appetite, as neo-Hobbesian reductionists like to argue – but nor can it be absolutely free and self-aware, as punitive theologians and public prosecutors like to argue, for reasons that have little to do with freedom.

(4) One of the capacities that's essential to sustaining a voluntary commitment is the capacity to will itself into the future, without thereby losing its self-determining autonomy in the present. If it a will is to persevere as a *will*, i.e. as voluntary, it must find ways to resist the tendencies and the inertia that will always encourage it to develop into its opposite, and to become merely habitual, or routine, or dogmatic. A will must remain self-critical and self-renewing. I'll come back to the challenge posed by this 'dialectic of the will' in the final section of this article.

(5) Unlike a person's vital needs or instinctual drives, an exercise of will is always more or less voluntary and thus more or less conscious. A will is more considered, more conscious and deliberate, than a mere want. Once again the 'more or less' is essential here, and given the way infants are raised and socialised, the unconscious is of course an irreducible dimension of human experience. To affirm the primacy of a rational will is not to downplay the pressures of desire and need. It should go without saying that there can be no perfectly conscious line of thought or course of action, no more than there can be any absolutely free will. It should also go without saying, however, that it's impossible to do justice to what political actors say and do on the assumption that actors are primarily driven by

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69 On this regularly contested point, see for instance Kenneth Miller 2019.

unconscious fantasy. Any exercise of volition is oriented by more or less informed deliberation, i.e. more or less adequate forms of knowledge, self-awareness, anticipation of likely consequences, etc. There is no stark dualism of will and intellect, any more than there a sharp break between will and desire. To characterise the will as the 'higher faculty of desire' is only fruitful if height remains a thoroughly relative and relational term.

(6) Insofar as a decision remains willed or voluntary rather than compelled, it also remains, right down to the final instant of its execution, more or less contingent or non-necessary. A willed decision is one that always *could* have gone the other way – not because of an ultimately indifferent 'free whim', but because actors have an irreducible degree of discretion as they weigh up values and priorities, means and ends, outcomes and consequences, and so on. Actors are sometimes faced with genuine decisions. No amount of rationalisation after the fact, no appeals to the sort of retrospective necessity that may sometimes seem so clear in the *wake* of a decision ('it was inevitable', 'there was never really a choice', etc.), can ever minimise the anguished searching involved in the actual first-person making of a decision, in the present. Should we go this way or that way? Sometimes it is up to us, and so depends on how we are organised, how we are informed and educated, what our priorities and expectations are, how these might change under pressure, and so on.

(7) Since it varies with capacity and resolve any exercise of willing thus varies with the character and scope of the actor involved. For a whole host of psychological, social, and thus psycho-social reasons, an actor can become more or less resolute or committed, more or less ready for action, and more or less lucid about what that action involves. This actor, in particular, can be more or less extended or expansive, more or less buoyed by relations of solidarity and reinforcement with others. Again, it is thoroughly unhelpful to conceive of the will as an essentially inward and isolated faculty, one that operates in the absence of all 'external' motivations, indeed in the absence of all relations *tout court*.

Unfortunately, the most familiar and influential conceptions of the will embrace versions of such introversion as an essential aspect of its freedom. As briefly anticipated above, the Stoic investment in an inner or attitudinal freedom remains paradigmatic here, and it's surely no accident that echoes of Stoic wisdom have become so prominent in today's self-help marketplace. Rational actors are always free to accept or to resent what happens to them, the Stoics maintain, so long they can also accept that they can have no significant influence upon what happens to them. A disciplined mind is free to decide whether to accept or regret what happens because its essential activity remains aloof from involvement in what happens. A true sage knows, as Marcus Aurelius puts it, that 'every event is the right one', and 'whatever happens at all happens as it should.'⁷⁰

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70 Marcus Aurelius 2002, book 4, §10.

'Let man be pleased with whatever has pleased God', says Seneca; true virtue is 'pleased with what it has, and does not lust after that which it has not.'⁷¹ So long as we manage to adjust or 'incline our will' to accept whatever occurs as both necessary and right, then we can affirm our assent to what happens as itself free rather than forced. 'Do not seek to have things happen as you wish', adds the former slave Epictetus, 'but wish them to happen as they actually do happen, and all will be well with you.'⁷² The general approach is summed up in a recurring image, attributed to Chrysippus:

When a dog is tied to a cart, if it wants to follow, it is pulled and follows, making its spontaneous act coincide with necessity. But if the dog does not follow, it will be compelled in any case. So it is with men too: even if they don't want to, they will be compelled to follow what is destined.⁷³

Our will may be thoroughly free to affirm or to bemoan our destiny, in short, but only because it is just as thoroughly powerless to change it. If the sage 'escapes necessity' this is only 'because he wills what necessity is about to force on him', and since 'fate leads the willing and drags along the unwilling', so then 'noble spirits' should always 'let fate find us ready and eager', rather than defiant or unreconciled.⁷⁴ Revived with particular force by Nietzsche and then Deleuze, the logic of such *amor fati* further resonates with the ruthless equanimity of liberalism's *laissez faire*, and thus with the common sense that orients our era.

The most influential and canonical accounts of the will generally conform to this neo-Stoic script, in a trajectory marked, among others, by Augustine, Scotus, Malebranche, and Edwards. As traced over the history of philosophy, it's a trajectory whose destination is most often oriented towards Kant on the one hand or Hegel on the other.

Kant's unqualified affirmation of moral autonomy pushes neo-Stoic introversion to its limit.⁷⁵ According to Kant, we are always free and thus able to do the right thing, i.e. to obey the moral law that our reason prescribes for us as for all other rational beings, so long as we cultivate the strength of character required to master our appetites and fears. Kant's moral law is a law in the strongest and mostly implacably commanding sense of the term. 'In order for it to have a sovereign

71 Seneca, Letter to Lucilius LXXIV.19-21, 12, in Seneca 1989b.

72 Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, ch. 8, Epictetus, *Discourses* II 14, §7, in Epictetus 2008.

73 Hippolytus [citing Zeno and Chrysippus], *Refutation of All Heresies* 1.21, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 386.

74 Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* LIV.7; CVII.11, in Seneca 1989a.

75 This is a point emphasised in Vetö 2002.

authority over us, we must give morality the supreme power over ourselves, so that it rules over our sensibility' and our other faculties. If we are willing to do everything necessary to cultivate such an 'autocracy of freedom', we can overcome all 'pathological' and heteronomous influences.⁷⁶ On this condition, it lies within 'the power of the mind [*der Macht des Gemüths*] to master its morbid feelings by sheer resolution.'⁷⁷ Kant absolutises the power of such moral resolution, however, while at the same time depriving it of any political and indeed 'worldly' purchase altogether. He affirms an unconditional freedom of the will while simultaneously rendering opaque and indeterminate its material effects on the world we live in. There is no contradiction, then, between the moralising-individualist Kant who recognises freedom's 'power to pass beyond any and every specified limit' and the politically powerless neo-Stoic Kant who insists that 'a people has a duty to put up with even what is held to be an unbearable abuse of supreme authority.'⁷⁸

By contrast, Hegel's emphatically anti-Kantian form of neo-Stoicism seeks to align a person's free will directly with the worldly realm they inhabit. A legal person's 'initially' abstract and indeterminate will gains actual freedom via all the practices (their disposal of property, their engagement in lawful contracts, their familial obligations, their moral purposes, their roles in civil society, their religious commitments...) that dispose them to be a patriotic and dutiful member of a modern state. If Hegel notoriously presents the modern state as 'the march of God in the world', it is because such a state bases itself on 'the power of reason actualising itself as will,'⁷⁹ i.e. as 'the actuality of concrete freedom'. In Europe's post-Reformation context such freedom demands that 'personal individuality and its particular interests should reach their full development', ensuring the 'complete freedom of particularity and the well-being of individuals' – and also, that these individuals freely 'pass over of their own accord into the interest of the universal', i.e. that they align themselves with the interests of the state as a whole, and 'knowingly and willingly acknowledge this universal interest even as their own substantial spirit, and actively pursue it as their ultimate end' (§260). The upshot is a united body of patriotic citizens who voluntarily and indeed zealously devote their energies to the good of the state, and who (no less than the deferential citizens evoked by Hume, Burke, or Bagehot) accept its essential configuration or constitution without questioning or

76 Kant, 'Moral Philosophy: Collins's Lecture notes' [1784], in Kant 1997, pp. 137-44 [AK 27:361-8]; cf. Baxley 2010, pp. 54-5, 83-4.

77 Kant, 'Conflict of the Faculties', in Kant 1992, p. 175 [AK 7: 97].

78 Kant 1999, A317/B374; Kant 1996, p. 463 [AK 6:320-321]; cf. 'On the Common Saying, that may be correct in theory but it is of no use in practice', in Kant 1996, p. 297 [AK 8:297-298].

79 Hegel 1991, §258A.

investigating it, as effectively 'divine and enduring, and as exalted above the sphere of all manufactured things' (§273).

Kant and Hegel offer alternative means of depriving the will of any consequential political capacity. Understood à la Kant as a wholly introspective and thus indifferently individual or universal exercise, withdrawn from any constitutive interaction with other individuals or with the world in general, the will is equipped with absolute power over its own exercise and domain – and stripped of any power over anything else. For his part, by folding the actualisation of the will into the established continuum of the realm, Hegel divests it of any capacity for collective self-determination, or at least for any sort of self-determination that involves dissent or change. Neither account can prepare the ground for an actively political or general conception of the will. For that we need to turn first to Rousseau, for the theory, and to the Jacobins, for the practice.

VI Rousseau

For Robespierre and his most committed associates, the great effort of the French revolution was to impose upon 'the government of nations' the 'morality [that] used to be only in philosophers' books.'⁸⁰ The most important of these books, without a doubt, were those written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Rousseau's general importance for this project is twofold. First of all, his point of departure is an unequivocal rejection of any form of sub-voluntary determinism or necessity, in favour of an expressly voluntarist account of political action. His famous counter-factual evocation of a pre-historical or pre-social state of nature characterised by solitude and sufficiency, sketched at the beginning of his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, serves to preclude recourse to any supposedly 'innate' conceptions of a general interest or to an instinctive i.e. *involuntary* orientation to a common good – for example, the sort of orientation claimed by those who defend hierarchical social orders by analogy with actually-existing patriarchal family models. The transformative association or 'act by which a people is a people' is itself 'the most voluntary act' in the world,⁸¹ for nothing that precedes it also orients or determines it. In the rare cases where one exists, a common interest shared by a gathering of people can only arise as something that they themselves have deliberately willed and consciously instituted, and not as something they need simply recognise or receive, on the basis of instinct or inheritance, or as the gift of a benevolent ruler. If an association comes to value equality, for instance, it's because its participants have chosen to do so, pure and simple.

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80 Robespierre, 'Response of the National Convention' (5 December 1793), in Robespierre 2007, pp. 93-4.

81 Rousseau 1997c, p. 49 [SC 1:5]; Rousseau, 1997c, p. 123 [SC 4:2].

Rejecting natural forces or sub-voluntary pressures that might orient political actors, Rousseau thus affirms that ‘there is no true action without will. This is my first principle.’ Furthermore, ‘there is no true will without freedom. Man is therefore free in his actions.’⁸² Or again, since ‘one has to be free in order to will [...], if someone can compel my will it’s certain that I am no longer free.’⁸³ As actors we are free in an immediately and sufficiently practical sense, even if Rousseau (no less than Kant) readily accepts that we remain incapable of knowing theoretically the nature and scope of such freedom. Taking these points together, Rousseau concludes that ‘the principle of every action is in the will of a free being. One cannot go back beyond that. It is not the word freedom which means nothing; it is the word necessity.’⁸⁴

Although he rarely mentions him, Gramsci writes in the spirit of Rousseau more than that of Marx when he immediately welcomes the insurrection of October 1917 as the opening of an era in which a people’s ‘collective will becomes the driving force of the economy, the force which shapes reality itself,’⁸⁵ or when he later recognises, more generally, that ‘one can “foresee” to the extent that one acts, to the extent that one applies a voluntary effort and therefore contributes concretely to creating the result “foreseen” [...]. What “ought to be” is therefore concrete; indeed it is the only realistic and historicist interpretation of reality, it alone is history in the making and philosophy in the making, it alone is politics.’⁸⁶

Second of all (and this is his great virtue relative to Kant, and to the whole neo-Stoic individualist tradition), Rousseau emphasises the many ways that willing is bound up with acting or doing, or more precisely with the *capacity* to act. As Descartes had recognised we may be free to wish for whatever we want, but Rousseau understands that we can only properly *will* those ends that we may in principle achieve. Rousseau knows as well as Trotsky or Gramsci that ‘whoever wills the end cannot refuse the means.’⁸⁷ The scope of any *vouloir* or will varies directly with its *pouvoir* or power, and Rousseau distils the relation between the two in what he calls his ‘fundamental maxim’: ‘the truly free man wills only what he can do [*ne veut que ce qu’il peut*], and he does what he pleases.’⁸⁸

It’s this essentially relational quality of the will, its variable will-power, that explains why we can never ‘know what our nature permits

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82 Rousseau 2010, p. 434, p. 442.

83 Rousseau 1997b, p. 9.

84 Rousseau 2010, p. 442.

85 Gramsci 1994, p. 40.

86 Gramsci 1971, pp. 438, 172.

87 Rousseau 1997b, p. 23; cf. Trotsky 2017, p. 25; Gramsci 1994, p. 99.

88 Rousseau 2010, p. 215.

us to be.’⁸⁹ It’s our willing and doing, and not our being or nature, that establishes what is possible or ‘permitted’, and that tests it in practice. Rousseau underlines the fact that ‘the limits of the possible in moral matters are less narrow than we think. It is our weaknesses, our vices, our prejudices that shrink them.’⁹⁰ Again, ‘it is only our lukewarm will which causes all of our weakness’ and the power of a will is never set in advance. ‘We are always strong enough to do what we strongly will. *Volenti nihil difficile* – nothing is difficult for those who will.’ Nothing is difficult, in particular, for those whose will is ‘de-natured’ and expanded via voluntary association with others.⁹¹ A person who commits to such an association finds that ‘his faculties are exercised and developed, his ideas enlarged, his sentiments ennobled, his entire soul is elevated to such an extent’ that his capacities are thoroughly transformed. From a ‘stupid and bounded animal’ he is converted into an actor equipped with ‘moral freedom, which alone makes man truly the master of himself.’⁹² As the Irish revolutionary James Connolly put it in another context, ‘our curse is our belief in our weakness’ – but once organised and united, ‘we are not weak, we are strong.’⁹³

Rousseau’s abiding concern, then, is with this question that is so basic but also so far-reaching: what makes a will strong enough to accomplish what it wants? As we have seen, the strength of a political will varies directly with its generality or extensivity on the one hand, and its intensity or concentration on the other. The tension between these two conditions is irreducible, and it informs Rousseau’s two main pieces of practical advice for future revolutionaries. First, do not confuse sovereignty and government; the one is a function of will, the other of its execution. The people are sovereign to the extent they retain a capacity to assemble as an inclusive and egalitarian mass, as a ‘free community of equals’, committed to a common will. Sovereign command and general will are one and the same. ‘The mainspring of public authority is in the hearts of the citizens’, and a law is only lawful if it’s a direct expression of the people’s will.⁹⁴ The derivative and quite separate role of government is simply to follow orders and to do what the people commands of it. Though secondary in relation to the sovereign, the government’s role too is essential, and Rousseau (for some of the same sorts of reasons that

⁸⁹ Rousseau 2010, p. 190.

⁹⁰ Rousseau 1997c, p. 110 [SC 3:12].

⁹¹ Rousseau, 2010, p. 494, p. 164.

⁹² Rousseau 1997c, pp. 53-4 [SC 1:8].

⁹³ James Connolly, ‘Speech on War’s Outbreak’, 30 August 1914, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1914/09/wrsotbrk.htm>.

⁹⁴ Rousseau 1997b, p. 13; cf. Rousseau 1997c, p. 81 [SC 2:12].

Frédéric Lordon has begun to stress in his recent work⁹⁵) would have no truck with those who yearned for a day when the need for a centralised and imposing executive power might somehow 'wither away'. The real challenge is posed by the opposite tendency: since government is essential in any complex society, and since the members of a government have their own priorities and share in their own corporate will, a government strong and concentrated enough to do its job effectively will also soon try to usurp sovereign authority, and to position itself over and above the people it should serve.⁹⁶ The least that can be said is that Rousseau's repeated warnings about this danger lost none of their pertinence over the twentieth century.

Rousseau's other piece of advice follows on from this warning. Only the unflagging efforts of organised association and oversight allow a people to retain control over its government and to pre-empt the formation of any would-be ruling class. The general name that Rousseau gives to such efforts is 'virtue'. Virtue is literally a matter of political 'will-power' in the sense that virtuous practices and institutions lend the will the various powers it needs to overcome the obstacles posed by both social corruption and 'natural' temptation. To be virtuous, for Rousseau as then for Robespierre or Saint-Just, is to put the common good – the good consistent with the equality, freedom and interests of *every* member of the situation – before any partial or personal interests. As 'the goal of the government is the realization of the general will', what most directly threatens to 'prevent it from achieving this goal is the obstacle of private wills'.⁹⁷ So then, since 'virtue is only the collection of the most general wills', and since every person is 'virtuous when their particular will conforms in all things to the general will', if we want to ensure that our general will prevails our task is simply 'to make virtue reign'.⁹⁸

Rousseau concedes that contemporary social conditions make vigorous mass association difficult, but as a matter of both principle and practice, 'where right and freedom are everything, inconveniences are nothing.' In a virtuous state 'everyone flies to the assemblies' as a matter of course; by contrast, 'as soon as someone says about affairs of state, What do I care? the state has to be considered lost'.⁹⁹

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95 Cf. Toscano 2022.

96 Rousseau, 1997c, p. 106 [SC 3: 10]; p. 119 [3:18].

97 Rousseau 1994, p. 24 [*Fragments* 3:12].

98 Rousseau 1994, p. 22 [*Fragments* 3:6]; Rousseau 1997b, p. 15, p. 13.

99 Rousseau, 1997c, p. 114 [SC 3:15].

VII The French Revolution

The French revolutionaries who read Rousseau so carefully, and who maintained remarkable forms of oversight over their governments through to their defeat in 1794, took unprecedented steps to make mass assembly one of the great priorities of the day. Though its impact shouldn't be under-estimated, American independence had marked only a partial change in the ruling personnel; the post-colonial realm's essential class and racialising dynamics were preserved and intensified. The collective and wide-ranging assault on the *ancien régime* that began in earnest in the summer of 1789, by contrast, rightly deserves acknowledgement as the beginning of 'serious' i.e. mass politics.¹⁰⁰ At its most schematic, the basic story of the French Revolution can be told in terms of the series of steps whereby a people organised themselves to wrest sovereignty away from their king, i.e. to replace his will with theirs, as the new basis of political authority.¹⁰¹ There is space here only to list several of the most striking and most familiar of these steps.

Once it became undeniably clear that if the king continued to try to govern the realm by royal fiat he would bankrupt it, his ministers reluctantly agreed to summon the Estates General to approve a new set of taxes. After debating how they should be constituted and what they should be called, in June 1789 the deputies of the Third Estate effectively laid an abrupt claim to sovereign power when they appropriated the role and powers of a 'National Assembly,' and insisted that 'the interpretation and presentation of the general will belong to it' and to it alone.¹⁰² A couple of days later, locked out of their usual meeting place (and bringing to completion a collective transformation that would fascinate Sartre and then Tackett when they came to reflect on how groups can acquire a shared sense of purpose and solidarity), these deputies affirmed their 'unshakeable resolution' to draw up a new constitution, announcing that 'nothing can stop the National Assembly from continuing its deliberations in whatever place it may be obliged to establish itself.'¹⁰³ When in a further *séance royale* of 23 June Louis again insisted on his right to 'act alone for the good of my peoples', he was immediately confounded when the deputies he ordered to disperse instead stood their ground, with Mirabeau declaring that 'we are here by the will of the people, and that we shall retire only at the point of the bayonet.'¹⁰⁴

100 Cf. Mariegaard 2016.

101 For a good recent overview of the following sequence see Hazan 2014.

102 McPhee 2016, p. 69

103 Cited in McPhee 2016, 69-70. Cf. Sartre 2008; Tackett 1996.

104 McPhee 2016, p. 70.

A couple of weeks after the confrontation in Versailles, the events that led to the destruction of the Bastille further demonstrated that the king's government could no longer rely on the loyalty of either the professional army or the newly improvised civilian militias that were in the process of constituting themselves as a National Guard. It also demonstrated a remarkable, new-found though long-cultivated confidence among the mass of Parisians themselves, who proved themselves capable of rapidly organising, arming and deploying a force too strong for the old régime to contain, thereby lending a new material basis to the equation of the people's will and sovereign power.¹⁰⁵ The 'great fear' that swept much of the countryside in the summer of 1789 further confirmed the scale and strength of the insurgency, compelling the Assembly to make a dramatic series of concessions in early August that abolished much of the legal basis for feudal privileges and hierarchies almost overnight.

The balance of forces underlying this new reality received its most striking early confirmation when on 5 October 1789 a huge gathering of women, frustrated by months of food shortages and ministerial inactivity, took matters into their own hands and decided quite literally to show their government who was in charge. Massing themselves into a force too large and too resolute to deflect, they won over the support of thousands of National Guards and marched on Versailles in order to force the king and his family to relocate to Paris, where they would spend the rest of their lives exposed more directly to popular oversight.

I don't think it would be too reductive to characterise the years between the forced relocation of the monarchy in October 1789 and its eventual overthrow in August 1792 as a prolonged battle of political wills, pitting the masses who embraced this new landscape with enthusiasm against those who sought to preserve what they could of the old realm and their privileged place in it. The latter desperately tried to bring the revolution to a close, by mixing recourse to repression with the passage of moderate reforms; one way or another the former insisted that the revolution should continue through to the consolidation of more far-reaching changes. The revolutionary camp would divide, at each of the turning points that defined the next few years, over the question of just how far things had to change, from the admission of a merely civic equality for the more cautious (like Pétion or Brissot) to the assertion of a full social equality for the most radical (like Maréchal or Babeuf). If in 1792-93 it was figures like Robespierre and Marat who emerged as leading voices at a national level (while Parisian militants like Antoine Santerre and Sulpice Huguenin became prominent at a municipal level) it's because they were the most emphatic and consistent defenders of mass sovereignty, in both theory and practice. Surely no one did more than Robespierre, during these tumultuous years, to try to establish a 'reign of virtue' – with all of its force, and all of its dangers.

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¹⁰⁵ See in particular Alpaugh 2014; Wahnich 2008, p. 186; Godechot 1970.

The most important step in this sequence, of course, and the last that we have space to mention here, is the most far-reaching and most carefully prepared assertion of popular sovereignty in French history: the overthrow of the monarchy on 10 August 1792, and its replacement by a democratic republic.¹⁰⁶ If the great mobilisations or *journées* of 1789 had been hastily improvised, the massing that toppled the régime was many months in the making. By June, with the country threatened by invasion and its armies undermined by treason, the Assembly was flooded by petitions from all over the country. The prevailing message was unambiguous, as illustrated by this address from citizens of Marseilles, which was read out in the Assembly on 19 June:

French liberty is in danger, and the free men of the South have all risen to defend it. The day of the people's anger has come [*loud applause on the left of the Assembly and in the public galleries...*]. It is the people's strength that makes up all of your strength; you have it in your hands, now use it. [...] The people want to save themselves, and to save you as well; should you try to prevent this sublime movement? Are you capable of it?¹⁰⁷

The following day, the spokesman for the crowds who invaded both the Assembly and the royal chamber gave the people's representatives clear instructions: 'Execute, then, the will of the people who sustain you, and who will die to defend you. Unite, act, it is time. It is time, [...] and nothing must stop you.'¹⁰⁸ The Assembly preferred to prevaricate, however, until eventually a critical mass of people were prepared to force the issue.

In the bloody show-down that took place on 10 August 1792, the king was driven from his palace and into prison. A further message delivered to the Assembly, by the victorious leaders of this insurrection, made the transfer of sovereignty explicit:

It is the new magistrates of the people who present themselves at your bar. The new dangers to the country provoked our election; the circumstances counselled it and our patriotism will render us worthy of it. [...]. Legislators: all that is left is to back up the people [*seconder le peuple...*]. The people who have sent us to you [...] recognizes only the French people, your sovereign and ours, gathered in primary assemblies, as fit to judge the extraordinary measures which necessity and resistance to oppression have led it.¹⁰⁹

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¹⁰⁶ The most thorough and illuminating account remains Reinhard 1969.

¹⁰⁷ *Archives parlementaires*, vol. 45, pp. 397-8.

¹⁰⁸ Antoine Santerre, in *Archives parlementaires*, vol. 45, p. 411.

¹⁰⁹ Sulpice Huguenin, cited in Jaurès 2015, p. 106.

When he came to defend these measures from attacks levelled by his Girondin opponents several months later, Robespierre likewise sought to balance defence of mass or general sovereignty with its necessarily concentrated exercise. 'While it is true that a great nation cannot rise in a simultaneous movement, and that tyranny can only be struck by the portion of citizens that is closest to it', this most concentrated portion should 'be regarded as justified by tacit proxy for the whole of society.' The mass of Parisians that overthrew the monarchy acted 'in the name of all the departments. They should either be approved or repudiated entirely.'¹¹⁰ The insurgents had cleared the way for a new assembly, a new constitution, and a newly egalitarian and participatory conception of citizenship. 'The reign of equality begins', Robespierre enthused to his constituents in late September, and no-one can now delimit 'the extent of the glorious path the human spirit opens before you.'¹¹¹

It didn't take long for those opposed to this glorious path first to tip the country into civil war, and then to devise, after Thermidor, a suitably post-feudal constitution to remake the realm. As Sieyès and his *modéré* allies had anticipated back in the summer of 1789, this constitution would rest on new mechanisms of representation, i.e. new ways of filtering popular participation in politics according to 'competence' and wealth. Recourse to representation is the anti-Rousseauist move par excellence, for if 'sovereignty is nothing is nothing but the exercise of the general will [...], it] can only be represented by itself; power can well be transferred, but not will.'¹¹² Rousseau had insisted that 'sovereignty cannot be represented for the same reason that it cannot be alienated; it consists essentially in the general will, and the will does not admit of being represented: either it is the same or it is different; there is no middle ground.' A person either actively wills something or they don't. A people can appoint deputies or agents, but so long as they are sovereign no-one can will or legislate in their place. On these grounds, Rousseau concluded that 'the instant a people gives itself representatives it ceases to be free; it ceases to be.'¹¹³ Following the restoration of 1815, it took Guizot and the *doctrinaires* a few years to get the country used to the routines and priorities of 'representative government', but once new habits of law and order had been acquired the stage was set for the long triumph of 'liberal democracy' – a triumph that is still celebrated, in its essential principles, by the most recent generation of Thermidorians, led in France by the likes of Furet, Gauchet, and Rosanvallon.

VIII Marx

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110 Robespierre, 'Answer to Louvet's Accusation', in Robespierre 2007, p. 43.

111 Robespierre, *Lettres à ses commettants* (September 1792) cited in McPhee 2013, pp. 134-5.

112 Rousseau 1997c, p. 57 [SC 2:1].

113 Rousseau 1997c, p. 115 [SC 3:15].

Marx is famously critical of the sort of merely 'political will' he associates, in different places, with Robespierre and Blanqui. As illustrated by the Jacobins in particular, 'the more one-sided' and exclusive 'political intelligence' becomes, 'the more it believes in the omnipotence of the will, the blinder it is to the natural and intellectual limits of the will, and thus the more incapable it is of discovering the sources of social evils.'¹¹⁴ Analysis of these sources should instead pay more attention to those economic factors that are precisely 'independent of the will' of the actors they constrain. From his first ventures into political journalism, Marx stressed the importance of objective 'relationships which determine both the actions of private persons and of individual authorities, and which are as independent of the will as breathing.' Analysis of these relations allows some forms of behaviour 'to be determined with almost the same certainty as a chemist determines the external conditions under which given substances will form a compound.'¹¹⁵ Factors like the division of labour and resulting forms of cooperation that people experience 'not as voluntary [...], not as their own united power, but as an alien force existing outside them', impose themselves in ways that are 'independent of the will and the action of man, nay even being the prime governor of these.'¹¹⁶

It's an illusion, as Marx will conclude over the tumultuous course of the year 1850, to believe that 'revolutions are not the product of the realities of the situation but the result of a mere *effort of will*.'¹¹⁷ To understand modern economic development in particular means grasping the objective or sub-voluntary laws that govern commodification and the monetarised forms of 'general equivalence' that enable commodity exchange. As Marx's most widely discussed formulations have it, it is people's 'social being that determines their consciousness' rather than the reverse,¹¹⁸ and from his scientific or anti-utopian perspective communism is not a mere 'ideal' to be pursued but 'the real movement' already shaping the emergent order of things.¹¹⁹ Since 'no social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed,' so then from this perspective any attempt at political revolution made prior to capital's exhaustion can be condemned in advance as 'quixotic'.¹²⁰

114 Marx, 'Critical Remarks on the Article "The King of Prussia and Social Reform"' (1844), in Marx 2000, pp. 134-5.

115 Marx 2000, p. 30; cf. Marx 1998, p. 348, p. 99.

116 Marx 1998, p. 53-54.

117 Marx 2000, p. 326 ['Speech to the Central Committee of the Communist League', September 1850].

118 Marx, 2000, p. 425 [Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*].

119 Marx 1998, p. 57; Marx 2000, p. 590 [*The Civil War in France*].

120 Marx, 2000, p. 426 [Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*]; Marx, 1993, p. 159. The broadly Menshevik implications of this aspect of Marx's work are explored in detail by Chattopadhyay 2019 and 2021.

Along these lines, it would be hard to deny that Marx's materialist approach often encourages him to downplay questions of proletarian agency and purpose in favour of an analysis of what proletarians apparently *are*, or are tending to become. Since Marx believes that 'capitalist production begets its own negation with the inexorability of a natural process,'¹²¹ so then what most matters, at least in the general development of the class struggle, is not 'what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do.'¹²² Forced by 'radical chains' to reproduce and intensify the conditions that immiserate it, the proletariat is a class 'driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity' by an 'urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative *need* – the practical expression of *necessity*.'¹²³ Understood in this way, the proletariat is both the embodied anticipation of communism and the emergence of a class that *must* dissolve all classes, or rather it *is* a 'social group that is the dissolution of all social groups.' When then 'the proletariat proclaims the dissolution of the hitherto existing world order, it merely declares the secret of its own existence, since it *is* in fact the dissolution of this order.'¹²⁴ Recognition of what it is and so must do is certainly 'conscious', Marx adds, but it is the consciousness of a necessity which itself 'emanates' from proletarianisation itself. The proletariat develops as a class 'which has to bear all the burdens of society without enjoying its advantages, which, ousted from society, is forced into the most decided antagonism to all other classes; a class which forms the majority of all members of society, and from which emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness.'¹²⁵

On the other hand, however, and complicating this seemingly unilateral account of historical progression, Marx also consistently insists on the primacy of revolutionary practice, and on treating social transformation as an emphatically practical question. The young Marx insists on the distinctive way that, unlike other animals, 'man makes his

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¹²¹ Marx 1990, p. 929.

¹²² Marx 1975b, p. 37.

¹²³ Marx 1975b, p. 37. 'So where is the real possibility of a German emancipation? We answer: in the formation of a class with radical chains, a class in civil society that is not a class of civil society, of a social group that is the dissolution of all social groups [...] This dissolution of society, as a particular class, is the proletariat' (Marx 2000, p. 81 ['Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction']). Cf. David James 2021, ch. 6.

¹²⁴ Marx 2000, p. 81 ['Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction'].

¹²⁵ Marx 1998, p. 60.

life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness',¹²⁶ in a crucial chapter of *Capital* the older Marx insists in comparable terms on man's 'sovereign power' and capacity to 'change his own nature', his ability consciously and deliberately to determine his own ends, and to sustain the disciplined, 'purposeful will' required to realize them.¹²⁷ The young Marx, furthermore, foregrounds 'the self-determination of the people', and emphasizes the unique virtues of democracy as the political form of a fully 'human existence', one in which 'the law exists for the sake of man' rather than vice versa,¹²⁸ and is formulated as 'the conscious expression of the popular will, and therefore originates with it and is created by it.'¹²⁹ The older Marx will likewise embrace the Paris Commune of 1871 as an exemplary instance of precisely this sort of democracy in action, and an illustration of our capacity to invent a political lever that can wedge its way *underneath* the 'material' base of social being – 'a lever for uprooting the economical foundation upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule.'¹³⁰ It's essential to remember that this material base itself, furthermore, is both shaped by the irreducibly political inflection of class relations, and sustained by the irreducibly 'human' and thus purposeful and inventive character of the forces of production. Especially during periods of revolutionary opportunity, as briefly in 1871, or in 1848-50, what takes pride of place in Marx's political perspective isn't any sort of inexorable historical determinism so much as a strategic need for vigorous and lucid action, carried out by an independent, resolute and fully conscious political actor.¹³¹

The chief target of Marx's critique of bourgeois ideology in general and of bourgeois political economy in particular is precisely the way it discourages proletarian resolution and consciousness, by disguising as natural and inevitable capitalist forms of compulsion and command. Early and late, Marx understands communism as a definitive end to all such compulsion and dependence, and thus as 'the true appropriation of the human essence through and for man', 'the true resolution of the conflict [...] between freedom and necessity.'¹³² What is at stake in the revolutionary transition from capitalism to communism is nothing other

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126 Marx 1992, p. 329 [*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*].

127 Marx 1990, pp. 283-4.

128 Marx 1992, pp. 89, 88 [*Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State*].

129 Marx, 'The Divorce Bill' [1842], in Marx 1975a, p. 309.

130 Marx 2000, p. 589 [*Class Struggles in France*].

131 See in particular Marx et al., 'Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League' (March 1850), in Marx 2000, pp. 303-12.

132 Marx 1992, p. 348 [*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*]; cf. Marx 1991, p. 959.

than the 'development of all human powers as such,'¹³³ together with 'the control and conscious mastery of these powers, which, born of the action of men on one another, have till now overawed and governed men as powers completely alien to them.'¹³⁴ Once we understand the ways we determine our social relations, Engels will add in a quasi-Rousseauist vein, 'it depends only upon ourselves to subject them more and more to our own will, and, by means of them, to reach our own ends [...]. Man's own social organization, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by Nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action', and confirms 'the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.'¹³⁵

It would be a great mistake, therefore, to assume that Marx's critique of narrowly political will, and his insistence on objective constraints, necessarily implies a rejection of deliberate and voluntary action in general, let alone of proletarian political action in particular. If Marx draws out the very real effects of capitalist compulsion, which individuals subjected to capital can only experience as operating with a force comparable to that of a natural law, he also and more fundamentally aims to show that there can be nothing actually natural or transhistorical about any such laws. On the contrary, what should be stressed is instead the way Marx and Engels, and then also Kautsky, Lenin, Gramsci and many others, see the 'necessitarian' and 'emancipatory' dimensions of proletarian practice as complementary facets of one and the same political project. Writing in 1850, Marx knew perfectly well that since the peasantry and petty bourgeoisie 'will as long as possible remain hesitant, undecided, and inactive', so then 'in the impending bloody conflicts, as in all earlier ones, it is the workers who, in the main, will have to win the victory by their courage, determination, and self-sacrifice.'¹³⁶ It is this *political* and activist determination that is determinant in the first instance. Anticipation of 'inevitable' historical outcomes is not meant to inhibit forceful political action in the present and near future but rather to encourage it.

The more daunting the task, the bigger the role for such encouragement. If in Germany the rapid growth of the SPD allowed many of its members to hope for a 'peaceful transition to socialism' in the years that preceded the first world war, in a political situation like the one confronting Lenin, Trotsky and their contemporaries in Tsarist Russia – a situation shaped by draconian police repression and contested only by tiny groups of isolated activists – any talk of 'inevitable victory'

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133 Marx 1993, p. 488.

134 Marx 1998, p. 59.

135 Engels 1987, pp. 266, 270.

136 Marx 2000, p. 308 ['Address to the Communist League' (March 1850)].

was clearly as much a matter of boosting political morale as it was of historical prediction. The Russian revolutionaries especially 'needed a world-embracing hope to accomplish the world-shaking deed.'¹³⁷

Lenin, in particular, isn't only the hard-nosed materialist who analyses the remorseless development of capitalism in Russia and who emphasises how the 'human will and mind' are 'necessarily and inevitably' obliged to 'adapt themselves to [...] the necessity of nature.'¹³⁸ If he emerged as the undisputed leader of his party after years of bitters polemics it's first and foremost because of his indomitable *confidence* and resolve, and his emphatic faith in the power of ideals to win over sceptics, pessimists and 'philistines'. Lenin is carried, and carries others, by his faith in the transformative power of conscious awareness and purpose, and by his faith in the proletariat as an actor inspired by the grandeur of its historic mission to free itself and the world as well.¹³⁹ It's this side of Lenin that evokes Rousseau and Robespierre no less than Marx. 'The time has come', as he puts it in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), 'when Russian revolutionaries, guided by a genuinely revolutionary theory, relying upon the genuinely revolutionary and spontaneously awakening class, can at last – at long last! – rise to full stature in all their giant strength.'¹⁴⁰ Rather than settle for limited reforms or pursue narrowly economic questions, Lenin stakes everything on a mass willingness to engage in full political struggle, on a proletarian determination to settle for nothing less than revolutionary change. What matters more than any immediate improvement in working conditions are the 'miracles for the revolutionary cause' that even a lone individual can achieve, if determined to do so.¹⁴¹ In this as in so many of his other polemics, Lenin reserves his most bitter scorn for those who remain sceptical of such miracles, and who thereby stand condemned of 'a libel on Marxism.' Such scepticism

means belittling the initiative and energy of class-conscious fighters, whereas Marxism, on the contrary, gives a gigantic impetus to the initiative and energy of the Social-Democrat, opens up for him the widest perspectives and (if one may so express it) places at his disposal the mighty force of millions and millions of workers 'spontaneously' rising for the struggle!¹⁴²

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137 Deutscher 1954, p. 293.

138 Lenin 1962, p. 187-88, cf. p. 325.

139 Cf. Lih 2005, Lih 2011; Bensaïd 2007, pp. 150-53.

140 Lenin 1960b, p. 448.

141 Lenin 1960b, p. 447.

142 Lenin 1960b, p. 392.

Although Bolshevik priorities shift a good deal during the tumultuous years between 1902 and 1917, of course, Lenin's fundamentally Promethean project remains broadly consistent all through his political life. As Lars Lih summarises it, the most concise version of Lenin's 'heroic scenario' runs something like this: 'the Russian proletariat carries out its world historical mission by becoming the *vozhd* [leader] of the *narod* [people], leading a revolution that overthrows the tsar and institutes political freedom, thus preparing the ground for an eventual proletarian *vlast* [sovereign power] that will bring about socialism. What propels this drama forward is inspired and inspiring class leadership. The party activists inspire the proletariat who inspire the Russian narod who inspire the whole world with their revolutionary feats.'¹⁴³ It is this confidence in the power of political inspiration that accounts for Lenin's revolutionary eminence, rather than a proto-Stalinist insistence on historical necessity.

A peripheral but striking expression of a similar confidence is provided by Trotsky's fascination with Calvinism and the radical Puritans of the English Revolution, whose apparently 'fatal' belief in Providence only served to invigorate their determination to act. 'The ascendant bourgeoisie felt that the laws of history were behind it, and this awareness they shrouded in the form of the doctrine of predestination. Calvin's denial of free will in no way paralyzed the revolutionary energy of the Independents, on the contrary it powerfully reinforced it. The Independents felt themselves to be summoned to accomplish a great historical act', and 'God's Englishmen' strained every sinew to see it through.¹⁴⁴ Gramsci soon arrived at a similar conclusion for similar reasons, recognising that 'out of Calvinist predestination there arose one of the greatest impulses to practical initiative the world has ever known. Similarly, every other form of determinism has at a certain point developed into a spirit of initiative and into an extreme tension of collective will.' Even 'fatalism' itself, Gramsci could see, may be 'nothing other than the clothing worn by real and active will when in a weak position [...]. When you don't have the initiative in the struggle and the struggle itself comes eventually to be identified with a series of defeats, mechanical determinism becomes a tremendous force of moral resistance, of cohesion and of patient and obstinate perseverance.'¹⁴⁵ In

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143 Lih 2011, p. 192.

144 Trotsky 1975 [*Where is Britain Going?* [1925], ch. 3]. Victor Serge too was struck by a similar insight during a meeting of the Petrograd Soviet in 1919: 'A humble crowd, they have the faith, the will, the indomitable inner energy of masses who have discovered spiritual life. Cromwell's Roundheads who founded the English republic [...], the enthusiastic and stoical Calvinists who attempted, in the sixteenth century, throughout Europe, to achieve a moral and social revolution, must have been like this' (Serge 1998, pp. 56-57).

145 Gramsci 1971, p. 369, pp. 336-7.

the context of their formative debates, what most sharply separates a 'scientific' from a 'utopian' socialist is above all their relative degrees of commitment and resolve; what might remain merely wishful thinking for the one has become a matter of willed practice for the other.

In other words, and even in such extreme cases, the key question doesn't so much concern the making of this or that 'objective' prediction as it does the perfectly 'subjective' choice between deciding whether to wait and see whether such prediction might come true, or whether to act in such a way as to *make* it come true. It's the determination to resolve in practice this particular struggle, the one that engages its actors in the here and now, that underlies Marx's repeated insistence that human beings 'make their own history' and that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.'

IX The Russian Revolution

As Marx's most militant followers never tired of insisting, in the generation after his death, it was precisely his scientific credentials, his demonstration of the apparently inevitable collapse of a capitalism propelled by its own 'laws of motion', that secured his initial following in revolutionary circles. As Lenin stressed, Marx 'was the first to transform socialism from a Utopia into a science, to lay a firm foundation for this science, and to indicate the path that must be followed in further developing and elaborating it in all its parts'¹⁴⁶ – 'the Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true.'¹⁴⁷ No less than Lenin or Trotsky, Luxemburg saw no tension let alone contradiction between demonstrations of capital's imminent demise and exhortations to make every effort to hasten the process and to lessen its 'birth pangs'. The same can be said of Martov, Pannekoek, or Mattick. After all, notes Walter Rodney, both proletarian and bourgeois actors share the same 'objective reality': what distinguishes them is precisely their political perspective on it, and consequently their priorities, their aims, and their means of achieving them, i.e. their class interests or 'subjective' concerns.¹⁴⁸ It is the scope of these *aims* or ends and the viability of their various means that is 'scientifically' illuminated by Marx, with a view to making the choice between socialism or barbarism as transparent as possible.

The complication of the Russian Revolution, if considered from this perspective, is that its leading actors proposed a somewhat different choice – a choice that, in its making, was as much reminiscent of the Jacobins' revolutionary example as it was an anticipation of Marx's post-capitalist alternative. The political question that quickly opened

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¹⁴⁶ Lenin 1960a, p. 210 ['Our Programme', 1899].

¹⁴⁷ Lenin 1977a, p. 23

¹⁴⁸ Rodney, 2022, p. 45.

up with the suicidal collapse of the Tsarist régime in the first months of 1917 was less that of socialism in the future than of mass sovereignty in the present. As Lih has shown in convincing detail, to argue as did Lenin and the Bolsheviks in favour of 'all power to the Soviets!' was to argue in favour of a single and unified *narodovlastie* or mass power. It was to argue in favour of 'all power to the people! [*Vsya vlast' narodu*],' nothing more or less.¹⁴⁹ Positively, it was to argue in favour of a government that would immediately obey mass commands on peace, land, and workers' control. Negatively, it was to argue consistently against Lvov and then Kerensky and all the other 'compromisers' who sought to preserve what could be salvaged of the old régime, who sought to share power with its more progressive representatives, and who sought to persist with the prosecution of its disastrous war.

When with its dramatic 'Order number one' of 1 March 1917 the new Petrograd Soviet laid explicit claim to command the armed forces it issued a challenge that would define the trajectory of the next six months. As Lenin could see right away, the unprecedented 'dual power' or split sovereignty that arose through coexistence of the Soviet on the one hand and the bourgeoisie's Provisional Government on the other created an untenable situation. It led to the temporary 'interlocking' of two competing authorities, only one of which could claim to express the 'will of the people'. Sooner or later one power would have to submit to the other. 'Two powers *cannot exist* in a state', Lenin again argued in September. 'One of them is bound to pass away; and the entire Russian bourgeoisie is already trying its hardest everywhere and in every way to keep out and weaken the Soviets, to reduce them to nought, and to establish the undivided power of the bourgeoisie.'¹⁵⁰ The Soviet leadership, for its part, continued to hesitate, torn between those favoured the broadest possible coalition government and those growing more ready to rely on the massed workers, soldiers and peasants alone.

The months between February and October tell the story of how this hesitation was resolved. What drives the story forward to its resolution, as John Reed was especially well-placed to see, is the transformation of an initially 'shapeless will of the proletariat' into something altogether more shaped and more forceful.¹⁵¹ In early July, Viktor Chernov and the other moderates who still led the Petrograd Soviet famously refused the offer urged by impatient protestors to 'take power, you son of a bitch, when it is handed to you!' ¹⁵² By early October, the Bolshevik leaders who had helped to organise these and other protestors into a militant

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¹⁴⁹ Lih 2012.

¹⁵⁰ Lenin 1964, p. 61.

¹⁵¹ Reed 1977, p. 51.

¹⁵² Cited in Steinberg 2017, p. 77; Miéville 2017, epub 364/654.

majority in the soviets were in a position to make a different choice. That they made this choice in circumstances that they most certainly did not choose is a point that should be too obvious to mention, if it weren't for the fact that historical judgement of such choices is so profoundly coloured by the judge's expectations.

Again there is space only to sketch the barest outlines of the familiar sequence. Inspired by the courage of the many thousands of women and then men who defied the Tsar's soldiers as they demonstrated on the International Women's Day of 23 February 1917, over the following days and weeks a wave of protests, strikes and demonstrations swept across the country. All over Russia, in factories, army barracks, and rural communities, ordinary people gathered and deliberated, and began to seize, in unprecedented numbers and with unprecedented force, this opportunity to set their own political agenda.¹⁵³ The 'spirit of mutiny' and 'revolutionary élan'¹⁵⁴ that had briefly seized many parts of Russia in 1905 returned with a vengeance, in a context now defined by life-and-death struggles for peace, land, and more tolerable working conditions. In the form of hundreds of improvised councils or *soviets*, along with factory committees and soldiers' committees, many of the mechanisms for such control were constituted in the spring of 1917, and the pressure for radical change quickly began to mount. Like the Jacobins in 1792, the basic Bolshevik approach in 1917 can be summarised by the formula: trust the people and the emancipatory momentum of their *élan*, rather than a government whose priority is to limit and delay the damage to an indefensible social order. From the moment he returned to Petrograd from exile in Switzerland, in the spring of 1917, Lenin argued that the only way to save the country 'from collapse and ruin' would be to 'imbue the oppressed and the working people with confidence in their own strength,' to release the 'energy, initiative, and decisiveness' of the people, who in this mobilized condition can perform "miracles".¹⁵⁵ As he put it in the wake of the soviets' successful defiance of the attempted coup led by general Kornilov, in late August, 'Don't be afraid of the people's initiative and independence. Put your faith in their revolutionary organisations, and you will see *in all* realms of state affairs the same strength, majesty and invincibility of the workers and peasants as were displayed in their unity and their fury against Kornilov.'¹⁵⁶

What then decides the course of 1917 is that a majority of the masses who organised themselves through the soviets came to believe, as the collapse of the realm grew irreversible, that the best of the

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¹⁵³ See e.g. Smith 2018, pp. 124-5; Smith 1983.

¹⁵⁴ Trotsky 1972, ch. 18.

¹⁵⁵ Lenin, cited in Steinberg 2017, p. 92.

¹⁵⁶ Lenin 1977b.

available options were offered by the Bolshevik party and its allies among the Left SRs. As Stephen Smith explains, over the months initially moderate investments in the conciliatory 'discourse of citizenship [...] quickly ceded to a discourse of class', as old constraints on political participation were exploded. The dominant frame of reference shifted from realm to mass. A new outpouring of socialist pamphlets, newspapers all

addressed ordinary people in the language of class, and strikes and demonstrations, red flags, banners and images, the singing of revolutionary songs, the election of representatives, meetings in the workplace and on street corners, the passing of a resolution, the raising of funds for a political cause, all served to entrench this discourse, so that ordinary folk began to see themselves and the world around them in class terms.

This rapid 'success of the discourse of class', Smith continues, 'derived less from its accuracy in describing social relations than from the fact that it played upon a deep-seated division in Russian political culture between "them" and "us", upon a profound sense of the economic and cultural gulf between the *nizy*, that is, those at the bottom, and the *verkhi*, those at the top', and more than anything this sense contributed to the 'huge popularity of socialism.'¹⁵⁷ This shift in orientation from civic unity to class struggle, as historians like Smith and Steinberg make clear, was not an alternative to affirmations of the people and of popular sovereignty but rather a way of making such affirmations stick, of giving them a sharper political edge – i.e. a way of providing the *narod* with the only available means for imposing its will.

Although a premature rising in early July gave the Provisional Government an opportunity to crack down on the Bolshevik leadership, Kerensky and his dwindling clutch of followers were unable to find a durable political base for their régime. Improvised attempts at a 'Democratic Council' and a 'Pre-Parliament' failed to rally significant support. In the end, once the army's high command and the most reactionary segments of the old régime had proved themselves incapable of regaining power by an outright coup, it would come down to a contest between those moderate socialists who still supported compromise and those who did not. Over the course of September, the uncompromising Bolsheviks gained majority support in most of the key soviets. Trotsky's history of the revolution includes arresting descriptions of the atmosphere of those decisive days, during which

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¹⁵⁷ Smith, 2018, pp. 133-35.

all Petrograd, with the exception of its upper strata, was one solid meeting. In those auditoriums, continually packed to the doors, the audiences would be entirely renewed in the course of a few hours. Fresh and ever fresh waves of workers, soldiers and sailors would roll up to the buildings and flood them full. [...] The people of the slums, of the attics and basements, stood still by the hour in threadbare coat or grey uniform, with caps or heavy shawls on their heads, the mud of the streets soaked through their shoes, an autumn cough catching at their throats. They stood there packed shoulder-to-shoulder, and crowding even closer to make room for more, to make room for all, listening tirelessly, hungrily, passionately, demanding, fearing lest they miss a word of what it is so necessary to understand, to assimilate, and to do. [...] The experience of the revolution, the war, the heavy struggle of a whole bitter lifetime, rose from the depths of memory in each of these poverty-driven men and women, expressing itself in simple and imperious thoughts: this way we can go no further; we must break a road into the future.¹⁵⁸

Working class neighbourhoods of Petrograd and Moscow now teemed with tens of thousands of armed volunteers or 'red guards'. On 9 October, the Petrograd Soviet set up a Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) to organise and deliver the final blow; led by Trotsky, it began planning, quite openly, an insurrection to topple the discredited régime. A few days later, on 13 October, the soldiers organised through the Petrograd Soviet voted by a majority of 283 to 1 to accept the MRC as their commanding authority, and the de facto transfer of power was already underway.¹⁵⁹ Things came to head on the morning of 24 October when Kerensky tried to pre-empt the coming showdown by raiding the Bolshevik party headquarters and by trying to reassert control of the Petrograd garrison; this allowed the MRC in turn to present a call to arms made to the garrisons, to the workers' Red Guards, and to sailors of the Baltic Fleet, as a defensive operation designed to preserve Soviet power from a counter-revolutionary government. In a series of highly charged mass meetings, Trotsky and the MRC managed to win over the garrisons of the Peter and Paul Fortress and the neighbouring Kronverksky arsenal without having to fire the proverbial single shot. 'The government is tottering', Lenin wrote with characteristic urgency on 24 October, and 'must be given the death blow at all costs [...]. With all my might I urge comrades to realise that everything now hangs by a thread; that we are confronted by problems which are not to be solved by conferences or congresses

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¹⁵⁸Trotsky 1932, vol. 3, ch. 41.

¹⁵⁹ Faulkner 2017, epub 240/373.

(even congresses of soviets), but exclusively [...] by the struggle of the armed people.’¹⁶⁰ Most of the régime’s few remaining cadets and troops slipped away from their posts. The result of the brief and almost bloodless confrontation that began that evening was a foregone conclusion, since most observers could see, then as now, that ‘in the last analysis the Provisional Government had expired even before the Bolsheviks finished it off.’¹⁶¹

The argument that then divided the brief but decisive Congress of Soviets which began its deliberations the night of 25-26 October turned essentially into a debate about how best to interpret the will of the people. Had a conspiratorial MRC pre-empted and thus usurped the people’s will, a will that only the Congress was authorised to express? Or was the transfer of sovereign power ‘based upon the will of the great majority of the workers, soldiers and peasants’, as claimed by the first resolution to be passed by the Congress itself?¹⁶² Trotsky distilled the logic of what had already happened in a famously cutting retort to Martov and other Menshevik critics on the floor of the Congress, as they again hesitated about how best to respond to a *fait accompli*. ‘What has taken place is an insurrection, not a conspiracy. An insurrection of the popular masses needs no justification. [...]. When the downtrodden masses revolt, it is their right.’ Having embraced Bolshevik leadership, the soviet and its MRC ‘have tempered and hardened the revolutionary energy of the Petrograd workers and soldiers. We have openly forged the will of the masses to insurrection, and not conspiracy [...] The masses gathered under our banner, and our insurrection was victorious.’ The time for compromise had come to an end.¹⁶³

The enduring and eventually tragic drama of the Russian Revolution, however, is that the clear victory in October of Bolshevik arguments about mass sovereignty in the present did not by itself refute Menshevik arguments about the conditions and future of socialism. These arguments drew on the expressly sub-voluntary dimension of Marx’s scientific socialism.

It’s certainly true that Menshevik adherence all through 1917 to Plekhanov’s two-stage model of the revolution (first bourgeois then proletarian) – a model that had appeared especially compelling back when the prospect of mass political mobilisation seemed remote – prevented them from grasping what needed to be done now that such mobilisation dominated the present. Against all those who urged the *narod* to wait for the bourgeoisie to fulfil their historical role, and to mark

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¹⁶⁰ Lenin, note of 24 October 1917, cited in Miéville 2017, epub 511/654.

¹⁶¹ Smith 2018, p. 151

¹⁶² Reed 1977, epub, 263/768.

¹⁶³ Trotsky, speech of 25 October 1917, in Trotsky 1932, vol. 3, ch. 47; cf. Miéville 2017, epub 545/654.

time until their appointed historical hour might come, Lenin and Trotsky were surely right to press for the final transfer of sovereign authority from Kerensky's isolated palace to the soviets' turbulent Congress. To condemn *this* transfer as premature is essentially to condemn the assertion of mass sovereignty itself. Given the existing balance of class power, as Luxemburg recognised in another context, the proletariat is never likely to be 'in a position to seize political power in any other way than "prematurely" [... so] the objection to the "premature" conquest of power is at bottom nothing more than a general opposition to the aspiration of the proletariat to possess itself of state power.'¹⁶⁴ Possession of state power is one thing, however; its use to compel a transition to socialism from the top down is another.

On the one hand, then, the decisive fact of October is that, as Rabinowitch shows in compelling detail, 'the goals of the Bolsheviks, as the masses understood them, had strong popular support.'¹⁶⁵ John Reed was especially well-placed to appreciate that

if the masses all over Russia had not been ready for insurrection it must have failed. The only reason for Bolshevik success lay in their accomplishing the vast and simple desires of the most profound strata of the people, calling them to the work of tearing down and destroying the old, and afterward, in the smoke of falling ruins, cooperating with them to erect the frame-work of the new.¹⁶⁶

Far from being a mere putsch or conspiracy, October confirmed at the level of national government a transfer of mass sovereignty that was already well under way all across the country, in villages, regiments, and workplaces. Sensitive to the words and deeds of the actors themselves, Reed's account resounds with the repeated appeals to the people's will that characterised the first months of the new régime. In one domain after another, commissars and councils voiced resolutions undertaken 'in realisation of the will of the revolutionary people', whether this be a will to abolish inequality in the army, to establish 'workers' control over mills and factories', to redistribute land to the peasants, to establish a system of mass education, and so on.¹⁶⁷ Even the most prominent Menshevik historian of the revolution, Nikolai Sukhanov, soon recognised that 'to talk about military conspiracy instead of national insurrection, when the [Bolshevik] party was followed by the overwhelming majority of the

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¹⁶⁴ Luxemburg 2008, pp. 95-6 ['Reform or Revolution'].

¹⁶⁵ Rabinowitch 1976, p. xvii. 'Everywhere in the provinces at this time there were Soviet congresses, and almost everywhere they gave predominance to the Bolsheviks' (Sukhanov 1962, p. 577).

¹⁶⁶ Reed 1977, p. 254.

¹⁶⁷ Reed 1977.

people, when the party had already *de facto* conquered all real power and authority – was clearly an absurdity.’¹⁶⁸ Massed in their councils, the people considered their options and made their choice. However contorted the path that led to it, Lih notes, ‘this choice was an inevitable implication of the more fundamental decision to keep soviet power in existence, since the Bolsheviks were the only organized political force willing and able to do this.’¹⁶⁹

As Lenin’s lucid critic Rosa Luxemburg pointed out, a year after the insurrection, the ‘burning question of our time’ is precisely not a matter of short-term tactics but the general

capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. In this, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the *first*, those who went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world; they are still the *only ones* up to now who can cry with [Ulrich von] Hutten: ‘I have dared!’ This is the essential and *enduring* in Bolshevik policy. In *this* sense theirs is the immortal historical service of having marched at the head of the international proletariat with the conquest of political power and the practical placing of the problem of the realization of socialism.

Luxemburg could see, as well as Martov, that given current conditions, ‘in Russia the problem could only be posed, it could not be solved.’ Reliance on revolutionary developments elsewhere, notably in Luxemburg’s own adopted country, would certainly impose fateful constraints on the new Russian government. But given this premise she doesn’t simply condemn the Bolshevik initiative so much as call to rework, extend, and generalise it. ‘And in *this* sense, the future everywhere belongs to “Bolshevism.”’¹⁷⁰

In this sense too, what happened on 25 October 1917 invites comparisons with 10 August 1792. Its patience exhausted, a newly massed sovereign authority overthrew a discredited government and replaced it with one it seemed better placed to command. The great Robespierriste historian Albert Mathiez was perfectly right, during his brief period as a member of the French Communist Party in the early 1920s, to draw attention to some of the many striking parallels between the emergency measures taken in 1917-18 and in 1792-94.

Jacobinism, Bolshevism – these words sum up the desire for justice by an oppressed class which is freeing itself from its chains. The strength of Robespierre and Lenin results from their understanding

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¹⁶⁸ Sukhanov 1962, p. 576

¹⁶⁹ Lih 2017a.

¹⁷⁰ Luxemburg 1918.

of their troops, their ability to discipline, and satisfy, and inspire confidence in them. In spite of appearances, [such] dictators do not base their power on an authority above the people, on torture and constraint. No! Their strength and prestige arise from public opinion. Lenin [...] has erected a statue to Robespierre. He knows what he owes to him.¹⁷¹

Along these lines, if anything can justify the Bolshevik's fateful and much-debated decision to dismiss the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 – the Assembly that they themselves had convened, and had so long called for – it's their charged appeal to mass sovereignty and the people's will. In a speech he gave to defend this decision, Lenin reiterated the zero-sum quality of the underlying conflict. 'As long as the slogan "All power to the Constituent Assembly" conceals the slogan "Down with Soviet power", civil war is inevitable' and must be waged and won accordingly. Since mass councils 'created solely by the initiative of the people are a form of democracy without parallel,' any rival vehicle for the people's will is not only redundant but seditious. It's true, Lenin concedes, that 'the people wanted the Constituent Assembly summoned, and we summoned it. But they sensed immediately what this famous Constituent Assembly really was. And now we have carried out the will of the people, which is – All power to the Soviets!' Since only one will can rule, so 'by the will of Soviet power the Constituent Assembly, which has refused to recognise the power of the people, is being dissolved.'¹⁷²

On the other hand, what complicates the picture, of course, is that neither the Jacobin nor the Bolshevik stories end with the triumph of mass sovereignty. They end, as Rousseau might have predicted, with its usurpation. The Bolsheviks fulfilled mass demands actually to transfer 'all power to the people', and by doing so set a precedent that would resound all through the rest of the revolutionary twentieth century.¹⁷³ But at the same time they also claimed mass authority, in the context of international and civil war, to take the first steps of a 'transition to socialism'. This is where Menshevik arguments about the premature and thus utopian quality of Bolshevik assumptions about world socialist revolution retain all their pertinence. After reluctantly accepting the fact of the October insurrection and of its mass basis, Martov quickly despaired of the way Lenin's commissars seemed determined to pursue a socialist programme based less on a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in the properly 'advanced' and majoritarian (i.e. Marxist) sense of term,

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¹⁷¹ Mathiez 1920b, p. 429; cf. Mathiez 1920a.

¹⁷² Lenin 1972b, pp. 440-41. As Victor Serge subsequently noted in his history of the first year of the revolution, 'the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly made a great sensation abroad. In Russia, it passed almost unnoticed' (Serge 2015, p. 135). Cf. Radkey 1989, p. 101-102.

¹⁷³ Cf. Badiou 2007.

and more as an agenda driven by a small group of leaders working together with a disorganised conglomeration of 'peasants in uniform'. Animated more by a spirit of exasperated revolt than by the principles of scientific socialism, and hardened by years of exposure to the relentless violence of world war, Martov feared that the soldiers' 'pseudo-socialism of "trenches and barracks"' lacked the material and psycho-political foundations essential to Marx's anticipation of the exhaustion of capitalism. Russia as a whole was far from ready for a transition to a new mode of production. Absent a massed and conscious proletariat determined to pursue it, the Bolshevik path to socialism could only be decreed above, and thus forced through by terror and clientelism.¹⁷⁴ 'One shudders to think how far the very idea of socialism will be discredited in the minds of the people', Martov confessed to a friend a couple of months after October. 'We are undoubtedly moving through anarchy towards some sort of Caesarism, founded on the entire people's having lost confidence in their ability to govern themselves.'¹⁷⁵

Martov's great rival Trotsky had himself long ago anticipated the likely dangers run by an organisation that centralised too much power in the hands of its leadership, allowing each higher rung on the ladder to 'substitute itself' for those lower down.¹⁷⁶ In 1924, only a few short years after he had helped to eliminate the political freedoms that were once so essential to the Bolshevik project, Trotsky could only preface his own imminent expulsion from the organisation with an admission that 'none of us desires or is able to dispute the will of the party', for 'in the last analysis the party is always right.'¹⁷⁷

X History does nothing

No discussion of 1917 can avoid considering how far Stalin's eventual despotism was anticipated by Lenin and Trotsky's voluntarism. Accounts that seek to derive the former directly from the latter continue to inform condemnation not only of Russia's revolution but of all subsequent revolutions too, if not of the exercise of any transformative political will *tout court*.

Now everyone knows that the party which emerged victorious from Russia's brutal civil war quickly deteriorated over the course of several years into a bureaucratic monolith, and there is no need here to go back

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174 Martov develops these points in his debate with Zinoviev in Halle in October 1920 (Martov 2011, pp. 167-180).

175 Martov, letter to Nadezhda Kristi, 30 December 1917, in Getzler 1967, p. 172. Cf. Martov 2021, pp. 43-5; Savel'ev and Tiutiukin 2006, pp. 69-70.

176 Trotsky 1904, part 2, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1904/tasks/ch03.htm>; cf. Deutscher 1954, p. 90.

177 Trotsky, cited in Cliff 1960.

over the grim path that led through the militarisation of labour, the taming of the soviets, the assault on Kronstadt, etc., to the disastrous ban on intra-party factions and on extra-party dissent adopted at the same time as the 'new economic policies' of 1921. Nevertheless, as even so staunch a critic of Stalin as Victor Serge wondered in a frequently cited text of 1939, 'what greater injustice can be imagined towards the Russian revolution than to judge it in the light of Stalinism alone?'¹⁷⁸ For my part I'm persuaded by the arguments made by sympathetic critics like Serge, and by later analysts like Rabinowitch, Lih, and Miéville, that show how the party that took power in 1917 was an essentially different sort of actor than the one that exercised it in the 1920s.¹⁷⁹ The one helped to organise a mass sovereign and to arm it with commanding power; the other usurped sovereignty to the advantage of a new governing class. The one sought to concentrate and impose the people's will; the other came to rely on mechanisms of representation that centralised authority in the hands of a tiny clique. The one recruited activists who were thoroughly committed to a daunting and dangerous project; the other was swollen with recruits who sought material advantages in a new régime. The one understood very well that 'only if power is based, obviously and unconditionally, on a majority of the population can it be stable during a popular revolution,'¹⁸⁰ and scoffed at the very idea of 'establishing socialism against the will of the majority'¹⁸¹; the other seemed to know what the people wanted without needing to ask them. The one seemed willing in principle to submit to a higher sovereign authority concentrated in a Constituent Assembly; the other came to see the prospect of such an assembly as nothing but a threat to its own hold on power. And so on.

To take stock of what happened after 1917, as after 1792, it's essential to resist the temptation to read history back to front. It's also important to recognise, however, that the Marxian readiness to align political will with historical necessity which had seemed so encouraging when socialism was on the march did the cause no favours once it fell prey to confusion and retreat. In this respect too, the full arc of Cromwell's career is not irrelevant for those who study the trajectory of scientific socialism.

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178 'It is often said', Serge continues, 'that "the germ of all Stalinism was in Bolshevism at its beginning." Well, I have no objection. Only, Bolshevism also contained many other germs, a mass of other germs, and those who lived through the enthusiasm of the first years of the first victorious socialist revolution ought not to forget it. To judge the living man by the death germs which the autopsy reveals in the corpse – and which he may have carried in him since his birth – is that very sensible?' (Serge 1939).

179 Rabinowitch's landmark study of the way the Bolsheviks actually came to power in 1917 stresses 'the party's relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralised structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character', one that left plenty of space for divergent views, even on issues as urgent and divisive as October's call to arms (Rabinowitch 1976, p. 311).

180 Lenin 1977b.

181 Lenin, 'A Basic Question', 17 April 1917, cited in Lih 2017b.

Following Marx's emphasis on the inevitable growth and revolt of the proletariat as a class 'trained, united and organised by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production,'¹⁸² and guided by the indisputable 'fact of increasing impoverishment and proletarianisation', Lenin had always insisted on demonstrating socialism's 'necessity and inevitability from the point of view of the materialist conception of history.'¹⁸³ Through to the end of his life, he remained confident that 'the outcome of the struggle as a whole can be forecast only because in the long run capitalism itself is educating and training the vast majority of the population of the globe for the struggle.' He was convinced that this was enough to guarantee that, in time, the 'complete victory of socialism is fully and absolutely assured.'¹⁸⁴ But once you accept, as Lenin still did in 1918, that the initial success of Russia's revolution 'is not due to any particular merit of the Russian proletariat but to the general course of historical events, which by the will of history has temporarily placed that proletariat in a foremost position and made it for the time being the vanguard of the world revolution,'¹⁸⁵ then you should also accept that 'the will of history' may also place you, at least temporarily, in more compromised and more compromising positions.

We would do better to abandon all talk of a will of history. Rousseau's pessimistic assessment of historical momentum is more of a political asset than a liability. History by itself, after all, 'does nothing and wages no battles'. If one day we finally manage to replace capital's command with a form of 'association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' this will be because enough of us were determined to make this happen, and for no other reason.

By contrast, what for a long time was widely taken to be the great strength of Marx's scientific socialism, its conviction that the 'the will of the proletariat' must be determined by 'what the proletariat is' and shall thus be 'compelled to do', is in reality simplistic and evasive. It is evasive because it offloads much of the sheer effort of organising and empowering a collective purpose – the work that Rousseau and the Jacobins foregrounded as the deliberate practice and laborious cultivation of 'virtue' – to the immanent unfolding of historical development, in the naïve hope that capital must find itself compelled, willy-nilly, to exploit its workers in ways that also serve to concentrate, educate and motivate them. And it's simplistic because, unlike those 'virtuous' patriots or partisans of a general will, the scientific socialist on the Leninist model tends to downplay the ever-present risk of differences and divisions that might emerge from within the revolutionary class itself, starting with the division between the rank and file and their own leadership.

182 Marx 1990, p. 929.

183 Lenin 1960b, p. 353.

184 Lenin 1965, p. 500.

185 Lenin 1972b, p. 423.

The orthodox Marxist wager on world revolution stands or falls on the assumption that proletarianisation must indeed develop and 'mature' as a homogenising force, one that will more or less automatically erode all distinctions based on occupation, status, nationality, ethnicity, gender, and so on. What Rousseau and the Jacobins contribute to this picture is a frank recognition that such egalitarian erosion will only proceed if enough people will it so, and do what is required to overcome the compensating particularisms (patriarchal reactions, ethnic chauvinisms, imperialist predations...) that our ruling classes will always foster in order to resist it.

XI Challenging conditions

Any generalisations about the kinds of capacities required to sustain and to impose a political will must remain very broad-brush, but in this final section I can at least point briefly to the four main challenges involved.

(a) The first challenge is to develop the means of association, organisation and leadership required to formulate and sustain a collective purpose. As we have seen, such means must find a way of simultaneously expanding or extending their scope, the 'generality' of their will, while also concentrating and directing its exercise. The need to get this balance right is what's at stake in the endless debates about the relative merits of 'horizontal' as opposed to 'vertical' models of organisation,¹⁸⁶ about the difficulties of clarifying and sustaining a 'mass line', of upholding the conflicting tendencies of a 'democratic centralism', and so on. Trotsky's formulation of 1904 might be taken as representative of a widely shared approach to mass organisation in pre-war social democratic circles:

The Party is not only the *consciousness* of the organised class, but also its organised *will*. The Party begins to exist where, on the basis of a given level of consciousness, we organise the political will of the class by using tactical methods corresponding to the general goal. The Party is only able to grow and progress continually by means of the interdependence of 'will' and 'consciousness' if every tactical step, carried out in the form of some manifestation of the political 'will' of the most conscious elements of the class, inevitably raises the political sensitivity of these elements which yesterday were not involved, and thus prepares the material and ideological basis for new tactical steps, which will be more resolute, and of greater political weight and a more decided class character.¹⁸⁷

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¹⁸⁶ Cf. Nunes 2021.

¹⁸⁷ Trotsky 1904, part 2.

The more fraught the situation and the more hesitant the members of such an organisation, the more its leaders are likely to stress that 'a firm party line, its unyielding resolve, is also a mood-creating factor.'¹⁸⁸

Needless to say, charges of 'vanguardism' remain a familiar component of the wider aversion to the whole lexicon of 'sovereignty' and 'mastery', and especially to voluntarist accounts of sovereignty. These charges tend to combine a perfectly legitimate warning (following Trotsky's own example) about the dangers of usurpation or substitution on the one hand with far more ambiguous worries about decisive leadership on the other. The real issue concerns the pros and cons of participation in combative organisations altogether. What sort of army, after all, can function without a vanguard? As soon as any group masses together, it also begins to differentiate itself into parts – into left and right wings, into a centre, a rear, and a leading edge, etc. All these parts have essential roles to play. For Luxemburg or Martov no less than for Lenin or Robespierre, a determined 'front line' is a crucial part of any mass organisation that aims to challenge the status quo; a combative mass party *is* a vanguard party, or must rapidly become one, if it means to prevail.

The Jacobin club that evolved from a small gathering of like-minded delegates to the Estates General of 1789 into an extraordinary network of many thousands of coordinated affiliates is an arresting case in point, and its operations anticipated some of the confederating structures that would become routine in the formation of mass political parties a century later. The worker's councils or soviets that were improvised during the Russian revolution of 1905, and then their subsequent reinvention and multiplication all across the Russian empire in 1917, combining local participation with national or congressional coordination, is a still more remarkable example of a genuinely mass organisation. The soviet model adopted in 1905, Trotsky observed soon after the fact,

was an organization which was authoritative and yet had no traditions; which could immediately involve a scattered mass of hundreds of thousands of people while having virtually no organizational machinery; which united the revolutionary currents within the proletariat; which was capable of initiative and spontaneous self control [... and of acquiring] authority in the eyes of the masses on the very day it came into being.¹⁸⁹

Reflecting on the 'astoundingly effective' operations of the Soviets that he observed at work in 1917, and noting the way that all sorts of groups were accorded delegates on the basis of proportional representation and

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¹⁸⁸ Lenin 1972a, p. 209.

¹⁸⁹ Trotsky 1972, ch. 8.

remained 'subject to recall at any time', John Reed concluded that 'no political body more sensitive and responsive to the popular will was ever invented.'¹⁹⁰

In addition to parties, clubs, and councils (and also: schools, churches, mosques, trade unions, militias, national guards...), much of the organising work that has proved so consequential over the past couple of centuries has been mediated through the basic social forms of city and nation. Close-knit working class districts like the Vyborg in Petrograd played an essential role in the massing and mobilising of popular pressure in 1917, just as the *sans-culotte* faubourgs of Saint-Antoine and Saint-Marcel played a pivotal role in the great *journées* of 1792 and 1793.¹⁹¹ One of the main things that distinguished Marat, Danton and Robespierre from their Feuillantins and then Girondin opponents was their commitment to Paris as the 'boulevard of liberty'. As Robespierre put it, 'the people is sublime, but individuals are weak; during a political tumult, in a revolutionary tempest, we need a rallying point', and 'this rallying point must be Paris.' Only the nation's capital or 'head' can rally the people in general.¹⁹² Blanqui would repeatedly emphasise the same point. The French revolution continued for as long as a sufficiently mobilised Paris could pursue demands that resonated across most of the nation as a whole, just as the Bolshevik project of proletarian hegemony retained mass support for so long as the peasantry could see, in the cities' red guards, the best available means for achieving their ends. In other contexts, like those investigated by Mao or Fanon, an insurgent peasantry has been better placed than more heavily policed urban workers to wage and win a national struggle.¹⁹³

Either way, the nation itself remains both the most important and most problematic vehicle for organising a will of the people. It remains the most important, because the formulation of mass demands at an international level is still largely a matter of wishful thinking; socialist internationalism has never yet recovered from the disaster of 1914, and a project like the European Union, though in some ways an improvement over its member states, is equally constituted in ways that insulate the prevailing realm from mass pressure. The national liberation movements that won independence from European powers in the middle decades of the past century, and the related contributions towards the tricontinental

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¹⁹⁰ Reed 1918; cf. Reed 1977, p. 11.

¹⁹¹ See in particular Burstin 2005.

¹⁹² Robespierre 1958, p. 559. '*Que tout Paris s'arme, que les sections et le peuple veillent, que la Convention se déclare peuple*' (p. 359). Blanqui will likewise celebrate Paris as the 'capital of intelligence and of work, the true national representation, the concentrated essence of the country [...]'. Confronted with Paris, the Assembly is nothing. And Paris in turn will abdicate when France grows of age' (Blanqui MSS 9581, f. 93, 7 Feb 1856).

¹⁹³ Cf. Hallward 2011.

or Third World project of the 1960s and 70s, were arguably the last great achievements of emancipatory politics on a world scale, and their legacy remains a force to be reckoned with, not least in Cuba. If the Third World project failed, as Vijay Prashad has shown, it wasn't because it was too utopian, or anachronistic, but rather because, in the face of its adversaries and their combined military and economic power, it was too divided and too weak.¹⁹⁴ In the late 70s and 80s the fate of Third World internationalism was settled temporarily on the field of class struggle; it failed during those years, in other words, for the same reason that organised labour failed everywhere else as well, and for the same reason that emancipatory projects all over the world have largely failed – for the time being.

Very much for both good and ill, the nation endures as the most consequential horizon of a people's will, furthermore, because for lack of compelling alternatives it continues to provide the main way of addressing the unavoidable question of what makes a people a people – and unless this question is resolved in an egalitarian and inclusive way, any reference to a generic 'will of people' will likewise remain empty or wishful thinking. Hence the familiar tension between the particular and the universal that runs through every nationalising project. How far should distinct popular interests be addressed through convergent but separate forms of organisation, and how far should they be integrated as part of a single synthetic project? There can be no a priori answers to such questions. This is the sort of question that divided Luxemburg from Lenin on the issue of national self-determination, for instance, or from her comrade Clara Zetkin on the question of women's organisation, and it's one that would recur in the arguments around competing conceptions of national autonomy all through the twentieth century, not least in the segregated USA.¹⁹⁵ If by the end of his life Lenin's approach might have appeared to have more to show for it, Luxemburg's repeated warnings about the pitfalls of national consciousness have too often gone unheeded, and should continue to haunt our political imaginary. Meanwhile the pitiless logic of 'inter-national competition' remains the only game in town. The richer nations have already converted themselves into fortresses garrisoned by chauvinism and greed; the poorer ones, as always, still suffer as they must. Capital itself, needless to say, continues to operate as a global force, and to generate calamities that only transnational solidarity could address. Everyone knows that the challenges posed by exploitation, climate, inequality, migration, and so on, cannot possibly be overcome within national boundaries. A future will of the people must find new ways to organise and impose itself on an international scale.

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¹⁹⁴ Prashad 2008; cf. Getachew 2020.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Singh 2004; Haider 2017.

(b) The second challenge concerns education and the sharing of knowledge. Only informed and critical deliberations can prepare the way for convincing decisions and sustained commitments. Since inhabitants of the realm are systematically mis-educated and mis-informed, all mass education begins with re-education. Each of the great modern revolutions is marked by an outpouring of pamphlets, newspapers, debates, meetings, and on, seeking to set the record straight and to reframe the terms of discussion. The eager reception of Tom Paine's *Common Sense* or the abbé Sieyès' *What is the Third Estate?* is exemplary of the way a hitherto seething but dispersed public opinion can crystallise into a shared determination. So is the production and distribution of a party newspaper, on the model of *Iskra* and its many emulations. John Reed again helps to make a wider point when he observes how, in the autumn of 1917,

all Russia was learning to read, and *reading* – politics, economics, history – because the people wanted to *know* –. In every city, in most towns, along the Front, each political faction had its newspaper – sometimes several. Hundreds of thousands of pamphlets were distributed by thousands of organisations, and poured into the armies, the villages, the factories, the streets. The thirst for education, so long thwarted, burst with the Revolution into a frenzy of expression. From Smolny Institute alone, the first six months, went out every day tons, car-loads, train-loads of literature, saturating the land. Russia absorbed reading matter like hot sand drinks water, insatiable. And it was not fables, falsified history, diluted religion, and the cheap fiction that corrupts – but social and economic theories, philosophy, the works of Tolstoy, Gogol, and Gorky... Then the Talk, beside which Carlyle's 'flood of French speech' was a mere trickle. Lectures, debates, speeches – in theatres, circuses, school-houses, clubs, Soviet meeting-rooms, Union headquarters, barracks –. Meetings in the trenches at the Front, in village squares, factories –. What a marvellous sight to see the Putilov factory) pour out its forty thousand to listen to Social Democrats, Socialist Revolutionaries, Anarchists, anybody, whatever they had to say, as long as they would talk! For months in Petrograd, and all over Russia, every street-corner was a public tribune. In railway trains, street-cars, always the spurting up of impromptu debate, everywhere...

Every upsurge in mass education and mass argument foregrounds at least two related questions about authority that are ordinarily dismissed by inhabitants of the realm. The first concerns the apparently hierarchical relation between educator and educated, famously evoked by Marx's third fragment on Feuerbach. Marx's own appeal to 'revolutionary

practice' goes some way towards resolving the issue, but is incomplete, from a voluntarist perspective, without some reference to the figure or learning that can help people to make the transition from 'want' to 'will.' Knowledge is power but it must be acquired, and the truths that matter most in both science and politics cannot be grasped solely on the basis of one's own lived experience or observations. Emancipation is a process, and it's easy to see why Robespierre lingered on the fact that 'we poor devils are building the temple of liberty with hands still scarred by the fetters of servitude.'¹⁹⁶ The masses 'spontaneously' searching for knowledge who are evoked in Reed's account of 1917, or in Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*, are actively looking for something they don't yet have – not in order to perpetuate their subordination to a teacher, but to supersede it. Rousseau's evocation of a *législateur* is one way of framing this transitional and vanishing pedagogical relation; Kautsky's influential account of the 'merging' of scientific socialism with the workers' movement is another. In a more recent context, if Rancière is right to worry about the inequalities perpetuated by any teacher-student relation, Althusser and Badiou are also right to remember that demands for empowering theory or science originate with those who most want them.

The second question compensates for the first, and validates a version of the majority principle as a basic normative dimension of collective action. Any mass is made up only of individuals, and as Blanqui reminds us, 'if everything must be done in the interest of the collective, nevertheless everything must be done by the individual.' Only individuals can will and act, and inclusive mass deliberations can only proceed on the basis of one person one vote. Here the distinction between mass and realm is especially stark. There is only a will of the people to the extent that its every participant has an equal say in its determination – an egalitarian principle excluded as non-sensical in the realm-bound deliberations that preside over business as usual.

The goal of mass deliberation is to *arrive* at a settled consensus, or at least a decision its participants can accept. Like the majorities won by the Bolsheviks over the course of 1917, a willed majority is an achievement, not a point of departure. As Rousseau explains, when support for a proposal isn't unanimous then only 'the tally of the votes yields the declaration of the general will.' If my own argument fails to carry the day, then collective responsibility requires me to admit (for the time being) 'that I made a mistake, and that what I took to be the general will was not.'¹⁹⁷ When members of a trade union deliberate about whether they should go on strike, for instance, this is the kind of decision they will need to make, and abide by. So long as commitment to the group

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196 Robespierre, 'Gouverner la République' (10 May 1793), in Robespierre 1958, p. 497.

197 Rousseau 1997c, p. 124 [SC 4:2].

(the union, the party, the movement...) remains sufficiently strong i.e. sufficiently 'virtuous', Rousseau is confident that 'a good plan once adopted will change the mind' even of those participants who initially opposed it, and who as individuals might have stood to gain from a different configuration of things.¹⁹⁸

Meanwhile, as long as deliberations are instead largely filtered or represented through the hierarchical distinctions of the realm, so then virtuous priorities, in Robespierre's sense of the term, will remain the province of an embattled minority.¹⁹⁹ The basic question raised in each case by 'vanguard' figures like Robespierre and Lenin – as also by Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips, or by Ella Baker, or Bob Moses, or Greta Thunberg, or Anjali Appadurai... – is whether this minority can win over a critical mass of voices and votes, or not.

(c) The third and most daunting challenge returns us to the difference between will and wish, or to the will as a practical faculty for translating intentions into actions. This is where the need for strong and coordinated executive power comes in, and with it a role for government as the people's servant. In the circumstances of France 1792-93 or of Russia 1918-20, a government that wasn't strong and indeed authoritarian enough to defend the revolution from its enemies, to requisition food for the cities, to keep anarchy at bay, etc., could not have governed at all. Engels simply had his eyes open when he acknowledged that 'a revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is', as 'the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part' by whatever means this might require.²⁰⁰ (It shouldn't be surprising, either, that an embattled anti-colonial analyst of the Russian sequence like Walter Rodney might be less condemning of government authority than his cold-war American counterparts).²⁰¹ Even if it stops well short of challenging the current mode of production, forceful executive capacity is obviously essential for responding to climate disasters, for building infrastructure, for ending the use of fossil fuels, for transforming energy grids, for regulating the financial sector, for offering universal education, providing health care, enforcing labour and environmental standards, and so on; the general erosion of trust in government and in the wider 'public sector' has been among the greatest of neoliberal achievements. Who now trusts government pledges more than market forces? If people have increasingly 'lost confidence in their ability to govern themselves', as Martov warned, the beneficiaries are those class actors who have seized the opportunity

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¹⁹⁸ Rousseau 2005, p. 239.

¹⁹⁹ Robespierre, 'Sur l'appel au peuple' (28 December 1792), in Robespierre 1958, pp. 198-9.

²⁰⁰ Engels 1872.

²⁰¹ Cf. Rodney 2018; cf. Lih 1992.

to govern government. The banking/financial and military/security sectors in particular – those two pillars of traditional state power – have over this same period established themselves as effectively supra-sovereign instances, free from all but the most superficial forms of political oversight. Who now expects them to be properly overseen?

Of course a readiness for action varies directly with an actor's expectations. 'One must always remember', as Trotsky reminds us, 'that the masses of the people have never been in possession of power, that they have always been under the heel of other classes, and that therefore they lack political self-confidence' and are easily discouraged by compromises or hesitation.²⁰² In the routine affairs of the realm discouragement passes for realism, and we've all learned to appreciate that the end of the world is more easily imagined than an end to capital. The rulers of the realm can always be trusted to do everything in their power to thwart the realisation of any mass emancipatory project. What must such projects do to prevail?

Understood as a capacity that acts in pursuit of its ends, a political will begins with a choice of means. This choice itself largely depends on the kind of opposition confronting it. Many if not most of the Paris Communards of 1871, to take an especially consequential example, may have yearned for peaceful coexistence with their enemies in Versailles – but given Thiers and MacMahon's determination to respond not only with war but with war crimes, such wishful thinking was a recipe for disaster. As both Marx and Bakunin would later acknowledge, Blanqui's followers were proved a thousands time right when they immediately urged the Commune's National Guard to strike at once at Versailles and to rally the wider nation; the attempt to negotiate instead was a fatal mistake. Cuba's José Martí made the wider point very well: if 'it is criminal to promote a war that can be avoided', it is just as criminal 'to fail to promote an inevitable one', and to do everything possible to win it.²⁰³

To achieve the end of universal emancipation in Haiti, for instance, the slave insurgents of the 1790s had to fend off invasions from all of the great imperial powers of the day. Even so, Toussaint's cautious vision of a 'tricolour' Saint-Domingue might still have been feasible, against the apparent odds, if his French enemies hadn't been determined to restore slavery at virtually any cost. The atrocities committed by Leclerc and Rochambeau, during the final crazed months of French rule on the island, helps to put the American version of a slave-owners' rebellion in perspective. There too, by the late 1850s, Harriet Tubman, John Brown and their comrades in arms had come to accept that the unavoidable price of

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²⁰²Trotsky 1918, part 3.

²⁰³ Martí, 'Our Ideas' (14 March 1892), in Martí 1977, p. 272.

abolition was war, and that 'the lesson of the hour is insurrection.'²⁰⁴ By 1863, a critical mass of slaves could see that war indeed meant war, and by engaging in it decided its outcome. By 1865, even Lincoln could see that the war might need to last 'until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.'

It is again the force of capital's command, not the strength of labour's resistance, that led Marx and Blanqui, and then Luxemburg or Serge, 'to recognise the necessity for the dictatorship of the proletariat.'²⁰⁵ The total eclipse of this formulation in recent decades, along with any recognition of its 'necessity', is all by itself a suggestive measure of capital's ongoing triumph. But whatever the name that labour might give to its own potential sovereignty, the question itself will return whenever labour again begins to contemplate a challenge to capital's command: if it's to succeed, what must such a challenge entail? A negotiated transition to socialism, or 'despotic inroads into property'? One way or another, as Trotsky will retort to Kautsky, 'who aims at the end cannot reject the means.' In the context of an open clash with capital, 'if the socialist revolution requires a dictatorship, [...] it follows that the dictatorship must be guaranteed at all costs'; if such a clash spirals into full-scale civil war then whoever 'repudiates measures of suppression and intimidation towards determined and armed counter-revolution must [also] reject all idea of the political supremacy of the working class and its revolutionary dictatorship. The man who repudiates the dictatorship of the proletariat repudiates the Socialist revolution, and digs the grave of Socialism.'²⁰⁶ Does then this choice of ends serve to justify all feasible means? No, argues Trotsky, in his famous exchange with Dewey, in terms that again return us to the primacy of political will and the subjective factor:

Permissible and obligatory are those and only those means, we answer, which unite the revolutionary proletariat, fill their hearts with irreconcilable hostility to oppression [...], imbue them with consciousness of their own historic mission, raise their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice in the struggle. Precisely from this it flows that not all means are permissible. When we say that the end justifies the means, then for us the conclusion follows that the great revolutionary end spurns those base means and ways which set one part of the working class against other parts, or attempt to make the masses happy without their participation.²⁰⁷

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204 Phillips 2001.

205 Serge 1998, p. 92.

206 Trotsky 2017, ch 2.

207 Trotsky 1938.

For a long time, arguably from Cleisthenes and the Athenian Revolution of 508BC right through to the 'people's wars' that finished the campaigns against colonial rule in the 1970s, the figure of the 'people in arms' stood for the most forceful means of imposing a political will. Long after the victories of 1792-93, in the mid-nineteenth century Blanqui was still confident that 'a France bristling with workers in arms means the advent of socialism', and that 'in the presence of armed proletarians, all obstacles, resistances and impossibilities will disappear.'²⁰⁸ Around the same time, as the insurrections that began in 1848 ran out of steam, Marx was convinced that if the workers were to retain independent revolutionary initiative they 'must be armed and organized', and remain so while pursuing the ends of the revolution through to their completion.²⁰⁹ Twenty years later the same reasoning explains why 'the first decree of the [Paris] Commune [was] the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people.'²¹⁰ It also explains why Trotsky pays such careful attention to 'the psychological moment when the soldiers go over to the revolution', knowing that 'the fate of every revolution at a certain point is decided by a break in the disposition of the army.'²¹¹ For similar reasons, Fanon urges fellow writers and intellectuals to 'understand that nothing can replace the reasoned, irrevocable taking up of arms on the people's side.'²¹² Che's experience of guerrilla war in Cuba convinced him, likewise, that sufficiently determined and organised 'popular forces can win a war against the army.'²¹³

Each guerrilla fighter is ready to die not just to defend an ideal but to make that ideal a reality. This is the basis, the essence of guerrilla struggle. The miracle is that a small nucleus of men, the armed vanguard of the great popular movement that supports them, can proceed to realize that ideal, to establish a new society, to break the old patterns of the past, to achieve, ultimately, the social justice for which they fight.²¹⁴

Che's Vietnamese counterpart Võ Nguyên Giáp, to cite a final example, pushes this logic to its conclusion in the most dramatic people's war of

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²⁰⁸ Blanqui, 'Warning to the People', February 1851, <https://blanqui.kingston.ac.uk/texts/warning-to-the-people-25-february-1851/>.

²⁰⁹ Marx 2000, pp. 308-9 ['Address to the Communist League', March 1850].

²¹⁰ Marx 2000, p. 586 [*The Civil War in France*].

²¹¹ Trotsky 1932, vol. 1, ch 7.

²¹² Fanon 1968, p. 226.

²¹³ Guevara 1998, p. 13.

²¹⁴ Guevara 1998, p. 20.

all. 'Victory calls for something more' than money and weapons, and that something more, Giáp insists, is 'the spirit of the people. When a whole people rises up, nothing can be done. [...] That's the basis of our strategy and our tactics, that the Americans fail to understand. [...] No matter how enormous its military and economic potential, [the US] will never succeed in crushing the will of a people fighting for its independence.'²¹⁵ Summarising his explanation of the victory sometime later, Giáp stresses the point that colonial invaders so consistently fail to grasp, from the British in their thirteen colonies to the Americans in Iraq: 'It was a war for the people by the people. FOR the people because the war's goals are the people's goals – goals such as independence, a unified country, and the happiness of its people.... And BY the people – well that means ordinary people – not just the army but all people. We know it's the human factor, and not material resources, which decide the outcome of war.'²¹⁶

The binary logic of war excludes nuance, and the victors not only decide the conflict but write the history that will make sense of it. Confronting a society that he understood to be shaped by a recurring 'war between rich and poor', Blanqui soon realised that war means woe to the vanquished and fortune for the victors. *Vae victis* is a lesson that resounds through the ages, and its consequences can be illustrated as much by what has happened to Haiti since the overthrow of Aristide in 2004 as by what happened to Guatemala after 1954 or Chile after 1973. As Blanqui writes,

It must be stressed that it is Victory that carries glory or opprobrium, freedom or slavery, barbarism or civilisation, in a fold of its dress. We do not believe in the fatality or inevitability of progress, that doctrine of emasculation and submission. Victory is an absolute necessity for right [*le droit*], on pain of no longer being right, on pain of becoming like Satan, as he writhes under the Archangel's talons.²¹⁷

Given what's at stake, it's no surprise that a long series of insurgent commanders find themselves confronted by similar problems, and resort to similar solutions. Fairfax, Washington, Carnot, Toussaint, Bolívar, Cluseret, Trotsky – each faced the challenges of organising citizen militias, and each came to prioritise 'professional' forms of discipline and command.

For this very reason it should also come as no surprise, however, that the old figure of people's war has long ceased to orient the militant practice

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²¹⁵ Giáp 1970, pp. 330–331, p. 320.

²¹⁶ Giáp, PBS interview, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/peoplescentury/episodes/guerrillawars/giaptranscript.html>.

²¹⁷ Blanqui, 'Introduction', in Tridon 1871, pp. 8–9.

of political will. The dialectic of the will operates here with remorseless rigour. Professionalised armies are too easily co-opted by those with an interest in promoting their interests, and who either subsume the state or are subsumed it; after Fairfax there is Cromwell, after Carnot there is Napoleon, after Trotsky there is Stalin. If the US prides itself on the way its constitution promises civilian control over the armed forces, such 'control' has done nothing to prevent the state's absorption in essentially uninterrupted war, and in the vast array of industries and deceptions required to sustain it.²¹⁸ A modern arms race can have only one kind of winner, and the modern equivalents of pitchforks and muskets have no role to play against states whose arsenals now stretch from nuclear weapons at one extreme to kamikaze drones at the other. Régimes ruthless enough to exploit this fact to their advantage may prevail in the short term, as the first decade to follow the Arab Spring might suggest, but coercive force alone will never be enough to secure their future.

To will the end is to will the means, but precisely for that reason, it's now more obvious than ever that there are no longer any viable means that might allow a people to win a militarised conflict. Nor need they rely on them. When people mass together they don't need weapons so much as the moral and numerical force that can make weapons unusable. 'You're kidding yourself,' as Haiti's deposed president Jean-Bertrand Aristide explained a few years ago, 'if you think that the people can wage an armed struggle. We need to look the situation in the eye: the people have no weapons, and they will never have as many weapons as their enemies. It's pointless to wage a struggle on your enemies' terrain, or to play by their rules. You will lose.'²¹⁹ The people can only win if they impose own rules, and keep to their own terrain. As Elsa Dorlin argues in her timely book, a capacity for self-defence is as essential to emancipatory political practice today as it was during the civil rights struggles of 1960s, or the suffragette campaigns of the 1910s or indeed during the abolitionist campaigns of the 1850s – but the days when this depended on possession of a sword or a rifle or their equivalent are passed, or passing.²²⁰ In a country like the US or UK, when it comes to matters of strategy and tactics, we have more to learn from Ella Baker and Bob Moses than from Babeuf or Blanqui.²²¹ If sufficiently determined the force of non-violence can become the most imposing force of all, and Giáp's point is still true: 'when a whole people rises up, nothing can be done.'

(d) To recall the dialectic of the will is briefly to confront our fourth

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²¹⁸ Cf. Singh 2017.

²¹⁹ Aristide, 'One Step at a Time', in Hallward 2010, p. 351.

²²⁰ Cf. Jackson 2020; Cobb 2015; Dorlin 2022.

²²¹ An essential point of reference here remains Charles Payne's analysis of the 'community organising tradition' that proved so resourceful in the American South in the 1950s and 60s (Payne 2007).

challenge.²²² Volition isn't exempt from contradiction. Left unchecked, the voluntary tends to the involuntary. The more successfully a will imposes itself, the more easily it can develop into a new routine, a new dogma, or a new despotism. Echoed by Luxemburg and Martov, Rousseau's warning of the dangers of usurpation has lost none of its force. If it's to continue, a will must forever renew and rework itself as *willing*.

To persevere in an ongoing exercise of political will, then, is not only to 'make virtue reign.' It's also to remain critical and questioning of every sort of reign. Permanent self-criticism is an essential exercise of political will. 'No one can rule innocently', and this insight of Saint-Just applies just as much to his colleagues on the Committee of Public Safety as it does to the king they helped to execute; it will apply to Lenin and Bukharin no less than to Kerensky or Lvov. Virtue can only rule so long as it resists trying to make its rule and its rules definitive. Volition is relative and relational or it is nothing; to absolutise the will is to negate it.

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Back in May 1791, when the colonial lobby in the French national assembly could still argue openly for the retention of slavery, they made no attempt to defend the practice itself. 'It's not a matter of pondering whether the institution of slavery can be defended in terms of principle and right,' admitted the planters' spokesman Pierre Victor Malouet: 'no man endowed with sense and morality would profess such a doctrine.' What matters, he argued, is instead 'whether it is possible to change this institution in our colonies, without a terrifying accumulation of crimes and calamities'. What mattered is whether abolition, as the policy of sense and principle, might be adopted without disturbing the prosperity and security of the realm. As another apologist put it, slavery is undeniably 'barbaric, but it would be still more barbaric to seek to alter it.'²²³ Pitt's minister Henry Dundas struck a similar note when he assured the House of Commons, a few years later, of his full agreement 'with those who argued on the general principle of the slave trade as inexpedient, impolitic and incompatible with the justice and humanity of the British constitution' – before going on to oppose calls for its abolition, on the grounds that this would undermine British security and deliver the Caribbean colonies 'entirely into the power' of their imperial rivals.²²⁴

Though it's now rarely so explicit, such unprincipled complicity with the indefensible has become in our time, on issues too numerous to mention, the routine order of the day. It's time that we changed it.

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222 Cf. John H. Smith 2000.

223 Malouet and Barnave, cited in Gauthier 1992, pp. 174-7, p. 200.

224 Dundas, February 1796, cited in James 1963, p. 200.

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Politics is Intervention

Christian Klar

Abstract: The old world does not want to step down and a new world is increasingly insisting on its right. It can be said that the latter already had chances to enter history and unfold its social promises in 1917/18, after 1945 and in the 70s and 80s of the last Century. Each time, however, a restoration set in, that exposed the shortcomings of the new beginnings. Each time, however, the restoration was combined with an increasing destructiveness for the social existence of human beings on the planet. This essay is an attempt to discuss this interregnum.

Keywords: geopolitics, Tronti, Bolivarian revolution, intervention, politics.

For the first time in history the successful test of the atomic bomb in the Soviet Union in August 1949 initiated a balance between the great powers, under whose umbrella many nations were subsequently able to free themselves from the colonial yoke. In the Western industrialized countries, political mobilizations shook off their fear of war and engaged with socialist perspectives.

At the beginning the historical break of 1989/90 seemed to lead to a return of the Western empire's monopoly on power. The geopolitical space referred to as "the West" are essentially the old colonial powers.

The backlash to decades of socialist camps, however, registered a few peculiarities from the beginning that one should be aware of in order not to waste thinking unnecessary detours. The widespread depression was due to the fact, that revolutionary theories in the West had long since developed in an epigone-like manner.

Authentic movements kept a clear view. A remark from the ranks of the FMLN in El Salvador found its way into the international media: What is the Berlin Wall against the walls in the world between rich and poor? This already indicated that the old center of the world would no longer be able to hold its predominance and interpretative sovereignty.

In the same year 1989 – at the end of February – Venezuela experienced the Caracazo, an uprising that prepared Chavezism, which essentially instigated two things: rethinking socialism while integrating consequences from 11 September 1973 in Chile. On this basis, the Caribbean country continues to challenge the Western empire as well as the old world extended from colonialism.

When Hugo Chávez in 2015 declared at the Summit of the Americas in Argentina that "the time has come for the second independence", he had in mind what he also expressed elsewhere. He spoke about Simón Bolívar and other fighters against the old colonial powers:

"The project was the creation of republics of equals and free people, republics in freedom and equality, the project was the abolition of slavery, the elimination of misery, poverty, exploitation."

However, this had not been achieved.

“Bolívar captured this painful reality in a profound and dramatic sentence, when he said: 'I ploughed in the sea ...'. What was the use of this independence, Bolívar said, they could not create the republics of equals and free people they wanted, could not eliminate inequalities and privileges”.

The reference is intended first to draw attention to the presence of immense asynchronies of political and ideological processes in the world. The demographic, economic, informational and geopolitical shifts are not even addressed.

The old world does not want to step down and a new world is increasingly insisting on its right. It can be said that the latter already had chances to enter history and unfold its social promises in 1917/18, after 1945 and in the 70s and 80s of the last Century. Each time, however, a restoration set in, that exposed the shortcomings of the new beginnings. Each time, however, the restoration was combined with an increasing destructiveness for the social existence of human beings on the planet.

With the reduction of Western self-assertion to war and sanctions since the Restoration from the 1980s onwards and with the verdict of the then British Prime Minister Margret Thatcher that "there is no society, only individuals", the latest phase of Western, neoliberally and militaristically structured destructiveness was set. The conflicts since then have been marked by this verdict, which incorporated its anti-human vision into the contemporary capitalist economy. Critical and analytical thinking has been lost across the board. When looking at Western political personnel, the terms errand boys and Atlantic Bridge breeding's come to mind.

A recent Oxfam factsheet reported on the economic faults over two years of Corona measures:

“While the fortunes of the ten richest billionaires doubled, over 160 million additional people live in poverty.” Speculation and virtual assets continue to multiply.

The wars of the US and its allies since the 1990s have essentially been waged for the purpose of turning developing societies into failed states. The weakening of Western hegemony can only be slowed down by the disappearance of alternative models and poles of development. At the same time entire civilizations were turned to rubbles.

In ideological terms, the era of wars and sanctions since 1990 has revealed that colonial thinking has remained completely unbroken in the Western empire. One must emphasize: completely unbroken! It remained and remains deeply embedded in the discourse of opinion-leading agencies and intellectual agents. All efforts to spread a liberal and enlightened canon of values internationally and internally and to

establish it as superior carry its opposite. It is precisely the discourse of values that most clearly and unbrokenly repeats colonial patterns, as a glance at the writings of Franz Fanon reveals:

"It is not enough for the colonist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still better never existed in, the colonial world. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also negation of values."

Similar to this the Western left has also rooted its affirmative attitude towards the dominating circumstances. The enlightened canon of values functions essentially through the needs of the individualized consumer. Identities are defined and detached from people's social existence. "Woman" continues to be subaltern economically and in other areas, but experiences a revaluation as an identity and can be used with great ideological added value for domination, meanwhile especially in the militarized areas of politics and foreign policy: For the preparation of a coming war, the first thing to be done is to appoint a woman as foreign minister, minister of defence, etc. This could be observed above all in the USA with the "identity" POC.

This in itself banal procedure of domination is not even newly invented. Only the apparatuses of distribution, media, think tanks and state departments have new dimensions. The contents mostly follow up ideological deficits and poorly theorized neuroses of the New Left of the 1960s.

The systematic contempt of the economy and its built-in domination, the exaggeration of the so-called conflict between generations, the anti-authoritarian neurosis and multiplying rebellious masks no longer allow for an analytical approach towards social reality.

The war that turns the dispossessed into dust particles under the roaring mega-machine and destroys their subjecthood even before it destroys their lives, is no longer considered the greatest catastrophe in this ideological regression. Exploitation is no longer considered a social relation, at best a somewhat more or less individually felt frustration. This leaves only a general affect against "authoritarianism", which the NATO catalogue on "authoritarianly constituted" nations easily hijacks for itself.

This development successfully robbed the Western left, which after World War II was increasingly less rooted in the proletarian classes, of critical thinking. The universities, which are traditionally reactionary in constitution and only produced a flowering of systemic and ideological critique in the 1960s and 1970s, serve as well-formatted ideological agencies. The affirmative view of a world that is out of joint and extremely endangered, which is so widespread, can leave one stunned.

A last inkling of the dangers to the continued existence of the human being as a social being manifests itself only in the definition and care of victims of the conditions. These remnants of activism of the Western left, however, could no longer reach the height of the times or even an anticipation of overcoming the old order. The self-assurance that one is morally on the right side, and the associated seizure of one's own good intentions, are a terrible swansong. In addition, this constitutionality has fostered divisions for sometimes grotesque reasons and a further distance from political thinking.

Since the 24th February, a war is now perceived in Europe as a global event. A war that is rather a single battle in the great ongoing war since 1990. If one skips over the extraordinary affects in the Western debate when dealing with it, one can quickly see that neither NATO nor Russia will determine the outcome. It will be "the rest of the world" that will do so. The subjective potential of this "rest" is vastly underestimated. Intellectual creativity and historical consciousness are basically not perceived or represented in the West. "The rest of the world" appears at best as a demographic factor and a threat.

The list of countries in the world that refuse to participate in the Western sanctions against Russia is as well telling of the memory of the formerly colonized countries as of the weariness in the world of the forked-tongue speeches. It seems obvious to seize the opportunity to break the thirty-year self-importance of the self-proclaimed "world community", which at the same time acted as judge and executioner of the weaker nations.

For very many countries in the world, the focus is currently on breaking Western dominance. A multipolar world order should offer more scope for development and independence. For the first time, there are communicative and scientific preconditions for viewing human history as a common one. Here lies a precondition with which the policy of divide and rule at the expense of the peoples can be rejected.

For the Western left difficult times lie ahead. Only now starts the reckoning for 500 years of colonial history. This reckoning holds many psychological and political impositions, whose punitive and reparative demands must be communicated to the populations of the Western empire. Communicating this downgrading - after centuries of self-evident dominance - and linking it to a socialist perspective could be one of the tasks of the left inside the Western empire.

The leaders of nations subordinated over historical periods will tend to dampen the reparations discourse in order to achieve international cooperation and short-term advantageous negotiations.

More radical expectations prevail among the populations. Here again, Venezuela is an illustrative example. A very successful cultural policy since the first Chavista governments has replaced the image of one's own history, determined from the outside via Miami, with the appropriation of one's own authentic history. With this, the historical repression and the

memory of the history of the uprisings have been brought back into the present.

The emerging nations will continue to use spheres of action within capitalist logics. Socialist socialization, which has been repeatedly put on the agenda, has just as regularly come under pressure from world market mechanisms (up to and including open sanctions). However, this contradiction is a clearly recognized one. That is why the fundamental critique must put the structure of the world market at the center. Otherwise, the pattern of enthusiasm for new socialist Meccas and subsequent disappointment will only be repeated.

The form of the nation state is more likely to undergo a revival, in the sense that the nation state will provide the ostensible framework for the organization of the propertyless classes. Social services and safeguards are constitutive of modern mass societies and a moment of socialization. The internationalist consciousness receives a boost in the recognition of the common situation. Humans are social beings and need their fellow human beings. If this isn't the source of politics, politics is only the management of privileges.

This must be included by a Western left that believes itself to be "further" in its theoretical discourse, where it even develops theory at all. What is theoretically correct, however, is not always politically correct:

"Tactics and strategy must be united in our minds, while at the level of things, in facts, we must take care to keep them divided and – as circumstances demand – in mutual contradiction. The error of all the leftist positions in the history of the workers' movement is that they did not take account of this. It is an unpardonable error. The intellectual illusion of a 'scientific politics' is the shortest path to practical defeat for the working class.

They should align with the opposite principle, for what is right theoretically may be mistaken politically. Theory is understanding and foresight, and thus knowledge – even if one-sided – of the process's objective tendency. Politics is the will to invert this process, and thus is a global rejection of objectivity; it is subjective action so that this objectivity is blocked and unable to triumph.

Theory is anticipation. Politics is intervention. And it must intervene not into what is expected, but into what precedes it; here lies the need for the twists and turns of tactics.

In this sense, theory and politics are always contradict one other. Their identity and noncontradiction is the same thing as opportunism, reformism, passive obedience to the objective tendency, which then ends up in an unconscious working-class mediation of the capitalist point of view."¹

.....
¹ Mario Tronti, Marxist philosopher and politician from Italy.

Subjective Singularities

Sylvain Lazarus

Abstract: This is a chapter is a portion of Lazarus' book *Chronologies du Présent*. This book is comprised of six lectures, delivered in 2018, before the movement of *Gilets jaunes*. Its principal question runs as follows: what possibilities are there for a politics from the point or perspective of people? This is the question which the present chapter will address and try to explain.

Keywords: politics, State, people, space

General question: how to render “politique du point du peuple”? From the point of view of? The space of people? The point at which we find people v. the point/place occupied by the State?

Preface. The Present Question and the Point

Warm thanks are due to Eric Hazan for finding a home for this publication in his publishing house. The opportunity of publishing with *La Fabrique* allowed us to work our way patiently through what was initially a series of six conference talks given in Paris between February and October of 2018 and ultimately come up with the present manuscript. Those conference talks, conceived as a sort of chronicle of the present moment, took place before the *Gilets jaunes* uprisings which, later that year, would come to confirm, accentuate, and indeed exacerbate many of the hypotheses that we evoked in these conferences by inscribing them further still in the real. One of the stranger, more unsettling aspects of our present moment consists in the fact that such wide-spread, massive mobilizations fail to open up alternative horizons, other ways of conceiving relations of power, and resolves nothing in terms of the parliamentary system nor the rhythms of its electoral politics.

This book is about our present political condition. Its principal question runs as follows: what possibilities are there for a politics from the point or perspective of people? What the reader will find in the following pages is a re-evaluation of the contemporary as a felt, lived and experience which anchors itself in its difference from that which has taken place. What carries the present chronicles forward is the rupture taking place between the *taking-place* and the *having-taken-place* of the event.

Going back to the Algerian War of Independence and the Vietnam War, Sylvain Lazarus has devoted his thought to what he calls politics “from the point of people” (*du point des gens*). Though over the years he has engaged in revolutionary forms of politics, participating in the founding of two militant organizations, with respect to the present moment Lazarus has often remarked to me that he is merely “one amongst others”. To be one amongst others, called to the struggle by the state of world we find ourselves in, and to not try to claim an exceptional

status in that struggle on the basis of what one has been or done in the past, these are, for Lazarus, the touchstones of an anti-demagogic *ethos*, a form of truth-telling (*dire-vrai*) that is not without relation to what the late Foucault conceptualized as the “courage of the truth” (*courage de la vérité – parrhesia*). Only here the question of *who* is speaking is displaced in favor of knowing the site or *point from which* speech takes place, is rooted, elaborated and debated. The site in question is the site at which Sylvain Lazarus’ core claim, his central statement, emerges. Namely: that *people*—on their own terms and according to often creative logics of the possible—*think* (*les gens pensent*). He therefore leans on their words in his work, for it is in their words that their thought is borne out; to his mind, what they say bears within it a world of propositions for what may be possible in the present.

[...]

Claire Nioche

The Two Classisms

1

In my book, *Anthropology of the Name*, I argued that time does not exist.¹ What exists in the method of anthropological inquiry are sequences, each inscribed in its own system of dates. Sequences, rather than *time*, are meaningful because they allow us to inquire into thought, into the spaces of politics as a kind of *thought* that often shows up in such spaces as an “inner experience” of the political.

The question of sequences, however, immediately raises that of its own dating; and the dating of a sequence leads us to its *political quality / qualification*. I’ve often come back to the different dates that historians from the first half of the twentieth century proposed for understanding the French Revolution, for instance: some see it as taking place between 1789 and 1794 (Albert Mathiez), others (such as Georges Lefebvre) from 1789 to 1799, and others still (Alphonse Aulard) from 1789 to 1804.² In their dating of the event, each historian puts forward a different view (*qualification*) of what they understand by the name, “French Revolution”; or rather, to use a turn of phrase that I introduced and which has encountered more than a few imitations since, by the way that they understand the dates of the event, they put forward an answer to the following question: *Of what is the French Revolution the name?* What, in these different datings, does the “revolution” name? Obviously, if I date it from 1792 to 1794 (that is, to the events of Thermidor and execution of

.....
1 Lazarus 1996.

2 Aulard 1901; Mathiez 1939; Lefebvre 1951 & 1957

the leading members of the Jacobins), that which the Revolution is the name of cannot name the same thing as a set of dates that would prolong the revolution up to Bonaparte (1799) or indeed the latter's coronation as Emperor (1804).

Sequences are the lapses of time in which a mode is at work. That is to say, it is the lapse of time in which a specific invention of a politics takes place. Or, better yet, in which what emerges is the absolutely singular and unprecedented presence of something which has never before been and which will never again occur, take place. This is what I have called *a historic mode of inner politics|experiencing politics from within (un mode historique de la politique en intériorité)*, a term which allows us to conceptualize and describe a mode in terms of sequencing (revolutionary mode, Bolshevik mode, etc.) and to trace out their boundaries and limits.

Let me add a word of explanation/clarification: politics, here, is pinned to the axiomatic principle that "people think". This is what makes of a given politics a subjectivity, an interiority. It appears in the form of a mode. The form of this inner (experience) of politics is not a constant: it is sequential, rare, fragile. In order to identify it, we need to expose and disclose that which was thought and invented in the course of the sequence. A mode of politics can only ever be identified if we seek out the specific thought of the political which was at work in it. Such an inventive thought, furthermore, is the thought of a mode's agents, its actors, and it is rooted in, committed to, the *sites of the name*. As such, the name is unsayable (*innommable*); its description is carried out by investigating the name's sites: to return to the French Revolution, such sites would include the Constitutional Convention, for instance, the Sans-Culottes clubs, and the Army of Year II. When such sites cease to be, the mode has ended, closed itself off.

Why privilege sequencing over temporality, over "time", though? In my view, "time" is an invention handed over to us from Grand Narratives: Creation, Genesis, beginnings and ends of time; the time of unending repetitions of the calendar; of the crossing of the Red Sea, birth and death of Christ or of the Prophet and so on. Time is also a constitutive conceptual apparatus in the philosophy of History, and in Hegel especially. Time opens out onto totality, and thus onto unity. The dialectic needs time, culminating ultimately in the thought of historical materialism.

Today, however, a different problem occupies me. There is no inner experience of politics in the present, no widely-shared political site or space exists "from the point of people", and, thus, no sequence, open and open-ended in its political singularity. It is this present in which politics is sought after which I want to confront in these chronicles of the present.

2

In 1902, Lenin writes in the opening moments of *State and Revolution* that [control of] the State is the central question of politics, directly aligning his view with that of Marx's conclusive assessment of the experience of the Paris Commune and its defeat in 1871: the bourgeois State must be destroyed.

If for Marxists the State is the product of the irreconcilable nature of class contradiction and of the domination of one class over another, then destroying the State was the condition for wresting power away from the bourgeoisie. The disappearance of private property and capital was thus subordinated to the destruction of the bourgeois State. Whence the centrality of antagonism, of struggle, unfolding into the institution of a new form of power: the dictatorship of the proletariat, henceforth the only possible alternative to the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. And as a reminder, the concept of 'dictatorship' for Marxists was nothing more than the expression of the nature of State power itself—a power which is not shared between classes and which is transferred from one class to another even less. Once in power, for Marx and Engels, and later Lenin, the proletariat would put an end to the existences of classes as such by eliminating private property and the reign of exchange value, thus paving the way for the withering away of the State. The experience of Communism in the twentieth century would, however, belie this theory: once in power, the so-called party of "the classes" became the dominant operator in/of the State, organizing the latter's perpetuation rather than its historical disappearance.

Pierre Clastres, an ethnologist specializing in the Guayaki Tribe in Paraguay, argues, however, that it is in fact the State which creates classes and not the other way around.³ He positions and articulates class and State in a relationship which is symmetrically opposed to Lenin's view. Whereas Lenin affirmed that it is classes which—through and in the form of their contradictions—create the State ("The State," he claims, "results from the fact that class contradictions are irresolvable"), in Clastres' inversion it is the State as such that creates classes.

From the standpoint of Marxism, the State always carried within it a causal claim as to its origins: they are rooted in the contradictions of classes. The perspective of a classless society would be mediated by the proletarian revolution, the temporary dictatorship of the proletariat and, finally, the withering away of the State form. At the root of class conflict and the contradictions of class was private ownership of the means of production. Thus, what we have is a theoretical apparatus (*un dispositif*) of causes in which identifying the point of origin, what *causes* the emergence of the bourgeois State also allows for a theoretical inversion which the necessary steps and waypoints of its disappearance could be elaborated.

.....
3 See Clastres 1974.

I think it is now necessary for us to give up on this causal model or view of the bourgeois State from which we can always only too logically deduce and identify the path towards its inevitable destruction and, from there, the eventual withering away of the proletarian State in turn.

This would lead to a decisive change in our approach to the problem of the State. The question is no longer that of its disappearance. Today, in light of what I propose to think of as *conclusive experiences*, the categories of Communism and of the proletarian Revolution have lost the luster of credibility. The experience of so-called socialist States (the URSS, China, Cuba, and so on) is conclusive; so, too, is the disappearance from the contemporary scene of a working class organized as an *active political agent/body*. All this leaves us with the question of how, today, we might conceive of a politics from the point of people.

If we are to analyze the present moment, the present, we need to break with revolutionary historicity. We need to break with the idea of time and History, which is a real and major rupture. I see this breakage as a rupture with(in) the intelligibility of sense.

3.

I propose that we call “classism” the consequences of the following hypothesis: in modern society, there exist classes which are in conflict with one another (workers/bourgeoisie, workers/capitalists, etc.). Let us call “marxist classism” the following theorization: the proletariat, or the modern revolutionary class, is able to overthrow the bourgeoisie, to bring about a dictatorship of the proletariat and, along with the disappearance of private property, inaugurate a classless society, a communist society. There exists, of course, a bourgeois classism that allows space for a theory of class war, but its ends and aims are entirely other. As Keynes, that theorist of 20th-century bourgeois classism, once put it: “class war will find me on the side of the educated bourgeoisie”.⁴

These two versions of classism are already perfectly spelled out in Marx’s famous letter to Wedermeyer of 5 March 1852, nearly four years after the publication of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

...

V Subjective Singularities

1

Subjective singularities raise difficult questions, and so it would be futile of us to hope to encounter easy answers to the questions that they put before us. When a question is complex, our response to it can only try to

.....
⁴ Keynes 1933.

find a way to follow it in its complexity. What is at stake here is the status today of the assertion with which my *Anthropology of the Name* opened:

The field of the anthropology of the name is constituted by the questioned posed to thought by the following statement: *people think*. The goal [...] of this book is to shed light on the subjective from within the subject(ive) itself, or, as I put it, “in [its] interiority” [*en intériorité*], and not from the standpoint of objective or positivistic referents. Politics renewed—a new approach to politics—will take the form, here, of an example of how to think or approach subjectivity as a process.

My fundamental claim about politics is that it is of the order of thought. At stake in this claim is the irreducibility of politics to any other space than its own and, thus, the necessity of thinking politics in its singularity.⁵

If people think, and if politics is of the order of thought, it follows that people—after all, this does happen on occasion—can think politics, their politics, the politics that they speak out on, *politics in [their/its] interiority*. Such was my view of the situation twenty years ago.

What are we to make now, though, of what people think—what is the status of this thought today, when there no longer seems, to my mind, to be an available politics from the point [of view] of people?

2

At the time, I indicated that, for me, “the goal” of anthropology was to “grasp and account for subjective singularities”. I was careful to specify that *Anthropology of the Name* should not be placed nor read under the sole heading of the political. “Politics,” as I stated, is only *one name* for what was at stake: “for anthropology, politics is merely one name amongst others, anthropology includes the political but cannot be reduced to it.” It was, therefore, a book about subjective singularities.

Why would the statement, “people think”, be an anthropological rather than a political thesis? Or is it *also* but not *exclusively* a political claim? In describing anthropology, was I not invoking a *scientific discipline*, that is to say, a point of exteriority, and thus troubling somewhat my contention that politics needed to be thought as *politics*, from the point of politics? Why would the statement, “politics needs to be thought as politics”, be anthropological rather than political? I would seem to be claiming that they are both—that they are both anthropological *and* political theses—when I propose that we think the subjective as subjective, on the basis of the subjective.

.....
5 Lazarus 1996, p.11.

3

What, then, are “subjective singularities”? By way of response, I would first try to indicate what they do: subjective singularities allow for the *thought of thought's processes* (*la pensée des processus de pensée*), processes which are singular and sequential, which neither repeat themselves nor are repeatable.

This way of approaching the question is incompatible with methods for which any given phenomenon—if we want to investigate it, know it, formalize it—necessarily fits between a before and an after, and needs to be compared to other phenomena in terms of its similarities or differences. Such, of course, is the method of classical historiography and sociology: they operate in terms of causes, effects, and comparison.

In his *In Praise of History: or, the Work of the Historian*, Marc Bloch argued that taken in its uniqueness or singularity, no lived phenomenon can be accounted for in terms of critical analysis or interpretation. “A unique experience,” as he put it, “is always incapable of discerning the factors or conditions elements which constitute it (*ses propres facteurs*), and is thus incapable of accounting for or interpreting itself.”⁶

It should be obvious that my own way of thinking is very different from Bloch's, especially given his linkage of *interpretation* to *factors*, and of *factors* to *causes*. In this view, a singular or unique experience is never enough on its own; one needs to be able to compare it to something. And that's the point: in terms of causality for Bloch, a singular experience cannot on its own account for its causes nor provide an interpretation of itself. An approach based on subjective singularities sets out to do exactly the opposite: a unique assemblage of experience (*un dispositif unique*) can also be identified as a singular form of thought provided we take the subjective as the basis for our interrogation of the subjective, provided we think the subjective on its own terms.

With this way of thinking anthropology as the anthropology of singular subjectivities, of the thought of the processes of singular forms of thought, I am of course at a radical remove from approaches or methods based on causalities, determinism and comparison.

But do singular subjectivities allow for the putting into place of a method of knowledge production adequate to the formula, “people think”? Based on my own experience, as well as all my work, I know for a fact that the proposition “people think” tends to encounter resistance and to produce complications. So too does the idea that politics can be understood as a singular form of intelligence (*une intellectualité propre*), one that can be thought on its own terms. “There are people” is, in and of itself, already a claim which is difficult to acknowledge, especially if, as I suggest, what is at stake in this postulate is what I call a *clear uncertainty*, a *certain indistinction* (*un indistinct certain*). In other words: *there are* [*il*

.....
6 Bloch 1993, p.95.

y a] people, but what matters in the words—what matters in the question of the nomination or name, its qualification, its specification—*is not there* [*n'est pas là*] for as much. For a thought of people to be there, for there to be a thought of people, presupposes a form of work, an engagement/commitment, a process.

Yet instead of “people think” it is often and too readily said that capital and commodities decide everything, including what we think. What's more, we find ourselves traversing an age of groups and labels: the rich and the poor, Catholics, Muslims and Jews, second-generation citizens and the elites...We've gone from class struggle to the rush to classifications, it would seem.

For all of us, the State exists—there is the State as space of order(ing)s and commands. Next, there exist divisions between those who claim that this is simply the way of the world and the only thing to be done about it is give in and comply with it, and those who think that this is indeed the way of the world *but that there are nevertheless alternatives to it*. Within the space of parliamentary politics, one such possible alternative would be reforms, or the opposition between the political Left and Right....For still others, the alternative resides in adopting a posture of opposition to capitalism.

My own position is quite different. I would argue that, if something is to come about, it will do so from where people are. Where, when, or how, today, are questions none of us can answer, yet we must not simply wait for something to happen but actively work to bring it about as a possibility. If something is to be done, that is where it will come from, even if we do not know nor can predict what that may be. This is why I claim that the “people” in “from where people are” (*du côté des gens*) is the name for a *certain indistinction*.

For the category “people” introduces a break with that map of objectivism composed of entities and labels, of analytics and descriptions of situations. Using *people* as a category represents a move into the domain of decisions.

We need a *decision* if we are to renew or reinvent the question: what do people say and do? (*Que dit-on et que fait-on?*) Why? Because, if we are to emerge from the certain indistinction and thus open up a space for the possible, we are going to need *instruction*, we need a *formula*. For example: how ought we talk, today, about migrants or refugees? Some have suggested we talk about “the newly arrived”, but in point of fact our problem is that we lack the words for the situation. We're in the realm, here, of a certain indistinction for which we have yet to find the right instructions, the right formula. And the right formula is inextricably linked with what's at stake in the above-mentioned question: what do people say and do?

Accepting the “there are” and the existence of the certain

indistinction means affirming, with respect to migrants and refugees, that a formula is being sought out. This does not, of course, do away with the fact that the State's categorizations still also exist. If we take words like "migrant" or "refugee", which belong to the domain of administrative language, we cannot avoid immediately conjuring up practices and problems of repression, concentrated detainment or the possible registering by the State of such subjects as political refugees. The State categorizes according to its own logics and norms.

Maintaining that *there are people* and that this designates a *certain indistinction* and that *people think* is one possibility. But maintaining these hypotheses is a political choice, not merely with regards to where we want to end up, but also by the rigorous way in which they clarify where we do *not* want to end up. Each of those statements can be related to the other in the following formulation: at a distance from the State.

4

On the question of the subjective, I have argued the following:

Politics is of the order of the subjective.

The subjective without dialectical relation to the objective, and formulated on its own terms, is what I call *thought*.

That particular thought, *qua* thought, places in suspension the core polysemia of the word from which it derives. To think [*Penser*] is fundamentally to assign a content to thought on the basis of a word, to affix it to a specific usage which suspends the slips of polysemia. I recall a passage from Lenin's *What is to be Done?*, in which he writes: "There is politics and there is politics". There is a bourgeois politics, and there is a social-democratic (proletarian, revolutionary) politics. About the great wave of strikes of the 1890s, he notes (if I recall right) that: workers occupied the factories and they clashed with Cossacks, but this was not, strictly speaking, an instance of class war because what was still lacking was "the conscience awareness of the antagonism they represented with respect to the whole of the existing social and political order." Where Leninism was concerned, suspending the polysemia of the word "politics" was the gesture which introduced the formula, the order (*la prescription*), of antagonism.

We need to reexamine today the operation by which such polysemia are placed in suspension. I want therefore to propose two additional postulates with respect to—two extensions of the thought in—my *Anthropology of the Name*. On the one hand, the suspension of a word's polysemia *does not in any way cancel out the fact that the word is polysemic*. Using it, then, in such or such valence, or according to a specific order, is a choice, a decision made in a context in which

polysemia is and remains nevertheless at work. On the other, the suspension of polysemia renders the chosen signification *exclusive* with respect to the other possible senses of a word. Not in the sense that they are antagonistic. Rather, they are mutually exclusive in the way that, in my own word, an exclusive/exclusionary choice separates “the point of people” and the “point of the State”.

Whence the following: *in the act of suspending a word's polysemic possibilities, a thought circumscribes its site/situation with respect to other sites, and we can call these disjunctive and incompatible spaces 'exclusive'.*

The operation of intellectuality of this thought is a relation of the real, which in the terms I propose means that it is *rational*. The operation is not of a causal or determinant type, working backwards from effects to causes and explaining the how and wherefore of a given situation. The intellectual operator (*opérateur d'intellectualité*) of this particular thought is the act of deciding on a *possibility*, deciding that something *is possible: confronting the political real(ity) of a situation is also to formulate a possible alternative to it*. I want to insist on this last point, if only because we are so intellectually marked by a tradition which holds that thinking is only ever formalizing or systematizing a set of relations between causes and effects, so much so that it is difficult to accept that they might be any other form of thinking with respect to a given situation; one which might not be preoccupied with determining what factors have created the situation, what is its origin, and more concerned with the following proposition, which we are perhaps not very mentally attentive to or ready to accept: in this situation, what is possible?

When a boat is sinking and the lifeboats are put out, one of the trickiest but most important things is to get the passengers not to jump directly into the boats, but just off to the side of them. That's what the possible, *in situ*, is like. Intellectually speaking, it's not all that important, at the moment such a situation arises, to know who messed up the boat's motor, thus explaining why the ship went off course and so on. The possible here is strictly circumscribed by the situation and its circumstances, what they do or do not allow for and according to which rules or guidelines. What's at stake here is a rational thought whose category is that of the possible.

5

The possible and organized politics: during the period in which the Organisation politique⁷ group was operational, the main point

.....
7 A militant, post-party political organization that Lazarus helped to co-found in the 1980s. [Translator's note]

of reference for the subjective was what we called the thought of *politics from within/ in interiority*. In 2007, we decided to put an end to Organisation politique, however. Our question now, then, is to find out if there can be an thought of politics *without organization*. Or, rather, is there today a thought from the (stand)point of people which does not unfold under the auspices and constraints of an organization in the sense that I once argued that the only politics is organized politics.?

The State is the paradigm *in its space* of one form of articulation of a subjective to a form of organization. In that particular space, subjectivity and organization are inseparable: there are articulated to and often confused for one another; depending on circumstance, one term (subjective, organization) tends to prevail over the other. We see the same thing in Leninism as well. There, too, subjectivity and organization are inextricably intertwined. The subjective, there, is that of the working class and of the people and is indexed to their revolutionary potential. Yet there too, depending on circumstance, one of the two terms wins out over the other.

It was this paradigm linking the category of the subjective to forms of organization that led me to think about the October Revolution. I wondered if we could say that, in the October Revolution, the organization (i.e., the RSDWP, the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party) was put in the service of the subjective being borne by the mass of workers and the people? Does this obtain, even if as early as 1920 it is the subject which finds itself exclusively in the service of the party-State apparatus and not in that of the masses? Of course, that second sequence of the October Revolution corresponds to what I have called the period of bureaucratization (*étatisation*) of the *working class*, a period in which the subjective side of the revolution is entirely subordinate to the State apparatus.

In *What is to be Done* (1902), the subjective is regulated by the fundamental antagonism, the contradiction, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat as well as by the creation of a party led by professional revolutionaries. Yet the party was an *open* one—open, for example, in February of 1917, to the Soviets; it was open to the inventions of the masses while remaining inflexible on points of doctrine. The party managed to conjoin spontaneity and deliberateness. After coming to power, it was the State which would impose its points of reference for the subjective in the now well-known guise of the Workers' State, the Homeland of Socialism.

I wonder if, seen in this light, Leninism couldn't be understood as a kind of forced bending of Communism's conscience to the constraints and imperatives of a communist politics: class, struggle, and then a proletarian State. In other words, an assemblage of conditions, but conditions which are limited by doctrine.

Bending of the conscience to the imperatives of the State is a formulation that could apply to two ways in which the working classes were incorporated by the State: first, there is the Soviet form of the party-State in the 1920s; then the later, parliamentary form of incorporation of the working class, of which the PCF and the CGTU⁸ would be the main vectors in France during the same period.

The space of the State is simultaneously organized and subjectivated. An important part of this State subjectivity has to do with the fact that the questions of order and commandment that power embodies form, within the space of the State, the unavoidable, necessary space of politics—of the *thought* and *subjectivity* of politics. There are two forms of the subjective *within the State* that evolve alongside it. Let us consider two examples. The first is the manner in which the word “worker” and the figure of the worker disappeared from the space of the State as well as from the spaces which counted for and were accounted for by the State. This erasure of the word “worker” intensified in the 1980s, under Mitterand, especially during the strikes of automobile workers at Citroën and Renault factories. At the time, these strikes were described as “Shi’ite” strikes being led by “immigrants who were completely ignorant of French social-cultural realities”. From there, it could no longer be, from the State’s point of view, a question of working-class strikes, but of religious ones being carried out by immigrants and foreigners. What took place in this slippage was the literal erasure of the word “worker” and its replacement with the word “immigrant”, now no longer understood as a positive cultural presence but as a “problem”. This confessionalization of workers of immigrant origin in the sector of heavy industry effectively allowed for their disappearance as subject of/with rights. We thus went from an objective figure endowed with rights to an ominously threatening identity. This process of confessionalization of the figure of the worker in the language of the State (passing from *worker* to working class *immigrant*, to *immigrant tout court*) applied, furthermore, not only to workers but to middle-school and high school students too. To girls who wore the veil, or to the youth in the *banlieues* who were often also ‘confessionalized’ according to the same stigmatizing terms deployed by the State. That heinous bureaucratic bromide, *youth descended from immigrants*—used to describe young French citizens whose working-class parents or grandparents came from abroad to work in France and settled down with their families there—does the same work in this regard. Plainly put, “descended from immigrants” means: ‘their parents were foreigners’. Which implies: their parents were working-class *Muslims*. Thus the expression—*youth descended from immigrants*—is part and parcel of a broader field of operations that consists in no longer evoking the word “worker,” in no longer counting it as a figure of national identity.

.....
8The CGTU (or, *Confédération Générale des travailleurs unifiés*) was an offshoot of the French CGT and had deep ties to the French Communist Party (PCF) as well as to the Communist International.

In much the same way, once the State managed to appropriate the expression “I am Charlie,”⁹ it too became a kind of example of the processes by which the State produces subjects, by which it solicits adherence to its security and governmental projects and forms. What we saw there was a way in which the question of the separation of church and state was irreducibly linked to a terrible, criminal attack as well as to the State’s responsibility for identifying and apprehending those responsible. As far as the present situation in France is concerned, I would argue that the State today is a form of what I call the *separated State* (*l’Etat séparé*) and that this has furthermore been the form of the State for at least the past decade or so. For sorry proof of this fact, we need look no further than the way in which the rights of immigrants—and especially their right to regularization—has (d)evolved in France from the 1990s up to the present conjuncture. In the 1990s, every year that had been spent laboring without papers, or with counterfeit papers, documented by the pay slips accumulated while performing a real job, counted towards, and formed the basis of, a worker’s regularization dossier. Today, such documents would simply disqualify the regularization dossier and indeed expose the worker to legal jeopardy. Year by year, a series of laws transformed the process into a decision made increasingly at the discretion of a local prefect, workplace seniority as source of rights no longer counting. We mobilized a fight in favor of the proposition that “work means rights” / “working gives us rights” (*le travail ouvre à des droits*). In the Group of Undocumented Workers’ Collectives (*Rassemblement des collectifs des ouvriers sans papiers des foyers*), we proclaimed that: *work has a legal-judicial status. Every worker is a figure of work*. We organized a number of demonstrations between 1995 and 2007, in the course of which we chanted: “Workers matter,” “Working matters!,” “Papers for the Undocumented!,” and “We’re here, we’re from here!”. Taken together, each and every legislative measure or regulation passed since the beginning of the new millennium can be seen as a direct negation of every one of the principles that we spoke out for in the streets.

While we no longer find ourselves in a class vs. class type of paradigm, I continue to insist that bourgeois classism, that is, statist classism, forms the fundamental referent for binary oppositions such as rich/poor, center/periphery, elites/banlieues, and so on. It’s not that such oppositions don’t exist (the rich certainly exist, as do the poor, as do inequalities...); the problem is rather that this sort of pseudo-classism is at base a bogus, misleading displacement of class contradictions whereas our situation is very different from those of the past. In its Marxist formulation, the history of humanity is the history of class struggle. Today, however, a shift has taken place such that we might say

.....
9 A slogan widely circulating in the aftermath of the massacre by ISIS-affiliated terrorists of much of the editorial team of the French satirical daily, *Charlie Hebdo* in January of 2015. [Translator’s note]

that *the history of humanity is the history of inequalities*. That there are *de facto* historic processes borne out by inequalities is not in doubt, but this is not done at all within the previous or prior space of class struggle. From a Marxist point of view, class struggle was initially synonymous with the political power or potential of the proletariat, with the fact that the proletariat's political potential or power would be the base of support for a revolution, for a classless society, and for the withering away of the State. Class struggle wasn't simply a matter of *differences* or oppositions, it didn't merely indicate the existence of the rich and the power, the downtrodden and the powerful, the oppressed and the oppressor.

Classism based on an analysis of class formed groups positioned in a relation of class struggle (some contended that, with the support of the proletariat, the end of the State and class, the classed State, was in our sights; others maintained, like Keynes for instance, they were “on the side of Capital, and the bourgeoisie would always find [them] by its side”). That there are oppositions does not suffice to indicated the *nature* of certain tensions, processes, or the different, possible trajectories of things. We live in an age in which we are constantly informed and reminded of the extraordinarily uneasy, dramatic nature of certain situations—that of refugees, for instance. Which perspectives, which possibilities, might open up before us is, however, at once unknown and complex. There are the poor, and there are the rich: there is an undeniable tension there, but what produces that tension is today an open question.

6

Much in the same way that the terms “class struggle” and “revolution” have lost a certain consistency alongside the elapsing of revolution, the words “war” and “peace” have found themselves hollowed out. This is equally true where people are concerned as it is for the State.

For Clausewitz, the aim of war was to have the victor impose their conditions for peace upon the vanquished.

The internationalist thesis held that the figure of the global proletariat carried within it, along with socialism, the prospect of universal peace. If the proletariat were to come to power in each country across the globe, peace would reign. For years, the French Communist Party would even go so far as to subordinate struggles for national independence in colonized spaces to the imperatives of bringing about socialism in France, which would then emancipate every population that French imperialism had dominated, oppressed, and exploited. An essential moment of the collapse of the proletarian International, along with the Sacred Union of 1914, occurred with the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact between the Nazis and the Soviet Union in August of 1939. In Brecht's *Diary*, we find the following, stunning page about what this utter disaster portended for the proletariat as well as for progressive forces across the world. He writes:

The German-Soviet pact naturally alarmed every proletariat. the communists rushed to affirm that the pact represented a perfectly respectable contribution on behalf of the union to maintaining peace. it's true that shortly afterwards—a few hours later—war broke out [...] and the union presented itself before the global proletariat bearing all the stimata of having aided and abetted the spread of fascism, that most vicious and most anti-worker part of capitalism itself. the union saved itself by leaving, as the price for its salvation, the proletariat directionless, hopeless, and helpless: i don't think there's anything else to say.¹⁰

What are the valences of words like “war” and “peace” today in the spaces of power? What do they mean for people? How do we break free from the slippages to which they are currently subjected? We must examine and ask ourselves about the fundamental gap that separates the lexicon of State subjectivity (that is, imposed *de facto* by the State) and the language of subjectivity which is that of people.

The State remains an important challenge: what are its current forms, its inner contradictions, the tensions between the national and the international, between the logic of markets and the general good...? These are of course analytic questions, but we also need to think (about) the State from the standpoint of peoples' experiences of it. In his study of politics in Rome and Athens, Moses Finley cites the following remark by Harold Kaski: “The citizen can only access the state through the intermediary of the government [...]. He derives his conclusions about the nature of the State from the nature of governmental action; there is no other way for him to know [what the State is].”¹¹ A State, seen from the point of view of what Finley calls a citizen, is whatever a government does.

With respect to our analysis of the State today, I have maintained that, on the workers' side of the equation, the struggle with capital no longer had much conceptual consistency. Workers as *political agents* carrying out a praxeological struggle (*pratiquant un antagonisme*) with capital—this framing of things belongs to a bygone era. And yet, it is the case that there exists an antagonism on the part of the State vis-à-vis that which is heterogeneous or opposed to it. Seen thus, it is the State as such which puts into practice and develops antagonism, struggle.

There where there is multitude, there is a need for order, commandment, and violence, and thus for the State. Class struggle no longer has the political consistency that it once did. What remains is solely state struggle, antagonisms created and disseminated by the State. What predominates in current debates about the nature of the

.....
¹⁰ Brecht 1976, p. 47. Brecht's punctuation.

¹¹ Finley 1985, p.30. Laski 1935, pp.57-58.

State is mostly the nature of the relations between the economy and the State.

I disagree with the idea that the bourgeoisie and capital are subordinated to the State. We have a tendency to link capital to private property, to the law of value, to money—with the understanding of course that the State is involved in all this. But could we not imagine the opposite scenario? That is to say, that property and money are *creations* of the State? That it is the State, in fact, which creates the economy as well as its different forms?

I want to oppose to the thesis “The State bends to the laws of capital” the following proposition: the State doesn’t stem from the economy, even if it is the State which creates the dynamics involved in the creation and circulation of money and the market. The order of the State co-directs that of the economy.

And so I come back to the point of departure: subjective singularities.

The problem today is that it is not possible to take what I call *people* (*les gens*) as a subject nor politics in terms of organization. That way of thinking the political is entirely and exclusively parliamentary: it sees subjects as electors, and every parliamentary party as the essential and inevitable venue for forms of organization. In the current conjuncture, I don’t think that there is really much to be gained from non-Statist forms of organization. Organization nowadays only takes place in spaces of the state.

Today, the expiration of the category of revolution and of the proletarian antagonism require a complete reinvention of what we understand by the category of the subjective. “Subjective singularities”, in the mode of politics from within/politics in interiority, was thus also an agent of historicity. It is not for nothing that when I elaborated the concept that I also talked about a *historic* mode of politics: there was a subjective singularity and I was able to identify what it entailed, to indicate when it began and when it ended. So let us raise or open the question: do subjective singularities exist other than in historic modes of politics? Will we be able to seek out other modalities for the subjective, locate it in other modes or forms? Will we be able to tell what a new form of subjective singularities might be capable of doing, that they may open up other possibilities and processes? Once the historic mode of politics no longer claims a monopoly on the subjective singularity from the point of people, it will simply be one of the latter’s forms. An organized form. In *Anthropology of the Name*, the work of novation was assigned to historic modes of politics, to their sites, qualities, and qualification. But what would “people think” mean, then, in our present conjuncture, today, in a period in which there are no politics in interiority? Is it possible for us to imagine a (category of the) *subjective without organization*?

Conclusion. The Subjective without Organization

In every political decision there is always an existential dimension, there are always important questions of meaning. The main question is that of ascertaining *what grounds the decision*. The decision is individual. But in the space of a political organization, the initial decision consists in the act of coming together and adhering to the line. Yet if the subjective, today, is organizationless (*sans organization*), where are we with respect to the decision? If organization was of the order of a “we”, what would be the status of the subjective without a “we”? We would thus pass into the register or domain of an “I”, a heterogeneous, multiple “I”. In any event, the “we” of a politics in interiority was never an unconditional given, but a “we” which emerged *on/in certain conditions*. To return to my framing of the question, “people think” was in this sense a conditional *we* (*un nous sous conditions*). In the Group of Undocumented Workers’ Collectives and in the Organisation Politique, the overarching principle that guided and structured each of our meetings was the following: *each of us speaks in their own name and politics are shared in common*. What we had in common was a politics from the point of people. This is what grounded at once the subjective and organizational “we” of those groups. In that dry spell which for me stretched from the shutting down of the Organisation Politique in 2007 to the present day, I formed, along with a handful of friends from the OP—people who were still militantly engaged in politics, only now in a different form—a small group called *Les Quelques-uns* (The Some). *Each of us speaks and acts in their own name*, likewise for our interventions: some began working with workers’ shelters, others with homeless foreign minors without families in France, others with Romani families, others in working-class and impoverished neighborhoods and cities in and around Paris... *Each in their own name* is no banality. We gathered for small meetings, and rather than putting into practice an organized “we”, there was a plurality of individual subjectivities.

So if there is no longer a politics in interiority, and no longer any “we” other than in the fantasy of a collective subject, where are we with respect to what people think, with respect to the thought of people? Thought is conditional upon being able to formulate/formalize what constitutes it, in its opinion, as thought. To return to the “I”, the condition allowing for an “I” to think something is, I claim, alterity. What grounds alterity is the “I”’s accepting that the other, the “s/he”, is also an other “I”. I will therefore name *political thought* the existence of a third space or person (*un tiers lieu*) proposed or put forward by the “I” as a form of compatibility linking the “he” or the “she” to this “I”. “S/he” is an other “I”, and my own “I” in turn has the status of a third—of a “he”—for this “s/he”. This other, this “he” and this “she”, acts as a powerful interpellation of the “I”. Take, for example, the case of the word “migrant” and the language of the third person, of the “they” or the “them”, which always introduces and surrounds the migrant: they, the clandestine; they,

the undocumented; they, the potential terrorist, the refugee, the person escaping hunger, the unemployed, the survivor of the disaster while crossing the Mediterranean, the person at the mercy of others, they the vitally vulnerable and threatened. And responses to this “s/he” or these “they” run the gamut from “send them all back” to “this is someone that I absolutely will help”. Which proves, if need be, that the “s/he”, here, *is at the mercy of an “I”* who makes such statements. They depend upon it.

Did the organized “we” account for alterity? In its own space, certainly. And yet, there is a real and fundamental difference which separates the organization which provides for categories and a common idiom for thinking alterity and having to account for the latter oneself.

Can we transfer, then, the thought of a “we” of a politics in interiority to an “I” conditioned upon alterity? If we admit the hypothesis of an “I” and of a “s/he,” in other words, is it possible for us to locate an operative category of *the subjective on its own terms*, absent any form of organization? Can the multiplicity of “I”s and of alterities open up an other thought of politics? Subjectivities could then be apprehended as the space in which work takes place between the “I”s and the others. Can making others other “I”s produce a political thought? There’s something complicated about our situation, not least because recent mass movements and mobilizations seemed not to enjoy any apparent power other than that of intensifying repressive responses to them on the part of the state.¹² This raises the question of the relation between subjectivities and mobilization, and of the nature itself of a State which refuses to listen to what is being said in the streets. At present, no one takes seriously any more the idea that there may be alternatives, or that the State might take into account the propositions being formulated and put forward by people. So what must be done in such a situation? This is the question itself of the *at a distance* from the State.

There are servile positions available, positions of acquiescence and adherence to the State. What are the subjectivities associated with this acquiescence? Adherence to order, even if the order is a criminal one? To the State as guarantor of national wealth? Is such acquiescence motivated by personal interest masquerading as a defense of law and order? What we should propose, instead, is the creation of a space at a lateral remove from the State, *at a distance from the State*. As I’ve said previously, there is the State and it is what it is. And yet I can be *at a distance* from it, and find forms of creativity there, forms of inventiveness and inspiration from the point of people. At stake here is a the space of a possible positivity with respect to an institution that is at once fearsome and formidable. An absence of alternatives to the State today

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12 Consider for instance the Yellow Vests movement, the protests in 2017-18 against reforms of the age of retirement, or forms of support, solidarity and action during the first wave of Covid confinements in 2020.

is not a weakness any more than it is a blindspot. It is simply one way of accounting for, describing, an experience: both of the grand but opposing views of the state, that of communist socialism and that of social-democratic parliamentarianism, have run out of steam.

To conclude, I want to return to my time spent in the company of the *Gilets jaunes* in 2018-19, an apprenticeship which left a profound mark on me and which I continue to carry fervently with me today. *Being one amongst others* is something they taught me in particular, along with the attentive patience needed to listen to the other and, more important still, to hear what is said by each person, to hear what they think, what they hope, what they are prepared to do.

In November of 2019, Mortiz Herrmann and Jan Philipp Weise invited me to give a talk in Frankfurt to mark the occasion of the German translation of my *Anthropology of the Name*. I titled this talk, "Can We Put a Yellow Vest on *The Anthropology of the Name*?" Here's what I said at the time:

The Yellow Vests contend that the government, which considers itself constitutionally legitimate, is immoral both in terms of the decisions it has made and in its carrying out of them. Its discourse is one of mendacity and corruption. *They're trying to pull the wool over our eyes*, as the Yellow Vests put it. This immorality, furthermore, is embodied in the police and legal violence to which they have been subjected in the course of their protests.

For those of them that I met, the immorality of the use of power in question delegitimizes it. To the constitutional, judicial, but immoral, legitimacy of power, the Yellow Vests oppose the moral legitimacy of their mobilization. What's at stake is a *conflict of legitimacies*, and to my mind the violence used by the powers-that-be can largely be explained by the way in which its moral legitimacy has been called into question. The question of morality, here, is neither religious nor philosophical. By morality, what is in play are values and principles. Fundamentally taking into account the real, lived experience of people, and respecting it—this is the essential principle for them. So, too, is telling the truth about what's happening for them. As a refrain from one of their songs went: *Here we are, even if Macron wants us far, we're here for the/in honor of workers and for a better world*.¹³

Though the absence of homogeneous, centralized structures and organization of this movement had been the object of some reservations, if not critiques, of the Yellow Vests, for my part I

13 In the original French, the "we" in question in this song is the indefinite, third person collective pronoun, "On": *On est là même si Macron ne le veut pas, on est là pour l'honneur des travailleurs et pour un monde meilleur*. [Translator's note].

find this very quality to be essential to the movement. What's being presented to the government is not an organization, but a principle: our lives are worthy of respect and they must be respected. Peoples' lives matter, they count. Absence of structures is one sign of the Yellow Vests' newness: what one finds there is a form of distance from, and rejection of, the state-like dimension of every organization and which is symbolically concentrated in forces of centralization and the figure of leaders. But to open a dialogue with an organization the State needs to be able to identify leaders, it needs recognizable spokespeople, legitimate interlocutors. But what the Yellow Vests suspect, or what they have intuited, is that every organization is organized like a state (*toute organisation est étatique*). Theirs is not an anarchist proposition. They propose neither councils nor communalism. The only theory they put forward about power is that of its corruption and of the immorality of power's personnel.

The experience I had with the Yellow Vests is a point of reference for me (*est référentielle pour moi*). It will become a chronicle of the present someday, when whatever comes from the side of people/where people are will manage to pick up and take further what the Yellow Vests made possible. I waited until 2008 to write my chronicle of May 68, having experimented with the creation of two different militant organizations, both of which were initially conceived as ways of learning May 68's lesson: namely, as we argued at the time, that what was lacking in 68 was an *organization* with an all-encompassing view and a coherent political doctrine. When the present moment has come to its end I will be able to write not so much a chronicle of the Yellow Vest movement, but a chronicle of what they managed to open up, what they managed to bear witness to, for a time which has not yet arrived. For someone from my generation, there's still hope.

Translated by Robert St. Clair

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Politics at the Gateway of Nothingness: Liminal Times

Álvaro García Linera

Abstract: What happens when the legitimate cultural frameworks with which societies organize in the mid or long term the imagined direction of their multiple daily activities are blurred or paralyzed? The predictive horizon with which people give meaning to their plans, to their life projects, collapses, and the present is shown as an endless maelstrom of events that never end and, worst of all, lead nowhere. This is a common occurrence around the world today.

Keywords: liminal time, state, politics, symptoms, neoliberalism.

What happens when the legitimate cultural frameworks with which societies organize in the mid or long term the imagined direction of their multiple daily activities are blurred or paralyzed? The predictive horizon with which people give meaning to their plans, to their life projects, collapses, and the present is shown as an endless maelstrom of events that never end and, worst of all, lead nowhere. This is a common occurrence around the world today.

The symptoms of a time broken

For 40 years the moral and labor order of the planet was governed by a set of basic principles that supported an imagined and inevitable destiny of the course of societies, of personal and family efforts, with which people justified their daily efforts, their sacrifices, their daily strategies.

The free market appeared to be a "natural" way of allocating resources in which to find a "niche of opportunities" for family business or individual entrepreneurship; globalization as a universalized humanity that would allow that, sooner or later, the achievements and welfare of the world's rich would be spread to all, according to their efforts; the small and non-intrusive State that would liberate social energies and reduce taxes; the zero fiscal deficit that would manage to organize the country as an austere house without abhorrent collective rights, and auspicious in rewards for competent winners. All these guiding emblems played the role of an imperative destiny with which all governments, companies, journalists, opinion "leaders", renowned academics, social leaders and families adjusted their expectations of a happy future.

It was the dominant spirit of the world, which was not only imposed by the force of the dominant governments of the planet, by the imposition of the dominant fortunes of each country – but it was also validated by the desires of the subaltern classes themselves. The world had a direction. Societies had an inevitable future. Families a certainty of the times. People had a predictive horizon to organize their daily strategies. It did not matter how far away those goals might be; no matter how many failures and interruptions one could run into along the way or how discriminating

the opportunities for existence might be, it was not discouraging. They were strong ideas, a shared imagination, with the tacit certainty of common sense, which made it possible to organize the fragmentary pieces of daily life towards a destiny of success and greatness.

That was the way the world was and that was the way to be in it, asserted almost everyone. The arrow of time was rushing towards this optimistic future and no one, except those who were not in time or in the world, could affirm anything different.

But it now turns out that none of those narrative beliefs that prevailed for 40 years throughout the entire planet are observed by those who had promoted them, pontificated them, and consecrated them for years. None of those supreme guidelines solve the current suffocating anxieties that crowd in front of people and, what is worse, they currently lack the strength to capture the collective hopes able to overcome those adversities.

Nowadays, the so-called "universal laws of society" has begun to fade away.

In the first place, world trade, which between 1980-2010 grew twice as fast as world GDP, has, in the last decade, has fallen at rates similar to those of global GDP. In turn, the growth of global output has also declined to a half of its previous growth rate.¹

Secondly, the globalist exhaustion came from the movement of trans-frontier capital, the jewel in the crown of the free market. From a growth rate of about 11% of world GDP between 2000-2010, it has fallen to less than 7% in the last decade.²

This was followed by a series of setbacks to the sacred irreversibility of globalization. England left the European Union (EU), locking itself into a picturesque crowned sovereignty. The US, under President Trump, imposes tariffs of 5-25% over trade with China³ and 10-25% over steel and aluminum from Germany.⁴ The EU erects quasi-feudal walls to China's 5G⁵ phone technology, subsidizes fuel and energy,⁶ calls for building energy sovereignty⁷ and, together with the US, launches a campaign to retract its value chains to the national or regional level, to

1 <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/934031525380654860/pdf/125930-WP-v1-PUBLIC-14873-WB-GlobalTradeWatch-WEB.pdf>

2 <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2017/12/pdf/lund.pdf>

3 https://www.wto.org/spanish/tratop_s/dispu_s/543r_a_s.pdf

4 <https://www.dw.com/es/eeuu-y-la-ue-acuerdan-levantar-aranceles-al-acero-y-aluminio/a-59676162>

5 <https://www.ft.com/content/0566d63d-5ec2-42b6-acf8-2c84606ef5cf>

6 https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/RW22_01/RW_Energy_taxation_ES.pdf

7 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/meetings/european-council/2022/03/24-25/>

stop depending on the Asian "systemic adversary".⁸

As if this were not enough, in the face of the "large-scale confinement" provoked by Covid-19 which caused the world product to fall by -3.1 points,⁹ the G-20 states invented 14 billion dollars to flood the financial systems with money and rescue the collapsing markets in 2020 alone.¹⁰ And to complete this gradual fragmentation of globalism, the United States and the European Union, by decree, confiscate Russian monetary reserves deposited in "Western" banks¹¹ and "de-globalize" it by disconnecting it from the SWIFT financial system.¹²

Certainly, none of this collapses neoliberalism, much less capitalism, but we are clearly facing an accelerated deterioration and vilification of the contemporary form of economic accumulation and political-cultural domination known as neoliberalism.

The markets require the states to survive thanks to the liquidity of treasury bonds. States can go into debt to resuscitate stock exchanges and zombie companies, pay salaries of private corporations and give money to the poor. Sovereignty, that "dead dog" on the sidewalk of triumphant globalism, is alive to protect inefficient telephone companies in rich countries. The free market must now bow to national imperialism engaged in a war against "authoritarian asianism". Nationalization is no longer an anachronism, if it is a question of expropriating money from Russian oligarchs, or if energy security, with nuclear energy, is demanded by companies.

These are certainly extraordinary measures in the face of extraordinary events, such as Covid-19, the "great confinement", or the war in Ukraine. But the same was said in 2010 when state-owned banks saved the markets.¹³ And now it turns out that violations of neoliberal orthodoxy are applied in response to the effects of a virus; against financial collapse; to prevent the closure of companies; facing a war; to expand imperial influences in the East; to face competition from telephone companies; against the rise in gas prices; as a response to China's growth; etc. And tomorrow there will surely be another "extraordinary" pretext that will make exceptionality the new normal.

8 https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/estadosunidos_biden-firma-decreto-proteger-cadenas-de-distribucion/6071882.html and <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20220809/biden-ley-impulsar-semiconductores-eeuu-millones/2395321.shtml>

9 <https://www.imf.org/es/Publications/WEO/Issues/2022/07/26/world-economic-outlook-update-july-2022>

10 <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-00540-6>

11 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-05-09/la-ue-promueve-la-confiscacion-de-bienes-rusos-para-pagar-la-reconstruccion-de-ucrania.html>

12 <https://www.dw.com/es/la-ue-excluye-del-sistema-swift-a-siete-bancos-rusos/a-60986562>

13 Tooze 2018.

In the end, it is not possible to bluff with impunity for so long and in the face of so much evidence of the fact that the guiding axes of the dominant order have entered into a frank historical decline. And the result is a cognitive derangement, a generalized social stupor due to the catastrophic mismatch between imagined certainties and practical evidence. The world to which people imagined their destiny tied to has been shattered, and no discursive artifice attempting to fit its pieces together will be able to restore the magic of captivating social enthusiasm and credulity.

Long cycles of accumulation-domination

This world scene becomes more complicated when, at the crepuscule of the form of domination and economic accumulation prevailing these 40 years, it intersects with other crises, such as the environmental crisis¹⁴ and the decline of the historical cycle of the North American hegemony,¹⁵ giving rise to an overlapping of descending phases that further increases global uncertainty. We have then, the intersection of the descending phase of a short cycle, corresponding to the cycle of neoliberal accumulation-domination, with the slow fall of the long cycle of the hegemonic dominance of the North American empire.

Short cycles of accumulation-domination last between 40 to 50 years, from the time they are born, reach their zenith, decline and are replaced by another model of accumulation-domination. In part, these cycles coincide with the "long waves" studied by Kondratiev for the price, production, consumption and value series.¹⁶

We had the liberal cycle from 1870 to 1915, when its decline began; the cycle of the "welfare state" or "state capitalism" at the beginning of the 1930s, which entered its downward phase at the end of the 1960s; the neoliberal cycle at the beginning of the 1980s, until showing signs of aging with the "great recession" of 2010 and the new recession emerging from the "great enclosure" of 2020 – with the additional difficulty that now, there is no plausible substitute in sight.

On the other hand, the cycle of the hegemonies of the great empires, studied by Arrighi and Dalio, last between 100 and 150 years. And in each long imperial cycle there are two or three short cycles of accumulation-domination.

This intersection of descending phases of the short cycle of accumulation-domination are coinciding with the long imperial cycle increases world entropy. It is not by chance that in view of the magnitude of the problems that the world power centers are going through, the

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14 <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/>

15 Arrighi 1999. Dalio 2022.

16 Kondratieff 1956. Schumpeter 2002.

director of the IMF, Kristalina Georgieva, has been announcing the risks of geo-economic fragmentation.¹⁷

Every phase transition in the regime of accumulation and domination brings with it at least four major structural modifications:

a) In the way of organizing production, allowing the beginning of a long period of rising business profitability in production, and then also in the rest of the economic sectors.

b) In the way of distributing wealth, generating a lasting period of economic expansion.

c) In the mode of legitimization of the social order, which efficiently assembles the emerging economic regime with the expectations of welfare of the subaltern classes.

d) In the mode of monopolizing the predictive horizon of society, which allows the economically dominant classes to direct the collective hopes and enthusiasms of society.

The current debates on platform economics,¹⁸ energy transition,¹⁹ geoengineering,²⁰ monetary expansion,²¹ tax reforms and ways to combat economic inequality²² are the primary symptom of an effort to glimpse components a and b of a new model of economic accumulation.

Let us focus on the last two components, c and d.

When the rules of imagined social destiny become disrupted, as they are now, there is a fracture in the "spirit of the age" or, in other words, in the predictive horizon of society, in the hopeful destiny of the order of the world of life, which allows societies, and individuals, to assign a strategic predictability to their actions. This is what guarantees the cohesion of the dominant interests of the ruling classes with the expectations and moral tolerances of the subaltern classes.

But if the powerful of the world proclaim themselves for a free market one day and the next day announce "America first", or a nationalism of vaccines, microchips or electric cars, then the known

17 <https://www.imf.org/es/Blogs/Articles/2022/05/22/blog-why-we-must-resist-geo-economic-fragmentation>

18 Parker et al 2017. Srnicek 2018.

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21 Mitchell et al 2019. Kelton 2021.

22 Piketty 2019. Milanovic 2017. Deaton 2015.

and expected world has lost its compass. If those who advocated fiscal austerity as a republican responsibility the very next day are indebting the State "without limit" to save the financial markets, then the imagined direction of history collapses.

If protectionism and well-mannered sovereignism is the answer to China's economic rise, and the de-globalization of a ten percent of the world²³ is the way to justify the expansion of a geriatric European melancholic empires, then the ideology of free trade and minimum standards vanishes leaving a trail of global perplexity, as is happening now.

We are facing a secularized variant of the "twilight of the gods" or, if you prefer, the dramatic experience of the mortality of certainties.

Durkheim spoke of the inevitable and recurrent aging of collective representations,²⁴ but he forgot to mention that this in turn brings with it a wave of disbelief and frustration as a global sign of the times.

Neither governments, nor business conglomerates, nor international institutions, nor paid ideologues can convincingly imagine what is in store for societies in the medium term. Nor can the popular classes.

It is as if the sense of history had vanished in the face of the immediacy of a world without destiny or promise, and all that remains is the burden of an infinite and dilated present that goes nowhere.

The world is going through what in the 1840s Marx called a "spirit of the epoch without spirit"²⁵ and, eighty years later, Gramsci called the "interregnum".²⁶

It is a strange gateway of historical time in which everyone knows where they come from, but no one has the slightest shared idea of what is to come. It is a liminal epoch that plays a sort of threshold that separates a tired historical time, without active consensus of society; surviving by inertia, almost like a zombie; and a historical time that paradoxically does not arrive, that is not announced either, that is not known how it will be nor does it promise anything. A historical time that does not seem to exist, leaving the world in the solitude of an abyss without name or limit.

Liminal time

The liminal event accompanies the transitional moments of cycles of accumulation-domination. It signals the closing of an epoch and the beginning of a new one, but not as a gradual transition or a peaceful amphibious mixture, but instead as an emptiness; a desperate intimate absence. Liminal time is an abrupt cut in the experience of social time

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²³ <https://es.rbth.com/cultura/82628-cual-tamano-rusia-realmente>

²⁴ Durkheim 2017, p. 438.

²⁵ <https://www.marxists.org/espanol/m-e/1844/intro-hegel.htm>

²⁶ Gramsci 1981, p. 37.

and leaves people without substitute or plausible premonition for a long time – years; perhaps decades. Until, in the midst of social outbursts, the new historical time awakens, capturing the hope of societies. But, until that comes, the liminal epoch is precisely the in-between, the lack, the anguishing void, the suspension of time.

These social moments have at least five interdependent processes.

1. The paralysis or blockage of the predictive horizon with which societies oriented, real or imaginary, their future over time. Tactical uncertainty, in the midst of strategic certainty, so typical of modernity and post-modernity, are replaced by the tactical certainty of a desperate strategic uncertainty. The road to the future does not exist, because there is no future to cling to and to hope for.

2. As the neoliberal predictive horizon vanishes, the future disappears; there is no destiny in which to place mobilizing hopes. And since there is no tomorrow that imaginatively improves the present, there is also no path, straight or tortuous, fragmented or uninterrupted, by means of which the dilemmas of the present can be shortened regarding the imagined wellbeing. Then social time disappears, for it supposes a turbulent and discontinuous flow, but oriented towards a horizon, a goal, a destination. And then, society is submerged in the corporeal experience of a suspended time, lacking flow with respect to ends; navigating in a present without sense and dilated to infinity, as if time had been lost.

And if, as Aristotle affirms, time is the measure of movement,²⁷ that is, of the continuous comparison with a from-where or into-a-where; with the crumbling of the predictive horizon of societies, social time loses its direction, its shared social intentionality.

Therefore, there is no longer an arrow of historical time and it is as if time stopped and the only thing that remains is an oppressive present with no redeeming future.

The suspension of time does not annul the experience of the "lack of time" so characteristic of modernity. Instead, it is about the lack of physical time to fulfil routines, duties, daily, inertial commitments. The frozen time is that of the imagined course of collective history; that which is measured in relation to the desired future. This time is interrupted. And it is not about the religious "end of time" either, since this apocalypse is, nevertheless, a destiny, however devastating it may be. Although a catastrophic drift of the suspension of time is possible, which would explain the recent revival of religious and mystical attachments in social segments.

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²⁷ Aristóteles 1995, pp. 156, 152.

The acceleration of events, of which Hartmut Rosa²⁸ or Mark Fisher²⁹ have spoken to us, has now, in fact, ceased to be an acceleration of time because, having lost the arrow of historical time (economic growth, in the first author; post-capitalism, in the second), the accumulation of events has nothing upon which to be "measured", to compare with. They happen without a hopeful future. They are avalanches of events with no direction or destiny shared by society. Physical time is compressed in a vortex of events and demands, but historical time is stopped because there is no horizon to animate and move it. After all, the existence of historical time is also a symptom and a measure of the great political hegemonies within societies.

Global anxiety expresses the weariness of the hegemony that mobilized the enthusiasm and commitments of a large part of societies with their businessmen in coalition with their political leaders. Today that hegemony is passive, almost melancholic, lacking the vitality to monopolize the arrow of historical time, that is to say, the active leadership of politics.

But neither are we today only facing a fragmented and discontinuous time, as proposed by Byung-Chul Han.³⁰ In reality, the architecture of neoliberal time, from its beginnings over forty years ago, at the same time as its acceleration, has also been atomized, as atomization is the new labor condition that has fragmented labor centers into an infinity of small outsourced factories; and just as fragmented is the life trajectory of all wage-earners, submerged in a perpetual labor nomadism.³¹ The fractured logic and lack of continuous narrative of today's music video-clips are the visual and aesthetic expression of this generalized fragmentation of personal experiences of the world. However, this pulverized experience of social things, was unfolded in all these 40 years, within an imagined course of historical horizon articulated around the gratification of individual effort, the global market, competitiveness and economic accumulation. No matter how chaotic and discontinuous personal events have been, the shared belief that there is a satisfactory destiny behind which to run and glue the scattered pieces of life, was an epochal certainty. This was well illustrated by Bauman when, years ago, he pointed out that the fragmentation of life experiences, which inhibits long-term planning, provokes the permanent sensation of "missing the train" or being thrown out of the window of a car that is going "at full speed".³² The uncertainty that neoliberal modernity produced on a regular

28 Rosa 2016

29 Fisher 2017.

30 Han 2021.

31 Garcia Linera 2014. Beaud & Pialoux 1999.

32 Bauman 2009, p.21.

basis, was not of the future, because there was a "train" or a "vehicle" that, in spite of everything, was going at full speed to some destination. The concern of the time was to know the place that each person would occupy in that train, or outside of it.

But today, there is no certainty of time or train going anywhere. It is as if it has stopped while everyone is running chaotically inside it, while outside frantic images are reflected in the windows.

The shared predictive horizon that used to direct the daily fragments is empty. The future appears inscrutable, and the pieces of personal life appear as folds without any cohesion. The future has been extinguished; the present has become unhinged. The course of social life has been hijacked.

3. Cognitive perplexity. As the predictive horizon is diluted, society as a whole, its political leaders, its intellectuals, cannot outline possible courses of action with sufficient credibility and verification to arouse collective enthusiasm. The old belief system shows itself impotent to give verisimilitude to its paradigms – and also to the critical enunciations, which cannot displace or replace the predominant ones. The social mood is one of discredit and generalized disaffection. Politics is devalued. Enthusiasms are segmented and ephemeral.

It is a moment of cognitive collapse about the imminent social future that engenders a collective stupor, and drowns people in the reiteration of a present that never ends. Politics as a dispute for the hopes of societies is discredited. If there is no hope that moves time, then there is no future and no politics of transformation of the present. This not only gives rise to "anti-politics", which is in fact a politics against political elites, whatever they may be. What also arises is "a-politics", the detachment from the ways of managing the commons, of producing the future. That in the midst of this desolate panorama, theories about the "end of politics", the "end of humanity" and other collapsist discourses reverberate, is predictable. These are epiphenomena of the liminal time that turns frustration and the hopeless state of mind into a theoretical edifice of paralyzing social impotence.

And the fact is that "a-politics" is a temporary quality of society. It is transitory and, as we shall see later, the prelude to outbursts of politicization of society in multiple directions, until its homogenization and stabilization, as the new cycle of accumulation-domination imposes itself. But, in addition, this abandonment of politics clearly leaves the management of the common affairs of society to the old dominant elites, who will be able to act with greater arbitrariness in the absence of observance and interest. But their monopolies in this period of transit are fragile; they do not mobilize the active adhesions of the dominated and, like everything else, they have also lost credibility and trust. It is as if everything floated in a sea of apathy and generalized discredit. It is the symbol that the model of political-cultural domination of the last four decades is getting irreversibly old.

As the planetary system of institutions and authorities, which monopolize the symbolic power of enunciation of the promising future, contradict themselves, diverge or fail in the plausibility of their proposals, their monopoly also weakens and, with it, their power of performative enunciation of plausible horizons (conservative politics), also begins to corrode, with no replacement or visible alternative.

Uncertainty, with its terrifying sensation of not knowing yet in which way tomorrow will be different from this confusing and distressing present, restores to the future its random and contingent quality. In reality, history is always contingent, but people usually hold on to the immediate past as the only feasible horizon to bite the future, making the future a fatal determination. But not now. In liminal times, the past stops in fear of the future. For an instant everything is a brutal incertitude.

And in the global hopelessness a relative equalization arises in the social capacities of enunciation of the future; although for now this equalization is only in discredit and marginality, since, after all, the dominant ideologies, even if they no longer seduce, can still saturate the discursive space with fleeting spectacles of emotion and individual motivation. These are the death throes of a tired hegemony.

4. The divergence of elites. As the shared social horizon is fading into the void, the great globalist consensus that united the political elites is beginning to crumble.

If before, political center, right and left were mere personalized variants of the same project (state capitalism between 1930-1960; neoliberalism between 1980-2010), as the hopeful project fades away, nothing unites the elites but strategic distrust. And then, the traditional elites fragment with schismatic projects; and new elites emerge with proposals that are distanced from each other. Faced with the hegemonic decline, the center-right is drifting to the extreme right. The center left splits into leftist wings and new proposals that distance themselves from the traditional left. So-called "populisms" emerge, which more than a definition, are, in general, an exclamation of ignorance in the face of the unknown. Each political faction is radically different from the others. Nothing makes them concur towards a common space, they all diverge. From multi- or bipartisan center-right political systems (1985-2015), we move to a polarized multi- or bipartisan system (2015...).

Each of these forces disputes the vote of an apathetic electorate and, there where other social circumstances converge, politicized segments of society, not yet majorities, concentrate on more radical political projects that achieve ephemeral adhesions of electoral majorities, which then return to abulia.

One of the first political forces to emerge is the extreme right. Seeing how the old political consensuses are dissolving, the right is seeking to return to the old order, but now instead of seduction, it will seek sanctions, punishment or revenge against those it considers

responsible for this disorder: "greedy" trade unions, migrants who "snatch" jobs, women who "exaggerate" their rights, "egalitarian" indigenous people, etc. Without understanding that the weakening of the conservative project is the result of its own limits, they will seek refuge in the disciplining of the rebellious, the key to return society to the order of the old moral values. These are authoritarian and increasingly antidemocratic right-wings, which seek to redirect social fear regarding the lack of future, towards vengeance and punishment, replacing conviction with imposition, typical of decadent projects. The orthopedic implantation of "sovereigntist" variants in the neoliberal body (Trump, Orban, Bolsonaro, Meloni...), or essays of a type of "statist neoliberalism", like Biden, more than a corruption of the regime, point out the contradictions of a model of economy, State and society that has become moldy.

The Left is also undergoing a centrifugal renaissance. From the multiple Latin American national-popular variants, to the new European lefts (Podemos, Nupes, Syriza...) and socialist factions of the Democrats in the USA and Labor in England, they break with the globalist felony of world social democracy, and leave behind the mourning for the failed experiences of State socialism in the 20th century. All of them claim justice and equality, but they do not propose convergent paths or common horizons. They propose ways of correcting the present, but do not have a name for the future. They achieve political visibility and sometimes electoral victories, but they are temporary and cannot yet irradiate.

Even the academic left lacks contemporary referents that add ideological allegiances. They all cling to their specialties, their departments of study and their small sects of intellectual adhesion. And the older the better: it can be Foucault or Gramsci, or Marx; better yet: Machiavelli or Plato. Critical thinking cannot jump over a world that lacks a future. And, therefore, it is better to immerse oneself in the past to forget this disconcerting world that has misplaced its future. A liminal time everywhere.

All these political proposals from the left and the right, all of them diverging from each other, are part of the general chaos. They are not yet the solution. None of them manages to consolidate an expansive political-cultural project. They win victories here, only to lose there, or to be replaced in the next election. This is the quality of liminal time. For the moment, there will be a succession of short victories and short defeats of the different projects that struggle to emerge. There are no long hegemonies for the moment. For a while, there will not be. However, in these battles of modest temporalities, the authoritarian rightists are having more success, especially in the countries of the North. Not only because it is easier for them to harmonize with the conservative common sense built up over the 40 years of neoliberalism, but also because they offer certainty and, in this, they are bolder and more determined

than the modest lefts, which have not yet managed to shed the liberal-cosmopolitan, pacifist and ambiguous cultural environment that made them the party of the educated middle classes.

5. Cognitive openness. No society can live indefinitely in strategic uncertainty. It is a matter of necessary social cohesion in the face of history, of methods of legitimizing any form of government and, also, of drastic effects on the economy. The IMF has calculated that only in 2019, the uncertainty about the future of trade policies has caused a 1-point drop in global GDP growth.³³ The human being is, above all, a being of shared beliefs. It is its social quality. That is the social matter that produces life and institutions in society. Therefore, sooner or later it has to stick to something, to some organizing principles of the imagined future, whatever they are, on the condition that they return the certainty to some destiny in order to hold on with all its forces, and thus to give back the sense to the collective, familiar and personal history.

Therefore, in the following decade, the stupor and uneasiness must be followed, abruptly, by a moment of cognitive availability to revoke old beliefs and to cling to new ones where it is considered feasible to find solutions to anxieties and needs. It will be the moment of crystallization of a new system of beliefs that restores a new meaning to historical time. And that relaunches the passing of social time.

Durkheim spoke 100 years ago of moments of "creative effervescence" of new ideals that would guide humanity. Basically, it is a question of the formation of a new model of legitimization of domination, which would have to be accompanied, or riding on the back of, a new model of economic accumulation.

This time of collective desire for new organizing certainties of the predictive horizon is brief and profound. Historically, they arise contingently, due to some grievance, the loss of some right, a break in the moral order of the world, an aggression or perceived loss; an imminent fear or risk of death, etc. It is a moment of mobilized collective discomfort, but as a result of which all the old accumulated uncertainties, the perplexities experienced, the added anxieties, explode and people feel compelled to modify the organization of their lives, to rush into a new destiny that restores the certainties of a better future, regardless of the temporary sacrifices that have to be made. It is in that temporary space where the imagined certainty of the future will be settled; and with it, the monopoly of the conduction of the social hopes that will govern the following four or five decades. Not all societies may have the same intense and revealing course. There may be more active and influential ones than others; but these, in the end, will be coupled to the epochal movement.

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33 <https://www.imf.org/es/Blogs/Articles/2022/05/22/blog-why-we-must-resist-geo-economic-fragmentation>

Even thought, the new axes or strong ideas capable of organizing the imagined social expectations of the population, will replace the old, flagging paradigms, they won't emerge out from nowhere, nor do they will abolish completely the pre-existing ones. They will work on sediments; they will rearticulate fragments to create new mobilizing imaginaries. They will produce a new epochal common sense, leaving in place other multiple previous common senses. That proposal of society that manages to mobilize new expectations, plausible of gradual practical validation, with the framing of certain sediments of old common sense, will have greater chances of imposing itself. Therefore, those will be intense moments of social politicization, conservative or revolutionary; or both simultaneously, but politicization that replaces pretentious political beliefs, erects new ones, defends them in a practical way until, after several years of waves and counter-waves of expansive politicization, they are consolidated, allowing society to withdraw to its everyday life.

These are times when politics rises from the ashes of its lethargy; people get involved, collectives trust and mobilize for their beliefs. If they are authoritarian and hierarchical beliefs, they will trust in providence and force to subdue the infidels. If they are beliefs of equality and justice, they will deploy practical democratizations in the management of material resources, in decision making, in the distribution of material wealth. And perhaps both happen simultaneously.

The cognitive opening of society has no pre-established course. It is an eruptive moment of creation of modes of future sociality. It can take conservative directions, e.g., reformist or revolutionary post-fascist variants. The political struggle of that moment, concerning how, and with what elements, the political forces have concurred to that cognitive availability of society, will define the nature of the new cycle of legitimization-accumulation.

In fact, although in a local, peripheral, partial and ephemeral manner, the symptoms of this great coming battle are already being experienced today. In the economic sphere, with the trials of hybrid forms of free trade and protectionism, tested during the pandemic, and now with the energy crisis following the deglobalization of one of the world's main suppliers of gas and oil, Russia, or the regional contraction of strategic product value chains in order to stop depending on China; or the revival of state economic policies to reorganize the economy, etc.

The experience is also registered politically, with the emergence of progressivism, on the one hand, and governmental post-fascism, on the other.

Each of these proposals, even with their temporal limits and current impossibilities of installing lasting and irradiating hegemonies, are laboratories of possible courses of action which, together with other options that may emerge in time, overcoming these initial limits, will have to dispute on a global scale, the monopoly of the new ideas, of the new

global common sense, capable of captivating the hopes and imaginaries of societies for the following decades.

This global battle for the monopoly of people's predictive horizon will not be a merely discursive fact, even if it is discursively effective. There are always material conditions that create the space of possibility for the success a discourse, and of its own performative efficacy. In a certain way, the conditions of success of the new system of legitimization will, on the one hand, depend on an optimal articulation between the collective availability to substitute strategic predictive horizons of human action and on the other hand, the discursive architecture capable of recognizing and channelling, in some way, the social afflictions and discomforts around a future; and, finally, the coupling with a new economic order that makes these expectations sustainable in time.

Cognitive openness is a bifurcation in legitimate social imaginaries, an inflection in the social order, which will give rise to a new cycle of legitimization-domination. And these virtuous couplings can be approached from different societal projects, even antagonistic and with equally antagonistic results. These are, therefore, the times of politics in its purest state.

Inflation could be considered here as a good example. As it is known, it is an imbalance between the production and the demand of a product that leads to an increase in the price of that merchandise which, if generalized to many other products and maintained over time, dissolves the daily order with which each person organizes own expenses, the fulfilment of our material needs, the planning of savings and bets for the immediate future. For the majority of the population that sees the organization of their livelihoods affected, it is a daily cataclysm.

A liberal solution to this problem is the opening of markets so that the most efficient country in the production of these consumer goods can supply them at a lower price, thus reducing inflation. In the case of energy in Europe, that would mean buying cheap gas from Russia, regardless of the moral repudiation of the invasion of Ukraine. That is a clear market solution. A progressive solution is the state subvention to popular consumption to reduce inflationary pressures; in this case, gas from US and Qatar. A revolutionary alternative would be state control of prices at the expense of the profits of private producers – in the case of electricity, to the private generating companies. There is no single technical solution to a problem. There are multiple technical solutions corresponding to multiple interests and political stakes. The market solution is the profit interests of the exporting companies. The subsidy is the protection of popular consumption, but balancing it with the protection of private accumulation; or, again, only the fear to social discontent that could eventually affect the markets; as in the case of the decision of the conservative British government to subsidize the price of electricity for

two years.³⁴ In the case of affecting corporate profits, it is a public will to structurally reduce economic inequalities. Every governmental economic decision is a condensation and authoritarian hierarchization of the interests of the different social classes.

I mention inflation because, together with recession, they are one of the privileged scenarios of the moments of transition of the economic and political-cultural cycle. They accompanied the transition from the liberal cycle to State capitalism in the 20-30s of the 20th century.³⁵ They were also present in the transition from state capitalism to neo-liberalism.³⁶ And it seems that they will accompany this new transition of cycles.

In synthesis, the liminal time, in its initial disorder and subsequent effervescence, is an exceptional epoch for the creation of the new temporal order of economy and domination. It is, therefore, the privileged moment for the politics of transformation.

Because of this; because the liminal time is only repeated every half century; because it brings to light problems, limits and social possibilities that did not exist in times of social stability, it is the exclusive space for understanding the internal dynamics of the decline and formation of the political, economic and subjective order of societies. But also, of course, for renewed ethical-political commitments with the society under study.

Translated by Natalia Romé

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34 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-09-08/liz-truss-destinara-mas-de-115000-millones-de-dinero-publico-a-congelar-la-factura-del-gas-y-la-electricidad-en-el-reino-unido.html>

35 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/when-americans-took-to-the-streets-over-inflation-11623412801>, Tooze 2016.

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Immigration: A Major Issue in Politics Today

Robert Linhart

Abstract: This is a short intervention on the question of the possibility of doing politics today. It compares the forms of political militancy in the 1960s and in our historical situation, and poses immigration as the main issue in politics today. It also emphasises the crucial importance of feminist struggle, ecology, and similar struggles.

Keywords: immigration, politics, capitalism, language, colonialism.

Doing politics today, that is, being a militant, is very different from the period of 1968. Back then, we had just come out of the wars in Algeria and Indochina, and we were on our way to the sky. And now the sky is falling down.

When I started off as a militant, its horizon was France, even though we were fighting for the Algerian independence. Now we live in a globalisation, with its multiple horizons. But, what has not changed is that we still remain in the same reality of exploitation of the proletariat by capital. For me, to be active is always to fight against the capitalist exploitation, which always takes different and exacerbated forms.

We cannot be militants in the same way as we were in the past. It's up to young people to tell us about this. The palette has been enlarged: there is the ecological challenge, the cause of feminism, the problem of migration. Is it harder than before? I don't know. It's just different.

In the past, we fought against capitalist exploitation, imperialism, the exploitation of the Third World. Now, other perils have come to light, the capitalist exploitation of developing countries is such that immigration has become a major problem, just as the exploitation of man by man leads to an appalling destruction of our planet's resources and endangers the future of humanity, just as the exploitation of women by men has become a political issue.

In order to move forward in resolving these major issues, it seems to me, that we must focus on our fight towards a non-capitalist development of the countries that supply emigration, a development that is ecologically and socially sustainable (without exploitation). This could be a struggle that brings together militants from all countries. We need international militants, but now there are none and it is not easy to organise them together.

There is a balance of power with the dominants in terms of resources, including linguistic ones, with language issues playing an important role, as a medium of thought and values... The promotion of a single language would be good. Though not English, which conveys imperialist and capitalist values, but rather based on *l'esperanto*.

We are not going to recreate an International, it didn't work (and there wouldn't be many candidates for it). But we can create international bodies. We are not going to use social networks which distort thought, and which encourage brainwashing.

Immigration is a major issue. The number of people trying to flee, who are massacred at the borders, it is the culmination of capitalist exploitation. Politics means fighting against the trafficking of men and women, fighting for the integration of people who arrive in the developed countries while fighting for sustainable development at home. We have to think about this contradiction, we have to do both things simultaneously: helping people on the spot in their own country and helping those who arrive, especially those coming from the war zones.

The major political challenge is to find the means for a non-capitalist development that is neither exploitative of men and women nor destructive to the resources of the planet. Capitalism has the most devastating effects and is a savage in all aspects in the Third World countries. In the other countries, it seems to be somewhat more moderated. The Amazon is being devastated by Brazilian capital, which exploits people to destroy nature, which in this case is the lungs of the planet. People are destroyed in order to destroy the planet and make a profit out of it. People are exploited to do it.

In the end of the 1970s, there were experiences in the world that went in the right direction, such as the agrarian reforms in Algeria and Portugal, the *assentamentos* (land occupations) in Brazil.... But the landowners did not give up so easily. However, these are still interesting experiences of self-management that could be used as a model, while at the same time integrating the determination to take fundamental ecological requirements into account. Young people, such as Greta Thunberg, are doing it quite well.

It is up to us to make the connection with the social demands of fighting against the exploitation of men and women by men.

Translated by Agon Hamza

The Revolution of the WethOthers (NosOtros)... Around a Theory of the Real for a Material Historical Politics of Our Times

**Ricardo Espinoza
Lolas**

Abstract: This article rethinks the human for these times from a theory of the real that is equal to the problems that capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism have generated for us, and in this we can understand how emancipation is possible today. And for this it is postulated that the human itself is the WethOthers, that is, a dynamic sexual, mortal and historical structure that articulates itself in permanent liberating tension. And this is because the real happens as distance, that is, as what allows us to be always in movement, in transit, with each other, with everything, in the real itself; breaking all the limits that seek to enclose us in external and dead categories such as the self or the nation state. To this end, the paper, with the help of Machiavelli, Hegel, Nietzsche, Anzaldúa, etc., indicates that philosophy itself must be thought and designed from a certain line where the Other happens in all its daily fragility; namely, the theoretical and the practical go hand in hand in a scriptural mode that expresses the real as distant and in this freedom and power as an expression of humans among themselves, although this, at times, is very painful, but unavoidable.

Keywords: real, freedom, power, revolution, Hegel, Nietzsche, Anzaldúa

to my dear polignanesi...
Exergos

“Il moderno Principe, el mito-Principe non può essere una persona reale, un individuo concreto: può essere solo un organismo, un elemento sociale nel quale già abbia inizio il concretarsi di una volontà collettiva riconosciuta e affermata parzialmente nell'azione”¹.
Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*...

“Era dunque necessario a Moisè trovare el populo d'Isdrael in Egypto stiaivi e oppressi dalli Egizii, accioché quelli, per uscire di servitù, si disponessino a seguirlo. Conveniva che Romulo non capissi in Alba, fussi stato esposto al nascere, a volere che diventassi re di Roma e fondatore di quella patria. Bisognava che Ciro trovasse e' Persi malcontenti

dello imperio de' Medi, e li Medi molli e efeminati per la lunga pace. Non posseva Teseo dimostrare la sua virtù, se non trovava li Ateniesi dispersi. Queste occasioni

pertanto feciono questi òmini felici e la eccellente virtù loro fece quella occasione essere conosciuta: donde la loro patria ne fu nobilitata e diventò felicissima”². Maquiavelli, *Il Principe*...

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1 Gramsci 2014, p. 951.

2 Machiavelli 2018, p. 821.

"This Theseus must be generous enough to give the people he has created from scattered villages a share in the whole, because a democratic constitution, like the one Theseus gave to his people, is in itself, in our time and in the great states, a contradiction and, for this reason, this share should be organised. Even if the direction of state power in his hands ensures that he will not be rewarded with ingratitude, as happened to Theseus"³. Hegel, *The Constitution of Germany*....

"To reduce the distance is imposible"⁴. Malabou, *El placer borrado*...

Introduction

Theseus fascist or WethOthers?

When we read Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996), we come across that fascist Theseus, the one who does what he wants for the sake of himself under the guise of love for the Other (for the underdog, for the miserable, for the multitude), which is so dear to the fascist himself, for example Mussolini and to all current fascists: from dictators like Pinochet to totalitarian businessmen like Trump via so many politicians like Milei, Meloni, Le Pen, etc. But the obvious question arises: will Boric be a fascist for Chile and Petro for Colombia as Putin is for Russia? How do we know who is the "good" Theseus and not the totalitarian fascist? How do we know that even if Theseus is driven by power (*Macht*), even if he uses violence (*Gewalt*), he is not a fascist? The distinction between power and violence, so dear to social democracy, remains limited in order to understand a Theseus? How does a revolutionary Theseus come about, and not a reformist social democrat or even less a totalitarian fascist? And if Theseus is not a proper name, but lies a function, an operator or, to put it in "Lacanian" terms, Theseus is not someone, but Theseus is a signifier, he is the "Name of Theseus" and so with that, too, we are talking about the real when we speak of "Theseus".

Hegel, following Machiavelli, is very clear in his text on the Constitution (never published) and let us remember part of the exergue of this text: "This Theseus must be generous enough to give the people he has created from scattered villages a share in the whole, because a democratic constitution, like the one Theseus gave to his people, is in itself, in our time and in the great states, a contradiction and, therefore, this share should be organised"⁵. We know from the myths, and from that incredible "biography" written about him by Plutarch (much studied by

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³ Hegel 1972, p. 153.

⁴ Malabou 2021, p. 41.

⁵ Hegel 1972, p. 153.

both Machiavelli and Hegel), that Theseus is not just any hero: his Power and violence is radical, he punched to death the Minotaur himself (which is a bestial expression of Dionysos himself and impossible to be killed), he fell in love with the maenad, par excellence, Ariadne (daughter of Minos and Pasiphae, sister of the Minotaur and future companion of the drunken god) and with her thread he was able to get out of the Labyrinth (which was more complex than killing the Minotaur). The seduction of Minos' daughter was such that she betrayed her entire Minoan world for the love of her Attic hero; however, Theseus also abandoned Ariadne at the behest of Athena herself, he had such power to leave her lamenting on Naxos (in any case it was not so bad for her because she and Dionysos founded the ancient world with their dance). As a Hercules he performed many feats against multiple monsters of the Hellas, and no more and no less founded a united Athens by the hand of the wise, armed and sometimes owlsh goddess Athena herself (a queer goddess we would say these days), so he could not stay on Naxos with Ariadne. The great French historian of the ancient world Pierre Grimal puts it this way: „After the death of Aegeus... Theseus assumed power in Attica. His first act was to bring about 'Synecism', that is to say, to unite in a single city the inhabitants, hitherto scattered in the countryside. Athens thus became the capital of the state thus constituted. He endowed it with the essential political buildings: the Pitraneo, the Bule, etc. He instituted the Panathenaean festivals as a symbol of the political unity of Attica. He minted coins, divided society into three classes: nobles, artisans and farmers, and established, broadly speaking, the functioning of democracy as it existed in classical times. He conquered the city of Megara and incorporated it into the state he had created. On the border of the Peloponnese and Attica he erected a stele to mark the boundary of the two countries: on one side, the Dorian, on the other, the Ionian. And just as Herakles had founded the Olympic Games in honour of Zeus, so Theseus instituted, or rather reorganised in Corinth, the Isthmian Games in honour of Posidon“⁶.

If we look at the realisation of Theseus, thanks to Grimal's synthesis (synthesis of the mythical cycle of the hero expressed in multiple texts, vessels, craters, etc.), we realise that he is not at all a human, let alone a man (in the masculine sense), of flesh and blood. In him there is no Duce, no Führer, no Caudillo, no Liberator, no Dictator, etc., who embodies something in and of himself “essential”. Theseus is no hidden „in itself“ that wants to manifest itself. Theseus does not express the hidden essence of something universal that wants to unveil itself and that carries within itself the totality of something of its own (the monstrous error of the arrogant Heidegger of the 1930s and repeated by many ontological thinkers today, for example, the populists who clamour for a Pablo

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⁶ Grimal 1989, pp. 508-509.

Iglesias or a Zelensky or Dugin himself and his love for Putin). In Theseus there is no essence of anything, let alone the essence of a *Heimat* that seeks to be radically expressed (in „Heideggerian“ terms, Theseus brings nothing into presence, because there is nothing in the origin to bring into presence). And, therefore, in the question that lies for Theseus there is at stake something not only political, but a question about the real.

In Theseus, as Machiavelli puts it, fortune materially happens, which then becomes the virtue of some; it is what Hegel calls in the Constitution in a double way to express Machiavelli's nuance as: *Zufall* and *Notwendigkeit*: „If Machiavelli attributed the fall of Cesare Borgia not only to political errors, but also to the accident (*Zufall*) which, just at the most decisive moment, that of Alexander's death, prostrated him ill in bed, in the same way we must see, on the other hand, in his fall, a higher necessity (*Notwendigkeit*) which did not allow him to enjoy the fruits of his actions or to exploit them to increase his power, because nature, as it appears in his vices, seems to have destined him rather for an ephemeral brilliance and to be a mere instrument of the foundation of a state“⁷. Fortune is both accidental and necessary; for fortune already indicates something of the real in its constitutive distance (of all things, and especially of the human) that allows us to see this double dimension. And it is Hegel's dialectical methodical thought that can make explicit the features described by Machiavelli in his material history of the human at the beginning of the 16th century in that torn Florence, which cannot be articulated as something living, because the Hegelian method⁸ moves in the very movement of the human among itself and with things; and that movement is part of a way of showing the real in the human itself, even if it is painful for him. And in that this Theseus, who moves in the dialectical tension of the random and the necessary, is the virtuous par excellence, that is, in him power (*Macht*) happens, but as a contemporary Hegel would say, in this virtuous Theseus there is a constituent mode of being that is an expression of the freedom (*Freiheit*) that is at the very basis of this articulation of theory and praxis, so important for the political and a radical expression of the real itself in its constitutive movement at a distance. Theseus is the quintessentially free, more so than Wagner's own Siegfried (and without any need for the sword of necessity), which is why he moves in constituent power, even when it shows itself as violence (when the streets and squares burn), even if this complicates social democracy, to the various Honneths that we encounter in many places, because it implies that in Hegel social revolt is always thought of as a manifestation of the power of the free (this cannot be accepted, for example, by Pöggeler, and let us not forget his failed text *Machiavelli*

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⁷ Hegel 1972, p. 125.

⁸ See, Espinoza 2016.

und Hegel. *Macht und Sittlichkeit*). We are facing a Hegel far removed from Rosenkranz and thus from Kant and the Prussian and a closed totalitarian state, but we are closer to Georg Lukács (and the brilliant *Der Junge Hegel und die Probleme der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft*, 1954) and Joachim Ritter (and his brilliant *Hegel und die französische Revolution*, 1957) and from there to Ripalda, Jameson, Toscano, Ruda, Vieweg, Žižek, Butler, Malabou and so many current thinkers and friends.

Hegel's Theseus is not someone of flesh and blood, much less someone who embodies anything essential, but neither is Machiavelli's, although at times *Il Principe* may lead us to believe that he is someone concrete, but neither is he a manifestation of any Florentine essential or of any original or primordial Florentine people, for he is always a chance that becomes necessary in the light of the radical freedom that opens up the power of the real in the midst of the material socio-historical fabric of one against the other, in the struggle of one against the other. Theseus is neither a totalitarian nor a reformist subject, but neither is he a subject in the sense of being someone, and the keys to this are given by Machiavelli himself in his *Discorsi*, as Negri realises: „... the republic becomes the body of the prince, the living matter of constituent power. The crisis of political discourse that Machiavelli had experienced between 1512 and 1513, both in the writing of *the Libro delle Repubbliche* and in his personal life, is theoretically overcome“⁹. Now Machiavelli's Theseus, as Hegel knows well three hundred years later, is the republic. The power of the real, freedom is expressed in a foreshortening, in a perspective, in the republic, that is, in the people (or plebs or multitude, the names are various for Machiavelli and indicate certain specific traits in order to show the human that emerges from the freedom of power): “Né si può chiamare in alcun modo, con ragione, una repubblica inordinata, dove siano tanti esempi di virtù; perché li buon esempi nascono dalla buona educazione; la buona educazione, dalle buone leggi; e le buone leggi, da quelli tumulti che molti inconsideratamente dannano: perché, chi esaminerà bene il fine d'essi non troverà ch'egli abbiano partorito alcuno esilio o violenza in disfavore del comune bene, ma leggi e ordini in benefici della publica libertà”¹⁰.

In the tumult, in the revolt, the people as people express their own real movement (thus transforming the instituted); And this movement indicates to us the arrival of history, the irruption of history, with all the pain that this may entail, but, at the same time, as the irruption of the constituent, of the power of the real as freedom that allows the establishment of a certain type of state that necessarily passes through this popular movement and that destabilises the neurotic establishment

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9 Negri 2015, p. 99.

10 Machiavelli 2018, p. 322.

and that operates as a natural representation of the state of things, since nothing changes and all change is basically “gatopardism” so that nothing changes. From the Prince (better with a lower case “prince”) to the people (better with a capital “People”) is what Machiavelli’s Theseus indicates to us, a people that is given as such in the same revolt (*Macht-Gewalt*) and that is born in chance itself and then becomes necessary; for example, in Chile, in October 2019 and which generated a constituent process. It was not Gabriel Boric the Theseus of Chile, but the Chileans in their multiple popular expressions who took to the streets and generated a historic change: an irruption of the power of the real in the contingency itself, and with violence, and that sought the common good of all, even of the opponents (and for that it was necessary to dissolve what was established, what was instituted by Pinochet). A state emerges from its foundations and remains alive to the extent that it is always open and in movement, even if it bleeds (if the state is not like that, it must perish, as the young Hegel would say). A state, precarious and contingent, from a logic, feminine, of the not-all (following Lacan and with it Žižek) and in permanent movement is now the place of truth as a process that passes through WethOthers. Hegel, as early as in his *Phänomenologie* (1807), told us that truth is process; and it is a process, a movement, a historical happening, hand in hand with the confraternity of Dionysos himself, namely the emergence of the people: „Philosophy, on the other hand, does not consider non-essential determination, but insofar as it is essential; its element and its content are not the abstract or unreal, but the real, that which puts itself there and lives in itself, the being there in its concept. It is the process that engenders and runs through its moments, and this movement as a whole constitutes the positive and its truth“¹¹. Theseus cannot be any possible Napoleon (even if a certain Hegel thought so, or Richelieu, who ended up headless and with his beloved cats atrociously dead). Theseus is a signifier that lies the „Name of Theseus“, that is, a function that emerges from a living whole and that does not allow itself to be trapped either in a closed theory of the real, or even less in a reproductive and repetitive praxis that seeks to perpetuate the instituted. Theseus is an operator of the free as a power of the real that opens the labyrinth, from his distance, in which we have lived and, with his fists, destroys that minotaur of an unlived life, of dead work, of dead time: the time of capital. Theseus is an expression of time, of the living time that we give each other, in the revolt itself, so that another time can be created. Theseus is the revolutionary expression of a happening of the living movement of the real and in it of the human. And Gramsci realises this, in the prison of Turi, when he reads *Il Principe*, and that is why he opens this text in its initial exergue: „Il moderno Principe, el mito-Principe non può essere una persona reale, un individuo concreto:

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¹¹ Hegel 1966, pp. 31-32.

può essere solo un organismo, un elemento sociale nel quale già abbia inizio il concretarsi di una volontà collectiva riconosciuta e affermata parzialmente nell'azione"¹².

And that is why Machiavelli does not get lost, like some current theoreticians of social democracy (and obviously of all forms of being conservative, not to speak of right-wing, because sometimes the term no longer says anything), and Machiavelli tells us categorically that: „... li popoli... benché siano ignoranti, sono capaci della verità"¹³; because in the people the real happens as distance and that is expressed in that life of the very praxis of every day that somehow raises a certain theory and with it contingent institution to make possible the articulation between all of WethOthers.

2

New concepts for old problems that repeat themselves to us like an unacceptable farce

How to understand in more detail this Theseus as „people“ in these times, without falling into the problems that the concept of the people has brought us since Machiavelli himself, and which have become more acute with the current Populist Theory since Laclau, with all the modifications that his heirs have made to it?¹⁴ Today, after a pandemic of Covid-19 (but which continues to have all kinds of effects on everyone and on society), the concepts of the human (and of the real itself) of many theoretical frameworks arrive too late or distort the human or misinterpret it as such and cover it up radically (this is constantly done by conservatives, but it is also common practice in many parties and movements that call themselves leftists); these concepts become accomplices of these policies that generate so much rejection and social unrest in many parts of this small planet. And the experience of a 16th century Machiavelli and a 19th century Hegel is repeated, in a way, in the 21st century, where we ask ourselves about this Theseus as a people, but of a people that must be thematised in a more finished form, at the height of these times and with a vision of the real, at the same time, structural as a constitutive and dynamic distance, as movement itself in all its fleeting, contingent becoming, which never closes in any way whatsoever. And far from theories that are no longer valid, because they are part of the

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12 Gramsci 2014

13 Machiavelli 2018, p. 322.

14 Populist theories are even postulated without antagonism and thus a liberal populism is re-founded, see Appleton 2022. Or populism is no longer spoken of, because the signifier already indicates fascism or has a bad press, and the term proletariat is used again to give another twist to Spanish populism, which is sinking day by day: Gómez Villar 2022

very problem to be faced and overcome. Today the subject of the real is no longer thought about, only by phenomenologists and ontologists in a rather old-fashioned way, always since Husserl and Heidegger, and speculative realists in a childish way following Badiou and the sciences, but who do not expressly account for the real in its operation in the midst of the very pain of the precariousness of being a human being.

Moreover, there are many key concepts that are no longer critically rethought. One of these concepts that has been radically devalued is the concept of the “people” of the populist Essex School (Laclau, Mouffe, Stavrakakis), which has had an eminently “Peronist and Christian” background for decades, from Argentina (this is how the almost “religious” phenomenon of Maradona and Cristina in Argentina and other parts of Latin America is currently understood: Evo, Pablo Iglesias, Bolsonaro, etc.), but also from Europe: Meloni, Meloni, Mouffe and Mouffe, but also in Europe: Meloni, Le Pen, Putin, Zelensky, etc.) and which has branched out in Europe thanks to Podemos from Spain to other latitudes. He is a concrete saviour Theseus and in him lies the redemption of the universal itself. In this perspective, it fails to understand the human without its sexed differential character, and without the traits of the mortal and historical and, on the contrary, the human is understood as subsumed in the „universal“ category of a people to be constructed (all populism is an ontology) thanks to the new Christ the Saviour; thus there would be a people to come, a people to be configured insofar as it is constructed by means of its demands, when certain humans become aware of their malaise thanks to the caudillo; for this reason populist theory always arrives late to the neighbourhood and only serves at the beginning to channel the malaise and operates as a strategy of power to win votes (hence its two great associated concepts of hegemony and antagonism), but never takes root in the very material life of each of WethOthers; and then, with the eminent failure (because there is no possible redemption of anything and even less mediated by a new Christ), it generates frustration, distrust and it often happens that the populist voter then ends up voting for the ultra-right as is the case of many communists who support Le Pen in France in the 2022 elections, but this happens in many other places. Populism raises up a-historical flesh-and-blood „Theseos“ who want to bring about the salvation of the people in themselves. And the people seek to recognise themselves in this Theseus and thus to be able to be somebody in life, or rather to be successful, namely recognition in this market-world.

Another of the concepts that have become obsolete, and for what I have pointed out, in this pandemic: it is that of „recognition“ of the Frankfurt School already in its Honneth version, namely „optimistic“ with its idea of progress, already in this fourth generation, that is, „pessimistic“ reflecting critically under the eminent catastrophe to come (Hartmut Rosa, Rahel Jaeggi, etc.). Concretely, understanding the human

in relation to the Other, as a mode of recognition between the two, installs a struggle and a competition to „appear“ successful on the planet and ends up transforming the human as a subject who, as an entrepreneur of himself, tirelessly seeks to be recognised, in a way becomes in a certain value, in commodity of oneself (even if in a „stupid and crude“ way), commodity in the market¹⁵ and, moreover, in this recognition of one with the Other, social democracy will always mediate as the European political institution par excellence, which wants to hegemonise the planet in order to govern and in this way homogenise everyone without any differential; and social democracy is no longer what it was (in the 70s of the last century, that is, the very expression of welfare for all), but is part of the very problem of understanding the European and the human being at the height of the times, that is, as a material differential that constitutes and moves, transits and does not allow itself to be trapped either in the self or in any nation state: we are humans in transit in multiple senses; from LGBTQIA+ sexual diversity to the migrants who constitute us from all the places we arrive: we are mixtures of mixtures and material mixtures, as Gloria Anzaldúa brilliantly points out¹⁶.

The same happens with the proposal made by the phenomenological and ontological School of Freiburg centred on Husserl, but especially on Heidegger (although this German philosopher is nowadays quite „cancelled“ due to his ontological foundation of social nationalism that is clearly seen in his Black Notebooks edited by Peter Trawny), that is, to understand the human as an „open“ phenomenon that is opposed to the determinations of a closed and modern „I“; and with this the human is radically reduced in its very materiality, it is not studied as an animal that has evolved under material conditions over centuries and millennia, but as a categorical or ontological element that in itself opens up from the real itself, „the“ being, without any mediation whatsoever, and this today is totally madness because it leaves us with nothing to do and only waiting for a „God to save us“, as Heidegger pointed out to *Der Spiegel*, interviewed in 1966 and published when he died in 1976 (this is one of the serious problems of Chul-Han and of many ontologists, whether believers or atheists, of which there are many everywhere, in different philosophical academies). And, in the same way, psychoanalysis comes very late today, by establishing the analytical understanding of the human (and with it a cure) from a sexuation normalised from the theory of the phallus, castration and edification in the essential difference of genders (Freud), but centred from the masculine itself and this is done by means of the psychic structure of neurosis (the last Christian and capitalist residue that lives in Freudian

15 See, Brown 2017.

16 See, Anzaldúa 1987.

psychoanalytic theory born at the end of the 19th century); and thus, for example, the classical Freudian psychoanalyst does not know what to do with the feminine, nor does the sexed feminine allow itself to be radically symbolised in a certain Parisian psychoanalytic school (Lacan and Miller): the school of the symbolic, but so little with the clinic of psychosis so typical of the teaching of the real can be given not only with the feminine itself, but with the human (Lacan's greatest achievement was what he did in *Seminar 20*, 1972-1973, Even and pushed the psychoanalytic to the limit of the possible); and so it is left without understanding, these days, let alone dealing with major problems of anguish, for example, rethinking the human, and in it the cure, as queer, trans, etc. It is about new human ways of being that coexist in neighbourhoods with each other, in sexual diversity through which some bodies fit together with others in their own singularities in order to be at ease (and thus to affirm life) and thus to be fulfilled in the midst of this flat neurotic capitalist world that operates, as Hegel would say, as a „natural representation“.

In short, we find WethOthers with an insufficient framework of interpretation of the real and the human (but one that refuses to disappear or change), in the face of the complex developments of the human in our times, both at the level of concepts and methodologically: these theoretical frameworks do not express us in what we are and cannot give a more finished expression of the real. Machiavelli tried his best to show the human in a Florentine material history and to indicate certain features of it, in the 16th century, but it is not enough for our times either; the same is true of everything that Hegel has done since the 19th century and that its effects reach our days via Marx, Lenin, Adorno, Lukács, Jameson, Žižek, Butler, etc., but we must go a step further at the level of concepts. For, as I have said, the existing concepts are inadequate to express the human in its radical material and contingent becoming that constitutes itself from an Other that perforates it as real. And with respect to methodology, one perceives the inadequacy of each of the ways of approaching the problem of the human by expressing it from one of these theories alone, in a unilateral, abstract way and without the development of a theory of the real today¹⁷; and so such theories always arrive too late to the problems that we live among WethOthers in these times that are similar to the problems of the 16th century in Florence, but that are updated at the height of the times and a long time has passed and the material passage in our bodies has been tremendous, continues and will not stop.

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17 "If we think we see a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then we are taking the first term of each of these perceptions as the 'reality' of gender: the gender that is introduced by simile has no 'reality', and is an illusory figure. In perceptions where an apparent reality is linked to an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and we take the second appearance of the genus to be mere artifice, play, falsehood and illusion. However, what is the sense of 'gendered reality' that thus gives rise to such a perception?". Butler 2007, p. 27.

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WethOthers with Hegel, but hand in hand with the dancing thinker Nietzsche to think the real

Faced with the possible social and institutional collapse that this human tide is provoking throughout the capitalist world (so well described since almost a century by Fisher, Žižek, Butler, Jameson, etc.), furthermore, because of the occurrence of this new pandemic and the strengthening of capitalism, the challenge is to see the need for the transformation of the epistemological framework of the conception of the human and the real, which was what Hegel did already at the beginning of the 19th century against all of kantism in its various manifestations (Fichte, Jacobi, Hölderlin, Schelling, etc.). The current concepts that shape the state of the art both in philosophy in general and in social and political philosophy (and also a certain psychoanalysis of the symbolic, cultural studies of the 1980s, certain feminisms such as that of identity, etc.) are still in force, certain feminisms such as that of identity or essence) have remained anchored in „stale“ or useless forms to articulate an ethical-political thought capable of responding to this problem that urges us day by day as inhabitants of this small interconnected planet, in tension and, at the same time, in permanent fragmentation (Machiavelli's world is repeated to us, not like a ghost, but like a nightmare, and it pursues us). The need to change the interpretative framework of the human and thus of the real itself, in order to bring the institution closer to humans (because we must have some kind of institutionality), as Esposito would say, a biopolitical institution, to a new understanding of our being, of the human as an animal / differential (a free animal at a distance): sexual, mortal and historical, and constituted with the Other in a dynamic and mediated tension in its territory, is fundamental. Nietzsche puts it beautifully and metaphorically in aphorism & 60: „Women and their action at a distance“ from *The Gay Science*: „Have I still ears? Am I only ears and nothing more? Here I am in the midst of the burning breaker, whose white flames rise up to lick my feet: - from all sides come towards me howls, threats, cries, shrillness, while in the deepest depth the old earth-shaker sings his aria [seine Arie singt], hoarse as a bellowing bull: and at the same time sets an earth-shaker's rhythm that makes even these monstrous rocks tempered in storms tremble their hearts in their bodies. Then, suddenly, as if born out of nothing, there appears before the portal of this hellish labyrinth, a few fathoms away, - a great sailing ship, gliding silently like a ghost. Oh, that spectral beauty! With what enchantment it catches me!“¹⁸. In that distance, it is the mythical distance of Ariadne (the feminine), which mobilises the bull Dionysos. The human, as an animal, sets out as such (steps out of himself) from the very structural distance that constitutes him, that is, the very freedom of

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¹⁸ Nietzsche 2014, p. 769.

the real; although such freedom causes him much fear and the distance generates a perforation of the human, it is itself what allows the animal human to become what he has to be (as Pindar-Nietzsche would say), that is, a human in and for the Other, even if that Other is part of the very problem that radically frightens him. This human animality that expresses itself in this radical finitude, through the freedom in distance as real that constitutes it, pulsates physically in this differentiability. And it pulsates in and through the Other, any Other. The very distance of the real: it is our radical sexualised mortality.

And Zubiri, the Spanish philosopher, points out something similar (against Heidegger and the phenomenologists and ontologists because they think of the human without body and animality), and he says it in this technical way: "For this reason, what can never happen to an animal, to feel lost in things, can happen to man.... Only man can remain without disorder, lost in things themselves, lost therefore not in the disorder of his responses but in the estrangement of what is felt"¹⁹. The human lives his own animal body at a distance from all things, and from the very real of things, that is, at a distance from things themselves; And this is how the human lives, his own radical animality, and it cannot be otherwise, because, as Nietzsche would say, „in spite of“ this painful distance, because it indicates to us the very openness of everything and the assured essential meaninglessness of nothing, least of all of the human (no religion or ideology can save us from this profound truth), it is because of this that the human can transform all things and in this himself: Formally freeing himself, even though he knows he is mortal, finite, this very thing makes it possible for him to go out of himself, that is, the sex *in actu exercito* of one with the other. This physical and real moment of the human being's radical estrangement is the basis of every possible revolution, which both Machiavelli and Hegel saw in their respective times. And this is how the Theseus of the Others can emerge in these times and which is always actualised for us; it is a Theseus, an animal in distance, not only mortal, sexual, but eminently historical distance from one another.

This structural and dynamic triad, in distance, that I propose to understand the human as: sexual, mortal and historical (and that in an external way Machiavelli thought it and in a reflexive way Hegel turned it), is expressed today not as an individuality that interacts with Other individuality (the liberalism of capitalism always sneaks in through some crack; even Agamben gets it through his thoughts), but as a material and virtually mediated socio-historical fabric (by all means of interaction from texts to images and digitalisation; from Machiavelli's letters and books to today's Instagram and social networks); such mediation is expressed dynamically anchored to well-determined territories; it is no

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¹⁹ Zubiri 1980, pp. 70-71.

longer possible to speak abstractly in any possible way. And the signifier „human“ expresses „human“ and, in turn, „human“ indicates determined territories dynamically open²⁰ in freedom; never closed or totalising territories.

Finding new conceptual and methodological tools that are adapted to the permanent emergence of a new human that emerges (the best way to understand and update Nietzsche today and make him part of our Critical Theory) have made certain conceptual ways of articulating theories with respect to the praxis in which we live (which was Machiavelli's great legacy and Hegel half realised it in the *Phänomenologie*, but especially brilliantly in the *Wissenschaft* and, in particular, in his third book of 1816: *Die Lehre vom Begriff*; a text that allows us to understand his *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, 1820, with that masterly Preface that opens the book); all theory goes hand in hand with praxis, and it is praxis that opens up theory and makes it always contingent and precarious (it arrives late, as Hegel says, but it arrives all the same), but not unnecessarily, quite the contrary, because it allows us to think the present, this here (this Rhodes, as Hegel says in the Preface), in this Dionysian dance of life that is slipping through our hands. This is what Machiavelli tried to do over and over again five centuries ago, and it is what we have to do today in the face of our problems. And it is what Gramsci is very clear about, imprisoned and ill in Turi: “Si giunge così anche all'eguaglianza o equazione tra 'filosofia e politica', tra pensiero e azione, cioè ad una filosofia de la praxis. Tutto è politica, anche la filosofia o le filosofie... e la sola 'filosofia' è la storia in atto, cioè è la vita stessa”²¹.

3

WethOthers... this is how we revolutionise ourselves today

For this, the philosophical concept that I propose to carry it out is, as I have said, and I have already been using it in this own writing, is that of „NosOtros“ and I have been working on it for many years and which is synthesised in my latest books (Espinoza Lolas, *Capitalismo y empresa. Hacia una Revolución del NosOtros*, 2018 and *NosOtros. Manual to Dissolve Capitalism*, 2019)²². This “NosOtros” could be expressed in English as “WethOthers” (following Carlos Gómez Camarena's translation for the first Routledge edition of: *The Marx and Lacan Vocabulary*, where I wrote the Revolution entry)²³. This concept expresses

20 Lacan puts it this way: “... la raíz del no-toda es que ella esconde un goce diferente del goce fálico, el goce llamado estrictamente femenino, que no depende en absoluto de aquel”. Lacan 1975, p. 101.

21 Gramsci 2014, p. 886.

22 Espinoza 2022.

23 See Soto van der Plas et al 2022.

the human today in the real itself as distance as it happens materially; and allows us to understand this new way of being that has risen rapidly in pandemic across Europe, the planet; and this human, who is WethOthers, is here to stay.

The philosophical construct of “WethOthers” allows us, contrary to certain theories, to look at the human materially and from a conception of the real: an animal perforated in its stimulus, expelled from the animal paradise of stimuli that assures us how we should behave, then at a distance from things and therefore free (even if this causes dread for the human animal). And in this we see, as I have already indicated above, a double dimension: one structural and the other dynamic (synchronic and diachronic at the same time). On the structural side, the human animal that radically emerges in these times of capitalism and pandemic is sexed (our bodies materially pulsate in a constitutive passivity and activity): hence we are all queer or if we want to pervert the very limits that are imposed on us as if they were absolutely determined), something of this drive was studied by Freud and psychoanalysis since *Die Traumdeutung* of 1900 (although it was published in 1899) as the very material and constitutive element of the human animal (against all centuries-old European interpretation of the “spiritual” character of the human as self, spirit, conscience, etc., which denied the materiality of the human as 'self, spirit, conscience, etc. which denied the materiality of the human being in its pulsar, in its sexuality²⁴ and, moreover, against every religious ideological vision to subjugate and dominate the human being). It is mortal (we are finite and radically expired), as Heidegger studied in an existential analytical, that is, ontological way in his *Sein und Zeit* of 1927 (but it is a human that is neither born nor materially has a body and, therefore, neither suffers, nor feeds, nor gets sick, nor is it a work force, nor dies like animals) and, finally, it is historical (our only transcendence is that of the human), it is historical (our only transcendence is the immanent sediment of layers and layers of human residue, of human logics that are passed and passed through, like mud, without ever avoiding the pain to the Other that this brings about, a history that constitutes us) as the twilight Adorno, one who no longer believes in revolution, radically showed in his *Negative Dialektik* of 1966. The human is sexed, mortal and historical, but this is not enough to realise what we are as a Theseus of the Self in the 21st century, because we need to understand ourselves dynamically; this is where everything that we are today as animals in free distance is at stake.

A human among Other humans and, in this dynamic tension (a way of understanding the perverse beyond neurosis and classical psychoanalysis and as a dynamic operator of what we are:

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24 “The unconscious is a thought process, and it is ,sexualized' from within, so to say”, as Ruda and Hamza masterfully point out to Zupan i 2019, p. 440.

revolutionaries), the human is no longer viewed from any category associated with the self (we are out of the Labyrinth of Modernity), because any attempt to imprison it in some prison is doomed to failure, and neither can it be imprisoned in the trap of the nation state (Hegel clearly realised this, and remained faithful to it, in his revolutionary character); This is why the Dieter Henrich edition of the *Grundlinien* is important to understand that Hegel was never a Prussian to the end) and that what was known in Latin America, in Africa, in the East and now also in Europe is a fact: multiple nations and no state, multiple humans without nations, etc. We humans are a mixture of mixtures in the midst of the real as distance, and this has been seen and experienced in every European neighbourhood for many centuries, and the same in the East and in Latin America, not to mention the Anglo-Saxon world of the USA and the UK. It is human in differential tension at a distance and in mixture with Others, it is free par excellence, it is an expression of power (*Macht*), even of violence (*Gewalt*) and it does not allow itself to be trapped in any categorisation (it perverts all the laws that are imposed on it in a naturalised way). It is not, then, the power (freedom) of Theseus as Theseus, which never allows itself to be expressed in what Agamben thinks of as a certain way of happening in and of itself, nor like Balibar who seeks a correlative sphere to find power and the human, nor like Negri who tries to construct this power from life itself, as if this were something, a kind of substratum.

The human in its sexuation, in its mortality, in its history goes with other humans articulated in a constitutive way, therein lies its freedom and therein lies the constituent power of the real. This Other that constitutes us gives us a dynamic characteristic: we are always in transit of its own and we cannot not be; we are human in „trans“ and for this reason I do not believe it is necessary to write the signifier „NosOtrxs“ (in Spanish) with „X“ or another way of expressing the differential (I see it as an error of a certain heideggerianism that wants to express the differential trace itself and that perforates the Derrideans). The human is in itself a socio-historical material fabric insofar as it is free and, at times, violent; in this dynamism, in this plasticity, the human animal happens today in a free distance and happens with the Other insofar as it is revolutionary. And it happens as a living and tense dynamic structure that expresses itself materially in its territories, which we can glimpse through public spaces, through social networks, through works of art, through aesthetic expressions that express the bodies, our „unconscious“; Technologists, network users, artists operate as an essential part of this mediation that makes it possible for us to see how this WethOthers happens today in the midst of a territory determined by material conditions, by multiple traces, tattoos, revolutionary flags, songs, couplings of bodies and between bodies; by a certain pain or trauma that constitutes it and that, at the same time, operates as a

moment that is assumed and never completely resolved, that is dragged along as a certain „remainder“. And nowadays, in short, this materiality of the human animal is mediated along with art by the virtual itself, from the Mass Media to the social networks, passing through the Smartphone and its power of material digitalisation²⁵.

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We, the mortal, sexed and historical animals who are coupled with each other: we love each other politically, but with Sade.

The human being is an animal at a distance, that is, free (hence its dread of existence unlike other animals), structurally mortal, sexed and historical, but at the same time it is dynamically a social fabric that lives and builds tensely and sometimes violently a present; and is thus bound to a past that sustains it and opens itself to a future to come. The material structure, without any sense of the real, of the human animal is eminently temporal in its dynamism. A temporality that, by mediating us with one another, constructs us sexually free and differential, as Butler points out very well in her 1999 book *Gender Trouble* (although Butler herself had to correct her book due to the criticisms that were made of it, because it seemed to defend a certain essentialism of gender) and, at the same time, in this mediated dynamism we are also ideologised, our unconscious is totally captured and it is in this capitalist ideologisation, it is its truth, as Žižek constantly points out in all his work, as in his now classic *The Sublime Object of Ideology* of 1989. And that's why art and current social technologies in some of their manifestations, but even in the capitalist botch-ups (such as Facebook), serve us to see what we are as WethOthers today; and in this way to be able to revolutionise the establishment in which we live (in that naturalised symbolic that operates by neurotising us and dictates to us like a “father” what to do, what to think and what to expect): We are emancipatory “trans” perverts who, from the streets, whether empirical or virtual, rise up with each other, sometimes in permanent struggle, not only to resist all capitalist, patriarchal, colonial normalisation, but to insist on and revolutionise the system itself. This was clearly seen in the work of the Chilean artists Las Tesis and their critique of the state through the performance “Un violador en tu camino” (inspired by the work of Rita Segato).

This human, free and suffering, structural and dynamic animal that inhabits concrete material territories (and that always inhabits them mediated by the virtual that constitutes and empowers it) behaves like an animal that has to realise its own freedom (this is the great theme of Machiavelli and Hegel), as Xavier Zubiri emphatically points out in

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²⁵ See, Castells 2009.

his Trilogy of *Sentient Intelligence: Intelligence and Reality; Intelligence and Logos* and *Intelligence and Reason* of 1980-1983. We are in a material phenomenology, which embodies Heideggerian ontology. Zubiri, like a Spanish Deleuze, but more conceptual in his work, like Spinoza, shows us how the human is the realisation of the freedom of the real in the midst of all the complexities of the human and to some extent thanks to it. Herein lies his problem as a human animal, which is becoming more acute today: how does this human animal organise itself freely with others and accept its radical differential that constitutes it without allowing violence to act among WethOthers? Is it possible for freedom as power to be non-violent? If the State violates us, a certain State, with its mythical violence, a State that is We WethOthers as a mere us that violates us and synthesises us in order to govern us as a herd and in this we are sodomised so that we produce in the normalised machinery of the production and distribution of capital, of colonial subjugation and patriarchal domination, we are left with this animality of this Treatise, we are left with the animality of this Theseus of the Others that is actualised in the skin and there, in the bodies, is the violence that Benjamin called messianic, but which in truth has nothing theological about it, but rather the immanence of bodies sexually, mortally and historically coupled with one another, we see a violence that emerges and says Nietzscheanly: Yes, again! And in this actualisation, the instituted is partly dissolved and space is made for the construction of new values.

This requires the design and implementation of new territorial spaces, new modes of interaction, collaboration and social deliberation that rearticulate the sexed, mortal and historical human as a socio-historical material fabric from the smallest to the largest community scales: from the differential marginalities to the everyday relationships of all kinds that occur, for example, in the neighbourhood. And it is from these socio-historical relationships that the processes of belonging to the territories, to the neighbourhoods, and the well-being and life in common of the „WethOthers“ are generated, but never without conflict; to postulate this is really absurd and shows that we know nothing about the human, neither before nor now, and that we do not understand how the real operates as distance and in it freedom and power. All idealisation of the human, against which Machiavelli and Gramsci have always fought, must fall under its own weight, because it has been part of the very problem of all politics to express the human from an erroneous conception of the ethical, totally romanticised and idealised of what we are, of what things are, in short, of what the real itself is.

Since it postulates a formally distant, non-specific, collective, networked, material, animal human with structural components (sexuality, mortality and history) and dynamic components (the Other as a relational component of the configuration of humans), it is possible to understand how all kinds of transformation happen to us. Not only does the

WethOthers aim to explore and describe the structural components of the social human that is permanently articulated by its dynamic components, but it also proposes and creates new political conceptual frameworks, conceived as new forms of democratic legitimization of citizenship. And this can be seen today in the politics of: Chile and Colombia, in different social movements, trade unions, marginalised collectives, LGTBIQA+, nations without states, original peoples, migrants of all kinds that break the borders of nation states, groupings of all kinds through social networks, mixtures of mixtures of humans: welcome the perverse, the abject, the precarious, the surplus, the marginalised, the poor of all kinds, the losers, the queers, the mestizos, the borderers, the weirdos, the freaks, the inhabitants of a country that does not exist, the walkers and their shadow, those who make the path by walking Machado's way, the monsters who do not let themselves be represented, those who transit, Brecht's indispensable, the betrayed, the imprisoned, the psychiatrised, the free spirits like Nietzsche, the radical materialists like Freud, those who do not ask but do, those who defy the established, those who in these times of capitalism love, the dancers, those who laugh, eat and drink, those who have been cursed, those who dream, the weak, the fragmented, those who have been tortured, those who have been humiliated, those who have had their bones broken, those who write with inks of blood and laughter, the polignanesi, the children of Sade.

Conclusion

Revolutionary animals perverting all the limits of the instituted in the very contingency of the real

It is neither a matter of substratum nor of correlation, every substratum is „founded“ on a correlation (in this, speculative realism is right), but contrary to what Meillassoux thinks, this correlation is „given“ in the real as difference (as Heidegger saw it, hand in hand with Nietzsche; and, in particular, Derrida among many other 20th century authors); and, furthermore, difference „happens“ from the very distance that perforates us as free human animals who live in the midst of a meaningless, precarious materiality and in the very contingency of our doing with Others.

The real is not in the double game that Meillassoux wants to point out to us in his *After Finitude* (2006). It is not a question of substance and correlate, two modes that articulate the real and the human in the course of history (obviously past Kant as read by Badiou) and of a rather infantilised and idealised history (between science and philosophy) by means of what expresses this „in itself“ or absolute or real. Least of all is the fact that we must today overcome the horizon of the correlate in all its manifestations in order to think a real in contingency: „Before the transcendental, one of the questions that could decisively break the deadlock between two rival philosophers was the following: which one thinks the true substance: is it the philosopher who thinks the Idea, the

individual, the atom, God, what God? After Kant, and since Kant, to break the tie between two rival philosophers is no longer a question of which one thinks the true substantiality but of which one thinks the most original correlation: is it the thinker of the subject-object correlation, of the noetic-noematic correlation, of the language-reference correlation? The question is no longer: what is the just substratum? But what is the right correlate? (...) But our purpose was not to deal here with the resolution itself. It was not a question, for us, of trying to convince that it was not only possible to rediscover the absolute scope of thought, but that this was urgent, because of the abyssal divorce between the Copernicanism of science and the Ptolemaism of philosophy, whatever the negations on which this schizophrenia rests... It remains to hope that the problem of ancestry will awaken us from our correlational dream and engage us to reconcile thought and absolute²⁶. Just as Kubrick tells us the history of humanity with the most famous ellipsis in the history of cinema in his *2001: A Space Odyssey* (and he does so in order not to waste time with a story already known and rather boring for everyone): from hominisation, to the deadly club, to the space flight to the Moon in order to understand what happens in the call of the Monolith to the human, I have tried to do the same with this thought by Meillassoux. Basically a very boring book because it tells us the obvious that we already know from a certain idealised history of ideas, as I said; in that Kubrick is more astute, he goes to the end, while Meillassoux stays right at the human's journey to the dark side of the Moon and there, in that place, he apparently stays and doesn't move forward. It is not a question of substratum and correlate and of getting out of the correlate to the real in another way (Hegel already solved that, but not Badiou's Hegel in his book), as contingency; in that the French philosopher is trapped and lost in Ariadne's Labyrinth. One has to take the step, as an attempt in this writing of the political, of understanding the real from this way of understanding the human in its very contingency that happens to it in its political life in the real (and in this Nietzsche is the master to follow), although for some philosophers this is anti-philosophy (that which is called 'anti' is, perhaps, the only philosophical way of expressing the real as distance in the very contingency of what happens to us), because it is the way out of the Labyrinth, for it is a precarious contingency that constitutes us biographically from the material itself, which always perforates us at a distance and which is actualised in a constitutive movement, with all the material history that it lies (with all its error within itself, Machiavelli is another master in this), in a somatic here with the Other, therefore no longer substrate, no longer correlate, no longer exit from the correlate, but in the distance of the real, a life that revolutionises the established. And which expresses itself in the „scriptural“ mode of philosophy.

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26 Meillassoux 2021, pp. 30, 204.

We are strictly animals of revolutions (even if this statement annoys all kinds of conservatives), because beforehand in our distance from all things we are physically and materially open to realise our desire in some way, even if it is totally precarious and contingent; and this itself is the pain of being a human animal (for we are always bleeding, our animality festering) and also shows all that permanent conflict implies in the midst of a meaningless materiality where even capitalism functions in a naturalised way. And that is why Machiavelli is not lost, like some current theorists of social democracy (and obviously of all forms of conservatives, not to speak of the right, because sometimes the term no longer says anything), and Machiavelli tells us categorically: „... the people... even if they are ignorant, they are capable of truth“²⁷.

And this is possible because we are an Other as Other, we are inexorably a WethOthers; we are at a distance from ourselves and that is a life in its everydayness and present. The best structural-constitutive definition of man is to be a We-Us; and the best dynamic-operative definition is to be Revolutionary; it is impossible to be a human animal that is not revolutionising the system that constitutes it (perverts it); for it would not be human. And here lies the very possibility of dissolution of capitalism, that is, in our human way of being viable in the world by being physically and materially open from our body, our feeling to humans, to things: this constitutive distance is what allows us to be free and in this the constituent power is activated and, at times, the very violence of change becomes inevitable. Hegel himself is emphatic in telling us that it is a right „... the right of rebellion against the order that denies all realisation to the will of free persons“²⁸.

If Nietzsche, in the 19th century, was at war against Christianity because it had depowered the human and locked it in „Ariadne's Labyrinth“ (that is, Modernity, with its heavy self); in my case I am at war against capitalism, in the 21st century, because it has sickened us in such a way that today "We hate the Other in its very difference"; and that is why this WethOthers intends that you, my reader, can awaken and dissolve the Other in its very difference, my reader, may wake up and dissolve this Labyrinth in which you have lived; and assume, with all the pain of knowing yourself to be finite, in this simple life, because there is no other life than the one we have and that life happens in and through the Other that constitutes us in the very distance of the real. This WethOthers, in short, speaks to us of how it is possible today for us to love one another. And we love one another "in the same boat" of our bodies tattooed through our socio-history and which opens us up to a possible emancipation that revolutionises everything; and so we pervert

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27 Machiavelli 2018, p. 322.

28 Hegel 1983, S. 20.

what we have been told about each other, because everyone is from an Other that happens to us sexually and, in particular, when we make love to one another to give of ourselves Centaurs, although this is painful, it is how we continue to be what we are always at the height of the times.

And as Anzaldúa says, many years ago already (1987), that WethOthers, in distance, is expressed in a different, Nietzschean way of writing, to indicate our emancipatory character from all limits in the limits themselves: „Borders are designed to define the places that are safe and those that are not, to distinguish the us (us) from them (them). A border is a dividing line, a thin stripe along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague, undefined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. Its inhabitants are the forbidden and the banned. There live the crossed: the cross-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the problematic, the street pimps, the mulatto, the mixed race, the half-dead; in short, those who cross, who pass over or cross the confines of ‚normal‘“²⁹.

And what Anzaldúa tells us is our philosophy of the real and for a policy of mixtures for these times. And its mode of expression is a „Nietzschean“ philosophy, that is, in simple terms articulated with the „literary“ (in the broad sense), that is, the human, the differential, the psychoanalytic, the feminine, the aesthetic, the social, what perverts us and makes us break the limits of an abstract and patriarchal real fallen from the „heaven of the philosophers“; and that it is that distance that happens to us in the very contingent and breaks us, displaces our limits. It is not an antiphilosophy, as Badiou thinks, but on the contrary, it is the philosophy par excellence to express that real at a distance that perforates us and constitutes our radical contingency (what Hegel calls Rhodes or Dance, the „here“ in *Grundlinien*: that town of Machiavelli's *Discorsi*).

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²⁹ Anzaldúa 2016, p. 42.

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Which Politics are Necessary in the Age of Ecological Crisis?

Michael Löwy

Abstract: The dominant politics of today are the politics at the service of the accumulation of capital, and the maximization of profit. The politics of almost all governments and mainstream parties, are “politics as usual” – the political equivalent of “business as usual” in the economic area. These politics are leading humanity, with increasing speed, to a catastrophe without precedent: climate change. There is a desperate need for a radically different sort of politics, a political program and a political strategy which take into account the seriousness of the ecological crisis and the dramatic threat it represents for human life on this planet. This paper discusses the possibilities of radical political alternatives to our present situation.

Keywords: politics, eco-socialism, humanity, catastrophes.

Politics are always possible! As long as there are human societies, there are politics...For the best and the worse.

The question should rather be: which politics should we have today? Which politics are necessary in the age of ecological crisis – or catastrophe?

The dominant politics of today are the politics at the service of the accumulation of capital, and the maximization of profit. The politics of almost all governments and mainstream parties, are “politics as usual” – the political equivalent of “business as usual” in the economic area. These politics are leading humanity, with increasing speed, to a catastrophe without precedent: climate change. There is a desperate need for a radically different sort of politics, a political program and a political strategy which take into account the seriousness of the ecological crisis and the dramatic threat it represents for human life on this planet.

We need *radical political alternatives*. “Radical” comes from the Latin word *radix*, “the root”; radical politics are those who deal with the root of the problem: the modern capitalist civilization, the dominant economic and political system, on global scale. Radical politics are therefore anti-capitalist, anti-systemic ones.

Ecosocialism is a political current based on an essential insight: the preservation of the ecological equilibrium of the planet and therefore, of an environment favorable to living species – including ours – is incompatible with the expansive and destructive logic of the capitalist system. The pursuit of “progress” and “growth” under the aegis of capital will lead us, in short range - the next decades – to a catastrophe without precedent in human history: global warming.

James Hansen, NASA’s chief climatologist, one of the greatest world specialists on the issue of climate change – the Bush administration tried, in vain, to prevent him from publishing his investigations - wrote this in the first paragraph of his book *Storms of*

my Grandchildren. The truth about the coming climate catastrophe and our last chance to save humanity (2009) : “Planet Earth, creation, the world in which civilization developed, the world with climate patterns that we know and stable shorelines, is in imminent peril. The urgency of the situation crystallized only in the past few years. We have now clear evidence of the crisis (...). The startling conclusion is that continued exploitation of all fossil fuels on Earth threatens not only the other millions of species on the planet but also the survival of humanity itself – and the timetable is shorter than we thought ». ¹

This understanding is largely shared, across lands and continents. In a well-informed essay, *How the Rich Destroy the Planet*, the French ecologist Hervé Kempf gives us a true picture of the disaster being prepared: beyond a certain threshold, which may arrive much sooner as predicted, the climate system may runaway in an irreversible way; one cannot exclude a sudden and brutal change, with temperature rising by several degrees, attaining unbearable levels. Faced with this knowledge, confirmed by the scientists, and shared by millions of citizens around the world, what are doing the powerful, the oligarchy of billionaires that rules world economy? The social system that presently dominates human societies, capitalism, blindly and stubbornly resists the changes that are indispensable if one wishes to preserve for human existence its dignity. A predatory and greedy ruling class refuses any attempt of an effective transformation; almost all the spheres of power and influence are submitted to a pseudo-realism that pretends that any alternative is impossible and that the only way forward is “growth”. This oligarchy, obsessed by conspicuous consumption – as already described by Thorstein Veblen many years ago – is indifferent to the degradation of living conditions for the majority of human beings and blind to the seriousness of the biosphere’s poisoning.²

The planetary ecological crisis, which is a crisis of civilization, has its most threatening expression in the phenomena of global warming. Result of the accumulation of greenhouse gases - mainly carbon dioxide – released on the atmosphere by fossil fuels – oil, coal – the process of climate change is a challenge without precedent in the history of humanity. What will happen if the temperature of the planet rises above 2° C? The risks are known, thanks to the works of the IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: rise in the level of the seas, with the risk of submerging most maritime towns of human civilisation, from Dacca in Bangladesh to Amsterdam, Venice or New York. Desertification in gigantic scale: the Saharian desert could arrive

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¹ Hansen 2009, p. IX.

² Kempf 2008. See also his other important book Kempf 2009.

till Rome. Lack of drinking water. “Natural” catastrophes – hurricanes, inundations, etc. – with growing frequency and intensity. One could continue with the list. At which temperature - 5, 6 or 7° C - will the planet cease to be inhabitable by our species? Unfortunately, we do not dispose at the moment of a replacement planet in the existing universe known to the astronomers...

What is highly worrying is that this process of global warming is taking place at a much faster pace than predicted. The accumulation of carbon dioxide, the rise in temperature, the melting of the polar ice and of the “eternal snow” of the mountains, the droughts, the inundations: everything is happening very quickly, and the balance-sheets of the scientists, as soon as the ink of the documents has dried, appear already to optimistic. One doesn’t talk anymore of what will happen by 2100, but of what is waiting us in the next ten, twenty, thirty years.

The “politics as usual” of the planet’s “decision makers” – billionaires, managers, bankers, investors, ministers, business executives, and “experts” – are shaped by the short-sighted and narrow-minded rationality of the system. Obsessed by the imperatives of growth and expansion, the struggle for market positions, competitiveness and the margins of profit, they seem to follow the precept proclaimed by the King Louis XV a few years before the French Revolution: “After me, the Flood”. The Flood of the 21 century may take the form, like the one in the Biblical mythology, of an inexorable rise of the waters, drowning under the waves the coastal towns of human civilization.

The spectacular failure of all international conferences on climate change – Copenhagen, Paris, Glasgow – illustrates this voluntary blindness: the greatest polluters, beginning with the US, China, Canada and Australia, refuse any commitment to a substantial reduction of CO2 emissions. The weak measures taken so far by the more “enlightened” capitalist governments – the Kyoto agreements, and the European climate-action package, with their “flexibility mechanisms” and emission trade schemes – are quite unable to confront the dramatic challenge of climate change. The same applies to the “technological” solutions privileged by the US and the European Union: “electric cars”, “agro-fuels”, “clean carbon”, and so on. As Marx predicted in *The German Ideology*, productive forces in capitalism are becoming destructive forces, creating the risk of physical annihilation for millions of human beings – a scenario even worse than the “tropical holocausts” of the 19th century, studied by Mike Davis.

One word about another marvelous, “clean and secure” technology, favored not only by the powers that be but also, unfortunately, by some ecologists as an alternative to fossil resources: nuclear energy...After the terrifying accident of Chernobyl (1986), the Western atomic lobby had found the answer: this is the result of the bureaucratic, incompetent and inefficient management of nuclear plants in the Soviet Union. “Such

a thing couldn't happen among us". Well, after the recent accident in Fukushima (2011), this kind of argument lost all currency: TEPCO, the owners of the Japanese nuclear plant, were one of the largest private capitalist enterprises in the country. The fact is that insecurity is inherent to nuclear energy: accidents are statistically inevitable. Sooner or later, new Chernobyl's and new Fukushima's, will take place, provoked by human errors, internal disfunctions, earth-quakes, tsunamis, airplane accidents, or other unpredictable events. Moreover, if one wishes to replace fossil-fueled plants by nuclear ones on a world scale, this would mean the building of hundreds of new such plants, increasing inevitably the probability of more accidents.

What is the alternative solution? What politics could confront the challenge? Individual asceticism and penitence, as so many ecologists seem to propose? The drastic reduction of consumption? The cultural criticism of consumerism is necessary but insufficient: one has to challenge the *mode of production* itself. Only a collective and democratic reorganization of the productive system could, at the same time, satisfy the real social needs, reduce labor time, suppress useless and/or dangerous productions, replace fossil energies by renewable ones. All this requires deep incursions in capitalist propriety, a radical extension of the public sector, and of gratuity, in one word, a democratic eco-socialist plan.

The central premise of eco-socialist politics, already suggested by the term itself, is that a non-ecological socialism is a dead-end, and a non-socialist ecology is unable to confront the present ecological crisis. The eco-socialist proposition of combining the "red" – the Marxist critique of capital and the project of an alternative society – and the "green", the ecological critique of productivism, has nothing to do with the so-called "red-green" governmental coalitions between social-democrats and certain Green parties, on the basis of a social-liberal program of capitalist management. Eco-socialism distinguishes itself both from the productivist varieties of socialism in the 20th century – either social-democracy or the Stalinist brand of "communism" – as from the ecological currents that accommodate themselves, in one way or another, to the capitalist system. It is radical political proposition that aims not only at the transformation of the relations of production, of the productive apparatus and of the dominant consumption patterns, but to create a new way of life, a new civilizational paradigm, breaking with the foundations of the modern Western capitalist/industrial civilization.

Eco-socialism is an attempt to provide a radical political alternative, based on the arguments of the ecological movement, and on the Marxist critique of political economy. It opposes to the capitalist destructive progress (Marx) a policy founded on non-monetary criteria: the social needs and the ecological equilibrium. It is at the same time a critique of "market ecology, which does not challenge the capitalist system, and of "productivist socialism", which ignores the issue of natural limits.

Democratic ecological planning, where the main decisions are taken by the population itself – and not by “the market” or by a Politburo – is one of the key dimensions of eco-socialism.

In the Great Transition to this new way of life, to a new mode of production and consumption, entire sectors of the productive system are to be suppressed - beginning with the fossil energies responsible for climate change – or restructured, new ones have to be developed, under the necessary condition of full employment for all the labour force, in equal conditions of work and wage. This condition is essential, not only because it is a requirement of social justice, but in order to assure the workers support for the process of structural transformation of the productive forces. This process is impossible without public control over the means of production, and planning, i.e. public decisions on investment and technological change, which must be taken away from the banks and capitalist enterprises in order to serve society's common good.

Society itself, and not a small oligarchy of property-owners – nor an elite of techno-bureaucrats – of will be able to choose, democratically, which productive lines are to be privileged, and how much resources are to be invested in education, health or culture. The prices of goods themselves would not be left to the “laws of offer and demand” but, to some extent, determined according to social and political options, as well as ecological criteria, leading to taxes on certain products, and subsidized prices for others. Ideally, as the transition to socialism moves forward, more and more products and services would be distributed free of charge, according to the will of the citizens. Far from being “despotic” in itself, planning is the exercise, by a whole society, of its freedom: freedom of decision, and liberation from the alienated and reified “economic laws” of the capitalist system, which determined the individuals' life and death, and enclosed them in an economic “iron cage” (Max Weber). Planning and the reduction of labor time are the two decisive steps of humanity towards what Marx called “the kingdom of freedom”. A significant increase of free time is in fact a condition for the democratic participation of the working people in the democratic discussion and management of economy and of society.

A few words on the history of eco-socialism. They concern mainly the eco-Marxist tendency, but one can find in Murray Bookchin's *Anarchist Social Ecology*, in Arne Naess leftist version of *Deep Ecology*, and among certain “degrowth” authors (Giorgio Kallis), radically anti-capitalist analysis and alternative solutions that are not too far from eco-socialism.

The idea of an ecological socialism – or a socialist ecology – didn't start really to develop until the 1970's, when it appears, under different forms, in the writings of certain pioneers of a “Red-Green” way of thinking: Manuel Sacristan (Spain), Raymond Williams (UK), André Gorz and Jean-Paul Déléage (France), Rachel Carson and Barry Commoner (US), Wolfgang Harich (German Democratic Republic) and others. The word

“eco-socialism” apparently began to be used mainly after the 1980's when appeared, in the German Green Party, a leftist tendency which designated itself as “eco-socialist”; its main spokespersons were Rainer Trampert and Thomas Ebermann. At the same time appears the book *The Alternative*, by an East-German dissident, Rudolf Bahor, which develops a radical critique of the Soviet and GDR model, in the name of an ecological socialism. During the 1980's the US economist James O'Connor will develop in his writings a new Marxist ecological approach, and create the Journal *Capitalism, Nature and Socialism*. During the same years Frieder Otto Wolf, Member of the European Parliament, and one of the main leaders of the left-wing of the German Green Party, will write, together with Pierre Juquin, a former French Communist leader converted to the Red-Green perspective, a book called *Europe's Green Alternative*, (Montréal, 1992, Black Rose), a sort of first eco-socialist European program. Meanwhile, in Spain, followers of Manuel Sacristan such as Francisco Fernandez Buey, will develop, in the Barcelona Journal *Mientras Tanto*, socialist ecological arguments. In 2001, a Marxist/revolutionary current present in several countries, the Fourth International (founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938), will adopt an eco-socialist resolution, *Ecology and Socialist Revolution*, at its World Congress. In the same year, Joel Kovel and the author of this essay will publish an *International Eco-socialist Manifesto*, which will be widely discussed. A *Second Eco-Socialist Manifesto*, discussing global warming, the Belem Declaration, signed by hundreds of persons from dozens of countries, will be distributed at the World Social Forum in Belem, State of Para, Brazil, in 2009. A few months later, during the UN International Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen, eco-socialists will issue an illustrated comic-strip, *Copenhagen 2049*, among the 100 thousand demonstrators under the banner “Change the System, not the Climate!”. In 2020, eco-socialists from several countries founded the Global Ecosocialist Network.

To this one has to add, in the US, the work of John Bellamy Foster, Fred Magdoff, Paul Burkett and their friends from the well-known North-American left Journal *Monthly Review*, who argue for a Marxist ecology; the continued activity of *Capitalism, Nature and Socialism*, under the editorship of Joel Kovel, the author of *The Enemy of Nature* (2002), and, more recently, of Salvatore Engel Di Mauro; the young circle of activists called *Eco-socialist Horizons* (Quincy Saul), who recently edited an eco-socialist comic-strip *Truth and Dare* (2014); not to mention many important books, among which one of the most inclusive is Chris Williams *Ecology and Socialism* (2010). Equally important, in other countries: the eco-socialist/eco-feminist writings of Ariel Salleh and Terisa Turner; the Journal *Canadian Dimension*, edited by eco-socialists Ian Angus and Cy Gornik; the writings of the Belgian Marxist Daniel Tanuro on climate change and the dead-end of “green capitalism”; the research of French authors linked to the Global Justice movement, such as Jean-

Marie Harribey; the philosophical writings of Arno Münster, an eco-socialist follower of Ernst Bloch and André Gorz; the recent *Manifeste Ecosocialiste* (2014) edited by a committee of activists belonging to the radical wing of the French Front de Gauche (Left Front), and the European Eco-socialist Conference which took place in Geneva (2014).

It would be a mistake to conclude that eco-socialism is limited to Europe and North-America: there is a lively eco-socialist activity and discussion in Latin America. In Brazil a local Eco-socialist Network has been established, with scholars and activists from various parties, unions and peasant movements; in Mexico, there have been several publications discussing eco-socialism. The well-known Peruvian revolutionary leader Hugo Blanco has been active in the International Eco-socialist Network, emphasizing the common agenda of the indigenous movements and eco-socialism. And recently (2014) there have been eco-socialist Conferences in Quito and Caracas. Last but not least: there is a growing interest for eco-socialism in China, where the books of Bellamy Foster and Joel Kovel have been translated, and several conferences on eco-socialism took place in the last few years, organized by Chinese universities.

It is important to emphasize that eco-socialism is a project for the future, a horizon of the possible, a radical anti-capitalist alternative, but also, and inseparably, an agenda of *political action hic et hunc*, here and now. The eco-socialist strategy aims at the convergence of social and ecological struggles around concrete and immediate proposals. Any victories, however partial and limited, that slow down climate change and ecological degradation, are stepping stones for more victories: they develop our confidence and organization to push for more. There is no guarantee for the triumph of the eco-socialist alternative; there is very little to be expected from the powers that be. The only hope are the mobilizations from below, like in Seattle in 1999, which saw the coming together of “turtles” (ecologists”) and “teamsters” (trade-unionists”), and the birth of the Global Justice movement; or like in Copenhagen 2009, when 100 thousand demonstrators gathered around the battle cry “Change the System, not the Climate”; or in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2010, when 30 thousand delegates from indigenous, peasant, unionist and ecologist movements from Latin America and the world participated at the People’s Conference on Climate Change in the Defense of Mother Earth.

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In the Silences of the Catastrophe: From the Standpoint of Reproduction

Natalia Romé

Abstract: The post-apocalyptic atmosphere seems to have imposed its presence even in the field of critical theory. In this essay I explore the theoretical and political resources of social reproduction theory in order to find a way out of the conceptual impasse of the presentist ideology of catastrophe and to open an interrogation about the just analysis of the situation and the political strategy it calls for.

Keywords: ideology, social reproduction, temporal studies, materialism, presentism.

I. Catastrophism: from imminence to inanity

It seems that the expression that poses that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” has lost its luster. It no longer arouses a critical spark or a complicit smile, but rather functions as a kind of *mantra* or a password to enter a group of distinguished minds. As in the best popular myths, its authorship is lost in the multiplication of names. And it is not that the question has been settled... What does it mean to say that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism?

During the long months of 2020, in the context of the so-called “geopolitics of vaccines,” we passed without perplexity the return of the semantic field of the Cold War. Specters of disaster mark our experience of time with the sign of eternal return. Those discourses resonate today – in the real war in Ukraine and in the promised war in Taiwan – as a flawed prophecy about repetition, the death drive, and the self-destructive tendencies of mankind. A mirrors-play, simulacrum of simulacrums, marks the pulse of our experience of the present.

But the phantoms of destruction do not complete the *spectrum*. Recently, the images provided by the Webb telescope opened to millions of eyes the possibility of contemplating space in time. A transmundane “afterworld,” somewhat secular and accessible to all screens, democratized the escapist phantasy, previously enjoyed exclusively by the lucky ones, such as Jeff Bezos. The telescopic imagery that lets us glimpse into the specter of a world without us (an epochality before the era of the so-called Anthropocene) also gives us the measure of the phantasy of an “us” beyond the World.

But what do catastrophist dystopia and escapist utopia have in common? Well, that in both of them history, and more precisely, the history of the globalization of capitalism, remains outside the field of vision.

It is worth remembering that *spectrum* comes from the Latin verb *specere* (to look, to observe). The question of the *spectrum* is that of the limits of the field of vision and therefore also the ambivalent frontier between seeing and not seeing. Seeing what is not there, or foreseeing what is not seen, raises the semantics of illusion, imminence, or threat.

In 1982, Michel Pêcheux identified as an urgent task of the communist ideological struggle the identification of these diverse resonances of the *spectrum*, in order to be able to think the ineffectiveness of revolutionary discourses to prefigure “another world” beyond this one. Pêcheux desperately suggested that each epoch should ask itself about the imaginary elements that configure the field of the visible as “World,” being aware of the irreducible ambivalence of any spectral field, between the technical and the threatening.

Just ten years later, in *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama celebrated the end of the Cold War, not as the culmination of a specific period of post-war history, but the end of history as such; the end point of the ideological evolution of mankind. Following the success of the book, Jacques Derrida outlined in *Specters of Marx*, the profound connections between the tele-communicational capture of spectrality and the contours of the Non-Event announced by Fukuyama. Postulating the Idea of the End as an episode that had already happened was paradoxical but plausible. After all, it “reinvented” Christian eschatology: the “transhistorical and natural criterion” of “man as Man” as the measure of all things; a metaphysics of “human nature.” so docile to the principle of capitalist individuation of the “owner,” that it would be taken up by Friedrich Hayek as the ethos of “free competition” in the 1940s and rewritten by Gary Becker as “human capital” in the 1990s.

In *Hay un mundo por venir?* Danowski and Viveiros de Castro recognize the imaginary kernel of the crisis. This “dysphoric flowering” – they say – located against the tide of the humanist optimism of the last centuries of Western history, foreshadows or exposes the decline of the horizon of history imagined as an epic of the Spirit. The “ruin of our global civilization by virtue of its undisputed hegemony” threatens to take away considerable portions of the population. Although it is “the very idea of the human species, which is being challenged by the crisis,” it would not start but “of course, from the miserable masses living in the ghettos and geopolitical dumps of the ‘world system’.”

The scheme is remarkably pristine, while the threat looms in the form of a “crisis that challenges mankind” as a whole; in the order of existence, the destruction begins (has already begun) in the peripheral regions, the disposable zones, the subhuman or non-human parts of mankind. The paradoxical democratisation of the consequences of the “apocalypse” will begin – it has always already begun – with those who still hope for inclusion in the “Kingdom of Man” and will wake up with the disaster without having attended the party of the eve.

II. Imperialist humanism

The idea of a “crisis of mankind” is attached to the first outline of effectively global power in history, consolidated at the end of the 19th century. In *The Accumulation of Capital*, Rosa Luxemburg calls it by its name, imperialism, and explains it as the very expansive logic of global reproduction of capital over non-capitalist zones of the world. The end of the 19th century is a transitional moment, from absolute surplus-value to relative surplus-value in the industrial core of capitalism's world-system. It is a moment of consolidation of a pseudoscientific notion of “race” and it concurs, also, the moment in which Silvia Federici detects a crucial step for the sexual division of labour: the rise of the “proletarian housewife.” Imperialist humanism represses the history of its immanent wounds: class, race, sex, and “catastrophe” is the name of this repression.

Since the First World War, the fact that the human species is capable of annihilating itself has been a frequent fact of theoretical and political concern, up to the point that we could think that it is the imminence of its self-annihilation that drives the idea of mankind as an illusory homogeneous and global community, fed, paradoxically, by the threats of its own destruction. Among the contradictory modulations of this idea, we can count the scientific-technological developments aimed at postponing the disaster, while deepening it, and the invention of the legal ideology of the humans' rights, whose global consolidation coincides with the fundamentalist project of ideological unification, promoted in the context of the Cold War, while confronting Third World movements of national liberation and anti-imperialist forms of humanism.

Gradually, the regime of modern historicity twists over itself and the future is absorbed by a temporality of imminent catastrophe. Presented in first place as 'a scientific revolution', the bomb dropped on Hiroshima opened the present era: that of the nuclear threat, says François Hartog, in *Regimes of Historicity*. Catastrophism, we might say then, is one of the tendential forms in which “presentism” was gaining ground over futurist utopias, while impoverishing humanist ideology towards reactionary dispositions.

The 21st century presents a turning point in the experience of catastrophe. 2001 brought this logic to a limit. Hartog poses it as that age featured by a contemporary event which, by allowing itself to be seen in its own constitution, is historicized immediately and already performs its own commemoration, under the gaze of the cameras. When the promise of catastrophe is revealed, its messianic, moral, or religious potency slips into the realm of technical phantasmagoria. Fukuyama's historicist and humanist utopia survives in its ominous reverse: the “final” consecration of the Western idea coincides with the end – no longer of history – but of the World. With the 21st century, history is not visible anymore. Neither technological *spectrum* nor the apocalyptic specters correspond to its scale; they are supra-historical, cosmic.

With the recent pandemic, mankind is once again challenged by the promise of catastrophe, and called into existence, as the Subject of History (albeit now without history). If the gesture is not new at all, the new seems to be, instead, its infra-historical temporality: the displacement of the disaster, from its imminence to its insignificance.

The relation between presentism and catastrophism is transformed into an experience of disaster which, we do not know exactly how or when, but has already happened. This is not a minor detail. A catastrophe that has already happened offers a clearly disappointing experience. Rather than a moral challenge to caution or responsibility, the catastrophe produces frustration.

The pandemic is already behind and the post-apocalyptic images of “wildlife” advancing on empty cities have been replaced by a normalization of catastrophe, less dramatic than tedious. In that scene, the apocalypse becomes a seductive image... A *grand finale* (a new world war, for example?) doesn't appear to be that bad. What is truly unbearable is the inexorable inanity of a disastrous “normality” that can last too long.

In fact, much of the conspiracy theories that flourish today find fertile ground in this kind of deception. Hence, it is not at all surprising that these theories are spreading rapidly among those who live in sub-human conditions.

Álvaro García Linera invites us to think about the *liminal* condition of the present. A time in which “the predictive horizon” that configured not only the field of “the visible” for a society, but the very scopic regime that makes a body of material relations exist as a society, has collapsed.

To inhabit a limit (an edge, a hinge?) is perhaps not being able, yet, to grasp the specific way in which the specters of our time affect social and subjective relations. In this liminal time, with old tactical uncertainty attached to a clear strategic certainty, so characteristic of modernity, has been replaced, Linera says, by the tactical certainty that there is no strategic certainty. Will strategic uncertainty wake specters of the past or technocratic solutions? Will the answer be cosmic or political? We have no responses yet...

What indeed seems clear is that the current revival of conspiracy theories restores, at least, the image of a world (which can be traced in the work of Sebastian Schuller). Conspiracism has already anticipated its response and it works, because it turns politics into a scene of religious reading, exegesis of symbols and signs in the “open Book of the World.” As a reiterative inflection of catastrophism, current conspiracy theories address the need to explain the invisible of the abstract causality of capital. They do it, in a religious or mythical way. This new humanist metaphysics fulfils the function of keeping the current crisis of reproduction of capital inexplicable.

Therein lies its ideological efficacy. The conspiracy also feeds on the catastrophic imagination; it plays with mirrors and transfigurations.

This is what Pêcheux read at the beginning of the 1980s: "Nazism will probably never happen again as such, but 'the womb remains fertile' as long as there are effective means – *medium* – to ensure that masses remain invisible to themselves, like unrepresentable specters that do not find their proper flesh and blood.

But that crisis of political thought, which is still ours, was – and is – a sign of "a new transformation of the relationship between the visible and the invisible, the unrealized and the non-existent, which power contests by multiplying specters." There is an opportunity here: Pêcheux pushes us to read the heterogeneity of contradictions in order to hinder the religion of Meaning and resituate history in our field of vision: "to devisualise the specters of revolutionary discourse in order to begin to return what is due to the invisible, that is to say to the 'real movement' that works in this world for the abolition of the existing order..."

To open our imagination to a kind of "world where many worlds fit" – as the EZLN people claimed in the 90s – against humanitarian or technocratic pluralism, requires identifying the contradictory traces of the "World of Man" under its various modulations: sex, race, class.

III. Absolute present of capital

Marx already said in the *Grundrisse*, that capitalism must be understood as an "economy of time."

The temporal formula of the capitalist mode of production – that capital originates in capital – describes a presentist mode of organizing time. This is another way of reading Marx's recourse to the category of fetishism, being the circular time that delimits an interiority, the plain space of the "commodity world" as absolute present.

This metaphysical experience is contradicted by the very historical condition of capitalism. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes – said Louis Althusser, evoking Engels. And this means that economy is not the Truth of social relations, but the absence of relation on which a capitalist social formation is organized – surplus-value is not a substance, but a non-relation, the "property" of dispossession, an absent cause. This idea strains the critique of the alienation of an original human nature, envisaged for example, in the concept of reification. Capitalist exploitation does not consist in the becoming a "thing" of the "person," but in functioning as a principle of personification that never ceases to partially become commodity. What the capitalist system exploits is this constitutive *décalage*, the schism in the human person.

Alenka Zupančič puts it in a uniquely interesting way by asserting, evoking the Lacanian formula that *the* worker does not exist. And it is this negativity that indicates the category of the proletariat, not as an 'identity' nor as a group of interest, but as that which names the point of

concrete constitutive negativity in capitalism; its disproved and exploited symptom. The idea of concrete constitutive negativity, as developed by Župan i , avoids the restitution of a founding negativity and must instead be understood as an assemblage of relations where each concrete relation resolves in a practical way, structural non-relation, while thereby positing its own impossibility. Each relation postulates a concrete point of the impossible that determines it. And determines what will determine it.

This reading allows us to recognize the fruitfulness of the Freudian category of overdetermination with which Louis Althusser proposes to read the materialist dialectic in terms of a plural and differentially articulated concept of historical time.

In the capitalist mode of production, therefore, the time of economic production has absolutely nothing to do with the obviousness of everyday practice's ideological time: of course, it is rooted in certain determinate sites, in biological time (certain limits in the alternation of labour and rest for human and animal labour power; certain rhythms for agricultural production) but in essence it is not at all identified with this biological time, and in no sense is it a time that can be *read immediately* in the flow of any given process. It is an invisible time, essentially illegible, as invisible and as opaque as the reality of the total capitalist production process itself. This time, as a complex 'intersection' of the different times, rhythms, turnovers, etc., that we have just discussed, is only accessible in *its concept*, which, like every concept is never immediately 'given', never *legible* in visible reality: like every concept this concept must be *produced*, *constructed*.¹

From this point of view, the social experience of a given and continuous time is the effect of the material work of the dominant ideology understood as a procedure of presentification and impoverishment of the complex of times within which a conjuncture is shaped. This means that, without the concept of ideology, it becomes practically impossible to name the imaginary condition of that simplification which makes material history be experienced as the metaphysical present of mankind.

The ideological critique of presentism brings us back to the materialist theory of history conceived as a time of times, in which the capitalist (non)relation exists as the presence of an absence. This is a way of reading Marx's theory that identifies the constitutive imbalance of capitalism. But, in order to read this imbalance, it is necessary to consider Marxist theory in a global way, beyond Volume I of *Capital*, towards the problem of reproduction understood as social reproduction, which opens up in his later volumes as a transition from the abstract to the concrete.

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¹ Althusser 1970, p.104

As Balibar has argued, Althusser's 'standpoint of reproduction' is a twist on the Marxist formula: instead of grounding historical variations in invariance, it assumes rather that all (relative) invariance presupposes force relations. This supposes that all structural continuity is the necessary effect of an irreducible contingency in which, at every moment, the latent possibility of a crisis lives. From the standpoint of reproduction, it becomes intelligible what, for Balibar, constitutes Althusser's central materialist axiom: the identification of struggle and existence (*pugnare idem est ac existere*), which assumes that identity is always division.

This brings us to a second question: the theory of the reproduction of capital is a theory of its immanent contingences, where reproduction is understood as the problem of duration of an effective articulation of times (which might not last).

In its concrete existence, every social formation is a complexity of differentially articulated times, in which there is not only one mode of production but more than one and, therefore, no matter how dominant, we couldn't find total subsumption, but a dominant mode of production that operates unifying forces and relations that are subordinate while heterogeneous to it. Not only "which" but also "what" are the productive forces and relations of production in each social formation, in which there are several modes of production under the dominance of one of them, is a sensitive and strategic task in order to understand what imperialism is, as Althusser says.

Temporal plurality as a key to analyzing the singularities of a social formation is something that Latin American Marxist theorists have pointed out since the beginning of the 20th century. José Carlos Mariátegui identifies an articulation of heterogeneous times by recognizing productive forces related to different modes of production that were structurally articulated in the Peruvian economy at the end of the 19th century. Thus, he analyses the regional and supposedly "archaic" economies of the "gamonal" or the "salitre" subsumed contradictorily to the logic of monopoly capital. In a homologous sense, the Bolivian thinker, René Zavaleta Mercado, speaks of the "variegated social formation" as a contradictory articulation of heterogeneous times in which the abstract but real dominance of capitalist dispossession operates. What the thinking of the capitalist periphery exposes is not some kind of exotic "Latin American-style capitalism." It is a way of reading the extended reproduction of capital that calls for a plural conception of historical time. Without such complexity, our understanding of concrete history dissolves in the fetishism of the abstract present of capital as "the time of the world and of mankind."

Rosa Luxemburg also warned that the "stanpoint of reproduction" opens up the field of vision of that abstract-closed economy theorized Marx in Volume I of *Capital* (between value theory and primitive accumulation), to allow us to see the expanded articulation of multiple

temporalities conceived by the necessary intertwining of capitalist and non-capitalist relations, in the imperialist dynamics of the expanded reproduction of capital.

These contributions allow us to notice that from the “standpoint of reproduction” the so-called presentist regime reveals itself as an (ideological) effect of the capitalist abstraction of time, showing its necessary articulation with relations that are heterogeneous to it. The economist and humanist siege of the dominant ideology is re-inscribed as a metaphysics of catastrophe, also in the broad wake of the Marxist heritage, from the evolutionist tendencies of the Second International and Stalinism, to the pretended technocratic and juridicist overcoming of the so-called crisis of Marxism by displacing history from its field of vision. Today, there is a proliferation of new, supposedly materialistic metaphysics that imagine a “world without us” alongside accelerationist economicisms that imagine an “us without a world.” These are supra-historical or infra-historical formulas in which it is not possible to think the schismatic existence of historical objectivity, simultaneously erasing the class struggle and the unconscious as unassimilable mismatches for idealist thought, be it humanist, vitalist, or determinist.

IV. It is not about the "world" or "mankind", it is only a crisis of reproduction.

In *The New Imperialism*, David Harvey analyses the singularity of late capitalism in terms of a profound crisis of reproduction. The predatory capitalism described as “accumulation by dispossession” is a response to the exhaustion of forms of extended reproduction, traditionally based on strategies of *spatialization* and *temporalization* of capital. The former, oriented towards placing capital resources in peripheral regions, reconfigure borders and frontiers, as anticipated by Rosa Luxemburg and recognized by John Smith, when he speaks of *Imperialism in the 21st Century* in terms of an over-exploitation of southern labour by capital from the global north.

In terms of *temporalization* of reproduction, Harvey refers to the strategy of placing capital and surplus labour in social infrastructure, prolonging the times of valorization. This goal sometimes even requires the destruction of capital, in the form of pure “philanthropic” expenditure such as that devoted to the funding of museums, foundations, and other institutions of art and culture, as Žižek has pointed out frequently.

Even though, conceived globally, reproduction is a terrain of conflicting temporalities – as Cinzia Arruza reminds us in “Gender as Social Temporality” – in which capital incessantly traverses the phantasmagoria of its continuous metamorphoses. The “solutions” to the crises of reproduction through strategies of spatialization or temporalization do not constitute regularities without counter-

tendencies. On the contrary, they account for the moments when forms of resistance to capitalism stage its constitutive fragility.

In this sense, Robert Boyer analyses the contradiction of the accelerated and reversible (presentist) temporality of financial capital with the irreversible short-term temporality of productive and reproductive investments. The latter involve social accumulation of time in institutions that offers an objective material resistance to the lack of memory necessary for the functioning of financial speculative logic.

Boyer let us understand why feminists of Social Reproduction Theory such as Tithi Bhattacharya, suggest that it is also in the web of formal and informal institutions of reproduction that class struggle – of a global and not a reductive idea working class – has its chance, in a variety of forms in which it strives to meet its own needs and in the struggles through which popular sectors contest their share of civilization.

The "standpoint of reproduction" makes visible the ideological condition of those conceptions of capitalism considered as a system tending towards equilibrium, from marginalist theory to the most recent ones of Gary Becker's human capital, including the new forms of algorithmic, vitalist or accelerationist fatalism. In these various re-iterations of economism and humanism, the crisis of reproduction turns to be unthinkable.

Considered from the point of view of reproduction, what Harvey identifies as "accumulation by dispossession" is not the hidden truth of capital, but a conjunctural reaction to its own crisis of duration. It is a "liminal" crisis in the history of imperialism, in which its various strategies of temporalization and spatialization are disrupted. And where the catastrophist modulations of presentism are proving ineffective in promoting the restitution of a humanist utopia, they still maintain their narrative capacity to leave capitalism out of the field of vision. These are the times, as Michel Pêcheux has said, in which power fights by multiplying its specters...

Current feminism did not invent the concept of reproduction, but it did lend its body to the field of vision that allows us to recognize it – today, in the midst of an apocalyptic cynic or nostalgic dominant atmosphere – in its critical and political force. Feminist theory and, especially, feminist developments on reproduction, see what Marx's theory discovers without seeing it himself. In doing so, they illuminate other genealogies, among which we can begin to trace the foundations of a non-catastrophist perspective of the present.

The standpoint of reproduction opens up, as the Argentine José Aricó pointed out in his courses at the Colegio de México in the 1976, the ethical-political moment of Marxist theory, not as its "complement" but as an immanent logic that connects science and revolution and that does not fit into any metaphor of vision.

V. Concrete analysis and the silent strategy

For Lenin, reading Russia's conjuncture, class consciousness means knowledge of the social economic totality, Aricó says. This is precisely what distances him from Kautsky and his idea of consciousness as an ethical end. The theses of *What Is To Be Done?* are thus born of the study of the process of reproduction of global social capital and of the rigorous application of the concept of *social formation*.

It is on the basis of this discovery of the concrete society that, from a Marxist perspective, a political theory could be structured not as the application to the field of politics of a final objective, but as the result of the unfolding of the internal contradictions of a society.²

Lenin's old question is a political question that Althusser poses too in his 1978 manuscript, also entitled *Que faire?*

What is to be done to help the orientation and organization of the working class and popular class struggle to win over the class struggle waged by the bourgeoisie? Every word of this simple interrogation must be carefully considered, he underlines.

First of all, the conjunction indicates that the orientation or the "line" precedes the organization. This implies, Althusser concludes, affirming the primacy of the political line over the form of organization. And that the establishment of both depends on the workers' and popular masses struggles, that is to say, on its antagonistic tendency to the struggle of the bourgeois class.

Everything depends on the concrete analysis of this antagonism, which constitutes the antagonism in an unequal and hierarchical relationship and which cannot be reduced to a simple relationship between given identities.

This leads us to a first conclusion: to get out of fatalism, whether utopian or dystopian, it is also necessary to abandon the vulgar sociology that thinks of antagonism as a meeting of pre-existing parts. It is a matter of taking seriously the materialist thesis of the primacy of contradiction over opposites, understanding the overdetermined complexity of contradiction, not as a simple relation between pre-existing entities but as a complex assemblage of relations and non-relations that give singular consistency to a conjuncture. It is, in short, for Althusser, a matter of seriously pondering the series of paradoxes on which the "primacy of the masses over classes and the primacy of the masses and classes over forms of organization, over unions and parties" is founded in the Marxist tradition.³

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² Aricó 2012, p.167, my translation

³ Althusser 2018, p.37

Through this overdetermination, the materialist tradition assumes that

...workers do not escape the ideological struggle and therefore the domination of the dominant ideology, and that any form of union or political consciousness is constantly threatened to take itself for the complete truth, unless we recognize that unorganized workers, therefore in principle less conscious, can know, under their silence, much more than those who speak a bit too quickly in their name.⁴

A concrete analysis of the situation is more important than seeing clearly, to listen to the silences through which a composite political individual speaks, an individual – and not yet a political subject – whose power consists in dwelling too close to the contradictions through which capitalism exists as division, schism, non-relationship.

A theory built not on seeing but on reading symptoms calls for a politics performed not with vociferating remanent truths but by interrogating the silences of the present evidences.

.....
4 Ibid.

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Can this War Be Thought of Politically?

**Claudia Pozzana &
Alessandro Russo**

1Abstract: The world horizon today is that of war without limits, and no conclusion of the ongoing conflicts and the incumbent others is foreseen. Since globalized war is the dark twin of globalized capitalism, the only way out of this war is the exit from capitalism. The problem is that there is no organized idea capable of credibly delineating new ways to invent a world beyond the capital.

Our tasks are dismissing our incapacity, that is, our imaginary limits, and facing the impossible, that is, the real of the situation.

Keywords: Globalized capitalism. Unlimited war. Self-liberation mass politics.

1. The contemporary dilemma

In front of this war, the classic combination of "the current situation and our tasks" constitutes the contemporary political dilemma. We schematically outline some key points, three for each of the two sides, situation, and tasks.

- The current war is the beginning of a global war, in which the main contradiction is the clash between capitalist powers vying for hegemony.

- The world horizon today is that of war without limits, and no conclusion of the ongoing conflicts and the incumbent others is foreseen.

- The explicit threat of nuclear weapons, whatever the balance of power in different geopolitical situations, shows that the actors of this war do not intend to retreat even in the face of unprecedented risks of human destruction.

- Since globalized war is the dark twin of globalized capitalism, the only way out of this war is the exit from capitalism.

- The problem is that there is no organized idea capable of credibly delineating new ways to invent a world beyond the capital, with the aggravating circumstance that a proper assessment is still to be done on the value of the previous experiments and their failures.

- The two terms of this weakness feed on each other. Without the aspiration to invent new roads, it is impossible to make a sufficiently in-depth assessment of the previous ones. But without such an assessment, there is no way to avoid repeating mistakes that have led to failure. Even worse, new possible experiments are preemptively overwhelmed by the total discredit of which the revanchism of the capitalist restoration has covered the past ones.

¹This is one of the two texts on the present war that we wrote in the summer of 2022. The other, titled "Facing the WW4," will be released in the next *Continental Thought and Theory. A Journal of Intellectual Freedom*, issue dedicated to "War: Cold, Hot ... and Tepid?"

2. Actuality of a question from Badiou

The question in the Call for Papers of this issue of *Crisis and Critique*, "Is politics possible today?" echoes the one that Alain Badiou has been asking since the 1980s, "Peut-on penser la politique?", and continues to illuminate our intellectual horizon.² The relevance of that question must be commensurate with the other that the present time imposes on us: can this war be thought of politically? However, Badiou's themes are also decisive for the present. Two in particular: politics as a singular thought and the assessment of state communism in the twentieth century.

As for the intellectual singularity of politics, it is necessary to untangle its two current meanings: politics as the enjoyment of state power and politics as mass self-liberation. Politics as a thirst for domination is an automatism that does not need any thought. It is only, from time immemorial, the compulsion to repeat struggles between oligarchic factions to conquer and divide state power. On the other hand, politics as self-liberation is what Mao formulated during the Cultural Revolution in the thesis that "the masses can free themselves and no one can act in their place." This politics can only be a series of inventions of new ways of thinking. What is at stake is the search for new collective existence, capable of keeping at a distance the craving to manage the lives of others.

Roads like these have already been tried, but they have failed. First with the defeat of the Cultural Revolution, and finally with the collapse of the USSR. A rethinking of those experiences is indispensable, capable of discerning within them the political impulses of self-liberation from their suffocation in policies of state domination. The fact that the latter were ultimately indistinguishable from any other form of power, namely from capitalism, was the core of what Badiou called the "obscure disaster" of state communism of the twentieth century.³

3. How was the war conceived in the twentieth century?

The assessment of those experiments has particular relevance for thinking about this war. The communisms of the twentieth century were intertwined with great wars, to which they set limits of principle, nourishing thoughts and actions to stop them.

The global wars of the twentieth century were conceived politically, not only in terms of military power relations but in a horizon in which organized ideas aimed to get out of capitalism. Lenin managed to think of the imperialist war from the point of view of the revolution. October was a consequence of the war, but at the same time, it was able to interrupt its destructive logic.

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² Badiou 1985.

³ Badiou 1992.

The other great wars of the twentieth century were also politically conceived by collective mobilizations, in which the possibility of a road beyond capitalism was a decisive reference. It was the case also in the partisan warfare in Europe during the Second World War and in the protracted people's war in China from the 1920s to the 1940s. Ultimately, even the Cold War did not become "Hot" because the clash was first political and civil (was capitalism or socialism more just?), even before than military.

Extra-capitalist political experiments were the main organizational factors that limited those wars and allowed them to end. More precisely, it was primarily the political thrusts for self-liberation that constituted a limit to the war. Only secondarily (and ambiguously), the limit came from the state domination of the various communist parties.

One should not forget that in the 1960s, there were sizeable anti-militarist mass movements. The US lost the Vietnam War not only on the military ground, defeated by a protracted people's war, but above all at home, with student and African-American political movements dismantling the pretensions of imperial militarism. Similar mass movements in Europe developed independently and were often highly critical of existing communist parties, which for their part, regarded them as adventurists and provocateurs. On the other hand, those movements harshly criticized both Soviet social imperialism and American imperialism.

That era ended irreversibly for decades. However, the political attitudes to war in the twentieth century show that it has been possible to tackle even world wars by imposing a limit on them. Today the situation is entirely different: the war is massively expanding because there is no politics capable of fixing its limitations.

4. The dictatorship of opinion

Without such a thought, the dictatorship of opinion is inevitably established over this war. The sinister novelty of our time is that state domination, in its various forms, subsumes war as the world's government, and around it shapes opinion.

For months we have been bombarded with propaganda that proclaims the absolute need for the masses to resign themselves to destruction and for the states to indefinitely increase the destructive power of the military apparatus: unlimited rearmament. An attenuated variant says: rearm, yes, but only for defensive purposes. Also at the beginning of the First World War, the Social Democratic parties voted for "war credits," begging (in vain) that they were used only for defense.

At the edge of the arch-militarist and mid-militarist propaganda inevitably appears the propaganda of finitude. We are told the war would be a lesson against humanity's hubris, which vainly pursues a desire for

infinity. A great artist calls his exhibition "Memento mori," a huge black bone chandelier in Murano glass. A great director presents his theater program as aimed at a didactic of being-for-death.

On the critical opinion front, the prevailing positions are quietly pacifist, those that all wars have always easily disregarded. An indignant call for desertion is a more radical opinion, isolated but determined. This appeal has its revolutionary pedigree. During the First World War, the insubordination and desertion of Russian soldiers were factors that led to the collapse of Tsarism. However, the Bolsheviks' call for desertion was highly politicized, to desert the war to get out of capitalism. The desertion of young Americans during the Vietnam War was also politicized. It was an integral part of mass movements searching for new forms of collective existence, which broke with the arrogance of militarism, racism, and sexism of the "American way of life."

Today, with the uncontested affirmation of capitalism, what is the political value of desertion? How is it different from what pushed soldiers to save their skin in all wars, and for all good reasons?

The worst is that today this war enlists, willy-nilly, all of humanity. NATO sanctions on Russia are a war response to the invasion of Ukraine but are funded directly by mass impoverishment in Europe. The same goes for rearming. Putin calls hundreds of thousands of young people to arms; in Italy, the restoration of the military conscription has been announced. The "compulsory conscription," direct or indirect, of Europe and the world will not stop there. Only a new political vision can make us "desert" from this war without limits.

5. Two temporalities

Is a way out of this war impossible? Better to say that our tasks are dismissing our incapacity, that is, our imaginary limits, and facing the impossible, that is, the real of the situation, without forgetting that the real can be rather unpleasant.

We must organize ourselves to stop this war and get out of capitalism. But what is to be done? We have some ideas about past mistakes that we wouldn't want to repeat, but we don't have enough about the new inventions we need.

The parties, the previous paradigm of political organization, have all been reabsorbed into the logic of state domination. Regardless of their differences, they are all in service of the war today. A politics that wants to distinguish itself from state domination, which today is capitalism everywhere, and stop the war must invent new forms of organization.

However, what can constitute a breadth of political perspectives comparable to those of the parties, including their universalistic aims? That such intentions have never managed to go beyond the conquest and maintenance of state power does not exempt a politics of self-liberation

from pursuing its universality. The issue at stake is thinking about the universality of politics at a distance from parties and states.

Marx said that modern revolutions come to "withdraw in fear at the immensity and infinity of their purposes." How to do it now that there are no revolutions on the horizon, but the tasks are even more infinite? Inevitably, two temporalities are intertwined: long and short.

Leaving the "capitalist Neolithic" (another definition of Badiou that we share) is an epochal transition that will involve several generations. Capitalism has a centuries-old history, grafted onto the millennial history of the family, private property, and the state. Marx and Engels looked at the overcoming of capitalism as a prolonged political itinerary aimed at getting out of "prehistory."

Long physiological times, therefore. To which are added two major contemporary obstacles. One is that capitalism has gained global dominance over the ruins of previous experiments to overcome it. One of its powerful ideological advantages is discrediting the defeated enemy who dared to challenge him. The core of the dominant ideology has been proclaiming for decades that capitalism is irreplaceable, as those failures would demonstrate. This ideology is not only self-congratulatory but aims above all to prevent the possibility of even imagining something else. "There is no alternative" was the motto of the restoration.

The second obstacle, even more pressing, is this war. Its only logic is the indefinite affirmation of global capitalism. In this sense, it has a more directly preemptive function than the dominant ideology of the past decades, aiming to eradicate any deviation in advance. For this reason, all states, however much they are in conflict, are perfectly allied in establishing the war as the world's government.

The eagerness of their commitment to destroy the world comes from the terror that the famous "specter" returns to roam somewhere. So, on with a preemptive war, which will annihilate even the imagination of that "specter," wherever it may lurk. Everything else is secondary. The proclamations on the principles of democracy against autocracy, of the values of the liberal West against the despotic East, or vice versa of the wise and virtuous East against the libertine and decadent West, are the modest fig leaf on the phallic semblance of the all-out war against ghosts.

On the other hand, attention needs to be sharpened on the specific temporality of this globalized war. Although interminable, it will alternate periods of stagnation and sudden catastrophic accelerations, possible armistices, and even temporary peace, which new and more bitter conflicts will follow. These tortuous developments can only be faced by a thought capable of looking at the epochal dimension of the change necessary to stop the war. Otherwise, there will be only deadly complicity or resignation.

It is also necessary to look with the utmost attention at the probable riots this war will provoke in the most intricate and unpredictable forms and ways. Although the now daily threats of nuclear war are made to sow

fear and reduce people to the most inert passivity, the immeasurable increase in the rate of oppression (ideological, economic, military), as always affecting the poorest, will inevitably meet resistance.

It will be decisive to discern in such mass movements affirmation and negation. The affirmative resolutions of other possibilities of existence, therefore open to epochal change, should be separated from the contrastive attitude, based on mere negation, therefore destined to be re-incorporated into existing oppression, even in a worse version. We should draw a lesson from the fate of the mass movements in the past decades. All tuned to a "no" to the existent, they have been silenced by more iron state domination.

6. Impossible tasks

While new skills are needed to organize ourselves politically, we have very few points of reference for doing so. Keeping ourselves at an abstract level (leaving aside the ongoing war for now), the organizational principle of self-liberation politics has at least two requirements: a multiplicity of collectives and the construction of a common intellectual space that nourishes, and is nourished by, their existence.

In all organized places of social life, political collectives can be able to examine and propose the possibilities of social relations independent of capitalist rule, both locally and globally. Let's take an example that we know best. In a school situation, how is it possible to practice an education that is open to thought and not imprisoned in the "exchange at equal value" between "skills" and "grades"? The so-called evaluation is the application of the "law of value." Still, to escape from it, one must broaden the intellectual perspective and look beyond the boundaries of the situation itself, that is, grasping the entirety of capitalist domination in the specificity of a school.

This problem arises everywhere interventions, detailed proposals, and overall projects are to be created. Other examples: how can a non-capitalist organization of public health work? How can there be an artistic, musical, theatrical collective, etc., free from market tyranny? To quote the most tangled knot, how can command and execution be thought beyond the fetishism of technology in all capital-labor relationships? Indeed, it is a close cousin of commodity fetishism, both pillars of the capitalist symbolic order.

In every place of social life, the problem is how to identify the rule that operates there specifically and, at the same time, face its global character. We will need to build a new vast space of intelligence in politics. All the more so in the current situation, in which the war exasperates the capitalist rule.

The organization will therefore require a third fundamental condition: the collective critical acquisition of old and new knowledge

necessary to focus on the situation of globalized war. It will be vital to reinvent forms, methods, and places for elaborating and transmitting this knowledge, open to anyone, even outside the existing school systems.⁴

It will not be governments, nor their diplomatic and military apparatuses, that will end this war. Sun Zi said war is the "great affair of the state, the terrain of life and death." Today it must become an "affair of the state" that everyone can actively deal with to limit and conclude. It takes a vast and profound mass intelligence to face this war.

It should be clear that keeping a distance from the state does not exclude the state from politics. For a politics of self-liberation, the state cannot be an object of conquest (historically, the opposite has happened, the politics conquered by the state), nor a measure of action. On the other hand, a politics capable of influencing state orientations and decisions without participating in power even in its electoral rituals opens up a space of unprecedented inventions.

It is possible to organize collectives capable of pronouncing the right and the wrong of state decisions and demanding rectifications.⁵ For example, to require drastic limitation of the military and stop rearmament; to reactivate labor protection policies dismantled by decades-long legislation that imposed precariousness as a norm; to impose restrictions on the autonomy of finance, which was "deregulated" by the neoliberal restoration in the name of "less state, more market." Yet, these assessments of the actions of governments must be substantiated by arguments based on inquiries and research. Above all, they must result from collective theoretical work and not simply the comparison between opinions, which can only confirm their average circulation (today, "media communication").

We need movements of mass theoretical study; whose tasks are to demonstrate that capitalism is by no means the eternal rule of the world but has its peculiar historicity. It can and must be brought to an end to stop its intrinsically destructive nature: unlimited profit is the chief sponsor of unlimited war.

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4 A tentative list of issues that deserve to be the subject of general study:
the analysis of the causes and developments of today's war
the classical and contemporary military thought
the historical experience of state communism and its relationship with war
post-socialist capitalism
the transformations of labor and finance legislation since the 1980s
birth and decline of the twentieth-century parties
the long sixties and their conclusion at the end of the seventies
the hypertrophy of the military in recent decades

5 Think of the equality movements of African Americans in the 1960s.

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Working Through Political Organization: Current Results of the Subset of Theoretical Practice (2021–2022)¹

Subset of Theoretical Practice²

¹ this is a re-formatted version of the text sent to Crisis and Critique – a longer non-revised draft can be [found here](#)

² STP contributors to the essay: Renzo Barbe, J.-P Caron, Efrén Cruz Cortés, Mirian Kussumi, J. Millie, Rafael Saldanha, Victor Silva, Maikel da Silveira, Gabriel Tupinambá, Yuan Yao

Abstract: The present essay begins by offering six propositions about the current conjuncture that frame our approach to the contemporary challenges of the radical Left. We then move on to sketch, in some detail, the three main ideas that condense the accumulated results of our current research project and picture our overall strategy for tackling this historical predicament.

Keywords: peripherization, political organization, social formations, political ecology, communist hypothesis

"The place we commonly call the real world is surrounded by vast and possibly infinite landscape which is invisible to these eyes (points to eyes) but which I am able to apprehend by other means. The more I tell you about this landscape, the more inclined you might be to call it my mind. I myself often call it my mind for the sake of convenience. For me, however, it is not just my mind but the only mind "
(Gerald Murnane, Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs)

1. Introduction

The present essay is an attempt to share with a wider network of comrades some of the results of the ongoing research carried out by the Subset of Theoretical Practice (STP)¹, both in hope that they might find it useful in their own political struggles and that it might spark the interest of others to join us in further developing these insights.

We begin by offering six propositions about the current conjuncture that frame our approach to the contemporary challenges of the radical Left, these are the theses of *peripherization*, *vulgarization*, *saturation*, *endogenous reproduction*, *multiplicity* and *organizational standpoint* - all of which are presented in the next section. We then move on to sketch, in some detail, some ideas that condense the accumulated results of our current research project and picture our overall strategy for tackling this historical predicament.

¹The STP was created inside the Circle of Studies of Idea and Ideology, in 2015, with the original focus of developing conceptual tools to account for CSII's own practice and its particular reading of the political conjuncture. And even though the Circle dissolved in January 2021 - in a collective decision based on the analysis that the collective no longer was capable of effectively intervening in the Brazilian political context - the Subset of Theoretical Practice continued to work within those same original directives, now filtered and transformed by the political experiences of many of its new members. The histories of CSII and STP are discussed in *Contribution to the Critique of Political Organization* and *Atlas of Experimental Politics*, both published in *Crisis and Critique*. You can learn more about the STP at www.theoreticalpractice.com

The first of these ideas is the concept of *socially-mediated perspectives*, namely, a theory of how political organizations can function as non-trivial perspectives on the social world, helping us to see, interact and constrain social reality in ways otherwise inaccessible to individuals. The second idea - which we only develop briefly in this text - develops this initial point into what we call *organizational trinitarianism*, a basic theoretical grammar which spells out the interdependence between (1) how organizations are *composed*, (2) how they get to *interact* with the world and (3) what is rendered *intelligible* through these interactions. The last idea applies this general grammar to what we call *multi-layered social worlds*, a model of social formations which combines the social logics of reciprocity, contract and value, allowing to recuperate insights from diverse critical traditions into a common conceptual framework and render a discussion of large-scale social transformation more commensurate with the concrete problems of political organizing. We conclude with some remarks on how these ideas contribute to a rethinking of the communist hypothesis, the difference between emancipatory and reactionary politics and the socialist transition.

2. Six theses on the new conjuncture

Before we move on to present the current results of our collective research, it is important to clarify how these otherwise abstract constructions are actually motivated by quite concrete and historically situated political challenges. The six theses we will introduce now - framing our diagnosis of the Brazilian conjuncture and its embedding in a larger historical process - should also help to establish a certain proportionality between the depth we ascribe to our current political crisis and the level of theoretical backtracking we deem necessary if a more robust reconstruction of political thinking, up to the tasks of our times, is to be possible.

2.1 Peripherization thesis

The first component of our diagnostic is called the *peripherization thesis*. Originally developed by Brazilian critical theorists such as Francisco de Oliveira in the 90s and early 2000s², but expanded and popularized by the philosopher Paulo Arantes³, it proposes an immanent revision of the relation between center and peripheries in dependence theory.

Dependence theory pictured the capitalist geopolitical machinery in terms of a power struggle through which the development of advanced capitalist countries relied on the maintenance of underdevelopment in

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² Oliveira, 2003

³ Arantes, 2014 - see also de Oliveira, 2018

peripheral ones. Authors such as Ruy Mauro Marini⁴, Vânia Bambirra⁵, Immanuel Wallerstein⁶, amongst others, helped to clarify that the “backward” elements in these peripheral social formations were not accidental or contingent remnants of their past: when seen from the standpoint of “world-systems” and the international system of power relations connecting first- and third-world countries, traits such as explicit apartheid structures, hybrid regimes of slavery and wage-labour, the systematic overexploitation of workforce, all appeared as functional parts of capitalism itself, playing a crucial role in the maintenance of imperialist domination. What the peripherization thesis does is to add another twist to dependence theory: it claims that these heterogeneous aspects of peripheric social formations are not only functional parts of their integration into the global capitalist dynamics, but rather constitute *the most fertile ground* for the new forms of capitalist accumulation today⁷. Rather than just being locally underdeveloped and globally integrated into the dynamics of social development, countries like Brazil, South Africa and Mexico have become perfect laboratories for new forms of capitalist exploitation, integrating authoritarian control of surplus populations, the management of unresolvable social conflicts and a new police state compatible with parliamentary democracy. As a consequence, rather than the slow expansion of welfare-statism, liberal ideology and low-intensity democracy, bringing characteristics of advanced capitalist countries to peripheral ones, it is the social hybridism, the conflictual heterogeneity and the typology of informal labor that was “bred” in these these peripheric formations which now expands itself *towards the center*⁸.

In short, the peripherization thesis states that *there is no necessary connection between capitalist development and the creation of a socially and politically cohesive space* - the alignment between these dimensions was local and circumstantial, and conditioned on the deepening of social and natural destruction everywhere else. Not only this, but the hybrid forms of domination nurtured in countries, neighborhoods and favelas where this alignment was never in place now emerge as the most adaptable and applicable set of social technologies for control and production. For us, this thesis indicates the need to abandon both political theories that rely on capitalist development to produce the conditions for its own systemic overcoming as well as those that rely on

4 Marini, 2022

5 Bambirra, 2019

6 Wallerstein, 2004

7 Oliveira, 2003; Arantes, 2014

8 Comaroff, 2015; Beck, 2010; Hochuli, 2021

spontaneous social unrest to disturb the stability of capitalist forms. The process of peripherization indicates, instead, that the more the social space becomes fractured, hybrid and heterogeneous, the more capital is allowed to circulate without the hindrances of human inertia.

2.2 *Vulgarization thesis*

A crucial consequence of the peripherization process, one which directly affects the tasks and conditions of political practice, is what we call the *vulgarization* of social space⁹. The simplest way to define this process is to consider the usual meaning of the term, as when we oppose the "popularization" and the "vulgarization" of a given idea: while the former operation implies that the core components of an idea are *preserved* as it spreads around, the latter describes the case when the more an idea circulates, the more it gets corrupted, to the point of becoming unrecognizable. The *vulgarization thesis* claims that one of the main consequences of the renewed capitalist decoupling between the social organization of *workers* and the productive organization of *work*¹⁰, brought about by the disconnection between social homogeneity and capitalist development, is ultimately an intense disconnection between class *experience* - conditioned by the different concrete social networks we must rely on to survive and understand our place in the world¹¹ - and class *structure* - conditioned by the place we occupy in the large-scale economic dynamic of surplus-value production and exploitation.

The most superficial version of the vulgarization thesis - usually developed by American or European authors - claims that contemporary capitalism simply pushes people away from collective life and towards individualistic, more atomized existences. Not only is this diagnosis not applicable outside very specific social contexts, but it also misses the crucial political consequence of a socially fractured space, which is the lack of any necessary *transitivity* between local and global solutions¹². Those that denounce the increased individualism of contemporary capitalism disregard the plurality of social experiences that make up a peripheral social formation, while those who treat this heterogeneity as a superficial effect, championing a straightforward return to the political idea of universality, do not consider that, as the very social terrain erodes, it is *the referent* and not the *signifiers* that people do not spontaneously share anymore¹³. A more situated description of the diagnosis of

⁹Tupinambá, 2021

¹⁰Abilio, 2015, p.131-170; Jones, 2021

¹¹Cicerchia, 2021

¹²Nunes, 2021, p.92

¹³Badiou, 2019

vulgarization might be that, once social referents themselves do not add up, a veritable *social perspectivism* becomes effective, in the sense that the totality of the social world appears differently from different social standpoints.

The vulgarization process implies, thus, that there is a *political-economic thrust towards social refraction* - it supplements the *temporal* crisis of peripherization with a *spatial* crisis that increasingly separates the homogeneous abstract space of capital from the fractured social terrain which supports it¹⁴, like a perfectly smooth highway cutting across a ruinous landscape. For us, the vulgarization thesis implies, first of all, a step back from both political theories that still rely on an underlying common social experience supposedly promoted by capitalist exploitation and its accompanying social institutions, as well as from those that treat this process of heterogenization as a purely ideological one - as if these differences did not respond to actual, concrete transformations to the social bedrock itself. Instead, this thesis claims that we must treat social life under peripheric capitalist forms as composed of a patchwork of truly distinct social fragments, each potentially organized around different normative conflicts that people need to mediate and navigate¹⁵, and each faced with different types of distortions when one tries to generalize their local properties to social experience at large.

2.3 Political saturation thesis

Our third thesis concerns the effect of these temporal and spatial tendencies on political upheavals and revolts. The thesis of *political saturation* claims that *the tension between popular and vulgar political forms precedes the tension between their Leftist and Rightist inclinations*. In other words, it maintains that political sequences like the 2013 June Journeys in Brazil were conditioned, first of all, by a clash between a political system built under modernizing, homogenizing social premises and a political force already shaped by the heterogeneous experience of social conflicts. We call "saturation" the process through which a complex system of political organizations - composed by moderate and radical parties, autonomous collectives, social movements, etc - can no longer incorporate and be incorporated by the political energy present in contemporary revolts and popular forces¹⁶.

In a book published one year after the June Journeys, titled *The new World-Time*¹⁷, Paulo Arantes proposed an interpretation of the protests claiming that these revolts pointed to *the end of a social pact* that in fact

14 Canettieri, 2020

15 Feltran, 2014

16 Lazarus, 2015

17 Arantes, 2014

unified both the Left and the Right at least since the dictatorship in Brazil - a basic agreement that economic development and social democracy constituted a historical tendency that would either naturally lead us from a situation of extreme social conflict towards a more "civilized" social space or at least point the way for progressive political strategy. For the philosopher, one of the crucial effects of the largest set of political demonstrations in Brazilian history was bringing to view the exhaustion of the political system informed by this modernizing social pact, which now showed itself incapable of producing political forms, programs and worldviews compatible with the emerging popular unrest and its particular dynamics.

From the point of view of the saturation thesis, the continuity between mass protests and the rise of the extreme Right in the last decade can thus be challenged and recontextualized as the contingent effect of a more structural inversion: as the ground shifts beneath our feet, the progressive outlook of the Left becomes the very index of a more underlying conservatism, a reluctance to recognize its anachronism, while the outright reactionary pleas of the Right acquire a new legitimacy for at least acknowledging that something is wrong with our progressive optimism¹⁸. Furthermore, the common tendency to describe our time as the age of "amorphous" political unrest¹⁹ - usually correlating the crisis of formal labor with the crisis of political forms - can now be placed in perspective: it is from the standpoint of Leftist modernist progressivism - be this of a more moderate or radical flavor - that contemporary revolts cannot but look without form, since they are shaped by a vulgar social terrain, with its own complex normative and organizational commitments, that look nothing like the converging, homogenized "people" we hoped to encounter.

The thesis of political saturation, therefore, states that *there is a structural mismatch between political forms produced under assumptions of temporal and spatial social convergence and the political forces that emerge within peripheric and vulgarized social conditions*. Adopting this thesis implies, for us, rejecting both political theories that ultimately read the new popular revolts as inherently reactionary outbursts of political energy as well as those that associate their political potential to the formlessness of new political forces, displacing the saturation of our political language onto a mystified image of the revolts. Rather than lose ourselves in fear and fascination with the efficacy of the new extreme-Right and their capacity to tame this popular force, the thesis of political saturation invites us to focus on the elaboration of a new political grammar based on the new social forms that already shape the complex reality of peripheric social life.

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¹⁸ Group of militants, 2019

¹⁹ Endnotes, 2020, Group of militants in the fog, 2022, Giully, 2018

2.4 Endogeneous reproduction thesis

In the context of political saturation, what happens with the already established political ecosystem of the Left? Here, the June Journeys can also help us frame the *endogenous reproduction thesis*. Put simply, this thesis states that *in the absence of a synergy between political forms and their social landscape the political ecosystem regulates itself via its own internal consistency*. We take "landscape" here to mean that region of the social space which, while not directly part of a recognizable political group, nevertheless actively indicate relevant constraints for a given political organization - for example, by considering what it learns from its social landscape, a party might be able to better select between appropriate and inappropriate political slogans for a given electoral campaign, or an autonomous collective might understand if it should invest its scarce militant resources into building this or that community or workplace initiative. Unlike "the people" or "the working class", which refer to more abstract social entities, a landscape forms a concrete network of people that mediate the contact between political organizations and its broader social environment²⁰: the larger and more heterogeneous the landscape, the more it is able to help regulate political organizations, in a sort of social reality-testing process. The endogenous reproduction thesis claims, then, that the more a political ecosystem loses its social traction - as it follows in the case of political saturation - the more it tends to rely on its own internal conflicts for regulating itself.

In her ethnographic study of the fragmented state of the Brazilian Left after 2013²¹, the ecosocialist militant Sabrina Fernandes came to a similar conclusion. While tensions between autonomists and party militants, reformists and revolutionaries, anarchists and communists, etc, have always existed, it seemed that one of the effects of the missed encounter between the radical Left and the June Journeys in Brazil was the establishment, or at least the intensification, of a truly unproductive cycle binding together the different sectors of the Left. The Workers' Party accused the smaller radical Leftist parties and the autonomist movement of boycotting their institutional project and of helping the inherently reactionary popular movement to gain traction. The socialist and communist parties, on the other hand, accused the institutional Left of capitulating before the economic pressures of capital and the autonomists of capitulating before the ideological pressures of "postmodern" relativism, thus facilitating the extreme-Right's co-optation of the protesting working class's indignation. Finally, the autonomist collectives and social movements denounced both the Workers' Party and the radical communist parties for their desire to

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²⁰ Nunes, 2021, p.171-172

²¹ Fernandes, 2019

control and direct the popular energy of the protests, while impotently witnessing this very force get either dispersed or re-organized into more conservative ends. Despite appearing to go their separate ways, in truth these different fragments of the Left had become more entangled than ever²², forming a system in which - in the absence of any continuous and effective synergy with a social landscape composed of the emerging social forces - the only trustworthy signals of how to make political decisions came from the recognition of the political failures of the other sectors of the Left.

As Fernandes notes, as the internal conflicts between Leftist tendencies and projects become the most relevant regulators of political action, two worrying symptoms emerge. On the one hand, since every political current wants to distinguish itself as much as possible from the others, this feedback structure acts as a centrifuge that separates political mixtures into more and more *idealized* "political substances", each highly averse to compromise and impurities and therefore unlikely to be able to produce real political effects - a process the author calls the emergence of *ultrapolitics*. On the other hand, when seen from the outside, the exact same dynamics that confirms every political position at the expense of the defeats of others simply signals to by-standers that *the whole Leftist field* is in error - leading to a extreme process of *depolitization*: a total disenchantment with the Left, which appears as an enclosed and privileged space of highly codified behaviors and self-referential discourses, in favor of managerial and entrepreneurial approaches to politics that seem to at least resonate with the realities of everyday life. Unable to establish an intercourse with the new social forces that took to the streets, the Brazilian Left entered a vicious cycle: the more it oscillated between ultrapolitization of each of its fragments and the depolitization of non-militants, the more it closed itself off to any social landscape, and therefore to any indicators of how to develop any meaningful synergy with the new social terrain it inhabited. To make matters worse, in the absence of social traction, a dangerous alternative solution always insinuates itself: to turn the Right into a coordinating force for the Left, which then unites in reaction to the advance of its enemies. The problem here is evident: not only it is impossible to stop the growth of a political force without actually offering people an alternative,

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22 One may remember here the way different areas of the Left antagonized each other over how to act or comprehend the June journeys, and yet all came to entertain - at some point or place - a *negative* relation to the people that took the streets during those days. Be it by downplaying the force, doubting the organicity or straight up repressing the protests in the case of the Worker's Party government; be it by being expelled from the marches in some cities for hoisting their flags in the case of the radical Left parties; be it by voluntarily leaving the mobilizations after the demand of suspending the fare rise was attended in the case of the Movimento Passe Livre, the main autonomist group organizing the protests, thus questioning the widely circulating watchword that the mobilizations "weren't just for the 20 cents". In all cases, a common experience of estrangement to the masses cut across all sectors of the Left, and yet passed terribly unrecognized.

but it is also impossible to fight an enemy if you have a veiled interest in making it seem more powerful than it is - since the greater the threat from the Right, the greater the reason to overcome the conflicts on the Left.

The endogenous reproduction thesis thus claims that one of the effects of intense political saturation is *the increasing separation of the reproductive dynamics of the Left ecosystem from the logic of social reproduction of its own social terrain*. For us, such a thesis implies that we should reject both political theories that directly attach themselves to any of these already established political standpoints within the Leftist spectrum, to the detriment of the others, as well as those which are incapable of recognizing the legitimate rationality of all of these political positions. Instead, we are required to take a step back from identifying relevant political actors through their own political emblems: the more these insignias refer only to tensions *within* Leftist organizations and discourses, the less they shine a light on the actual political forces at play in peripheric social formations. By separating the forms of social reproduction of the Left from its immediate claims to political relevance, we are also freed to recognize the political import of social phenomena which might, until now, pass by us unnoticed.

2.5 Political multiplicity thesis

The peripherization thesis points to a temporal impasse, the vulgarization thesis to a spatialized one. The political saturation thesis points to the mismatch between old political forms and new political forces and the endogenous reproduction thesis to the effects of this mismatch on the old political system itself. Our first proposition of how to respond to these new social and political conditions is called the *political multiplicity thesis*.

As we have seen, the peripherization thesis does not state that contemporary capitalism has arrived at a new world stage, but rather that the truth of capitalist sociality has *always* been in the periphery of the world -system - which is why while advanced capitalist countries face today a destruction of their progressive social conquests, peripheric countries are not essentially transforming their social structures, but rather losing their political reference point in developed capitalist societies. This “uneven and combined apocalypse” suggests that just as the tendency towards social homogeneity revealed itself to be an illusion produced by an exceptional moment in capitalist history, so is the idea that there is a natural tendency towards convergence between different Leftist political processes an effect of the same historical juncture. If there truly is a saturation of the political model built upon modernizing premises, then the first step to develop a political grammar that is native to peripheric conditions is *to drop the belief in any underlying common essence to the Left itself*²³.

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23Tupinambá & Paraná, 2022

The political multiplicity thesis might be a polemic idea, but one of its main consequences is to embed the political field back into contemporary social reality. What we have called the vulgarization of the social space implies, after all, that in the absence of an overarching homogenous social structure people are tasked with navigating sometimes incommensurate normative commitments in order to organize their daily lives, go to work, deal with the police, etc. To suppose that there is no necessary unity or convergence between Leftist projects is simply to extend that same task to political life itself - with two useful corollaries: firstly, *that our political challenges now potentially resonate with the organizational challenges faced by people everywhere* and, secondly, *that local political solutions to these challenges might function as models of solutions to structural problems elsewhere*.

At the same time, once we assume that the consolidation of common objectives, useful ecosystems or even a recognizable Leftist field are all contingent and therefore require additional compositional work, we can also look at the history of the social conditions that facilitate or render this effort impossible to achieve. In fact, the very limit between what are social and what are political organizations, what are practices of social reproduction and what are practices that produce new social forms, becomes less defined. It has become a common trope amongst Marxists to recognize that the move away from the emblematic factory work paradigm also affected the ways the Left can politicize workers - it is one thing to strategically count on capital's own drive to dress everyone in the same uniform and expose them to similar experiences of suffering and indignation, another is to be required to provide this homogeneity ourselves. Suddenly, "pre-political" tasks - an almost therapeutic effort of producing mutual recognition amongst people, the logistical work of creating networks and protocols for sharing information and resources, and the means for guaranteeing the financial subsistence of militants and workers during a struggle - become central components of any collective politics. For us, the thesis of political multiplicity also works as a prudent generalization of this principle: the need to frame our political theory in such a way that we never assume that there is some necessary social tendency that will, by itself, produce a common basis for the multitude of political forces operating within divergent social landscapes.

2.6 Organizational standpoint thesis

This brings us to a last crucial thesis, which helps to provide a general framework for combining the previous five propositions. The thesis of the *organizational standpoint* was actually introduced by Alexander Bogdanov in his writings on "tektology" or the "universal science of organization"²⁴ in early soviet Russia. In its original form, it might be stated as the claim

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²⁴ Bogdanov, 1980

that *there is no such thing as total disorganization*. It follows from such a statement that we cannot use the concept of organization to oppose social life and political activity - as if only the latter was organized - nor can we think of political organization as a particular strategy, opposed to "spontaneous" or "disorganized" politics. In fact, Bogdanov went as far as saying that we also cannot oppose the creation of things to their organization, since to work or produce is already to re-organize some material into a new form. For him, tektology was therefore not the study of a type of thing called "organization", but the study of any thing from the standpoint of its organization.

For us, the organizational standpoint thesis is, above all, the claim that the best way to avoid treating novel social and political forces as formless irruptions or ineffable potentialities is to develop *a theoretical grammar that can remain continuous while thematizing radically discontinuous forms*: continuities and discontinuities between modernizing and peripheric social forms (2.1), between popular and vulgar social spaces (2.2), between old and new political forms (2.3), between fragments of the Left (2.4), between everyday social composition and strict political composition (2.5), etc.

In his recent book *Neither Vertical nor Horizontal: A theory of political organization*²⁵, Rodrigo Nunes takes on this Bogdanovian principle and develops it in two complementary axes. On the one hand, Nunes adopts network theory as a common language that allows us to treat all sorts of human aggregates as organized systems, embedding social and political forms into one common theoretical frame. This first conceptual movement already gives us better resources to think about how social transformations affect the conditions for political practice, since the same set of conceptual tools we would use to describe changes to the social terrain also apply to how we might describe the problems faced by organization of militants, its limitations and cost-structures. On the other hand, since this common theoretical framework blurs the line between what is political and what is not - given that every social entity can be thought as a particular type of organized network - we are suddenly obliged to *identify politics by its effects rather than by its actors*²⁶. Again, this gives us a way out of the self-containment of the Left's endogenous reproduction and new resources to explore the reaches of the multiplicity thesis, since we are freed to consider certain political actors as composing inconsequential dynamics while recognizing that otherwise apolitical practices might play crucial roles in advancing a political cause or in creating conditions for further political composition of forces.

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²⁵ Nunes, 2021

²⁶ Torino & Wohleben, 2019

Finally, a crucial consequence of adopting the organizational standpoint - brilliantly argued by Nunes - is that it not only intrinsically connects the social and the political, but it also turns the problem of how different political organizations relate into a political issue of strategic dignity. This is what Nunes calls the point of view of the *political ecology* - the network of connections between political aggregates and between these groups and their shared social environment²⁷. The concept of political ecologies is a possible answer, from the organizational standpoint, to the impasse of endogenous reproduction and the general principle of political multiplicity: given that we are using the same tools to think different political forms and to think the different ways they might interact with each other, it becomes easier to mix together "first" and "second-order" political tasks, anticipating questions about the effects of certain tactical choices on the ecology of organizations. In other words, the organizational standpoints "flattens" *both* the infra-political and the political - by treating social life as already being organized life - *and* the political and the meta-political - by treating the composition of organizations itself as an organizational problem.

3. From the organizational standpoint to the standpoint of organizations

Motivated by our six theses, our theoretical approach takes seriously the plurality of veracious, but partial perspectives that make up an ecosystem of the Left, considering how different ways to antagonize a complex social system can lead to effective *yet* possibly incompatible mappings of social reality, points of view which we cannot be composed in arbitrary ways, based on some predetermined absolute common ground. There is truth to the picture of the social world that appears to autonomist radical movements, just as there is truth to the point of view of the Workers' Party government and to the point of view of radical Leftist parties - but there is also a profound truth in the fact that these perspectives neither naturally cohere, nor seem on their own sufficient to encompass the full extent of our common social and historical predicament. Today, a working theory of proletarian struggle capable of producing synoptic views of social totality, must allow for a certain *indifference* to the commitments of the different historical traditions in the Left, precisely in order to recognize where each of them lays hold to something real today²⁸. As such, we need

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²⁷ Nunes, 2015, p.171

²⁸ Compare this to a similar problematic in feminist movements, as Donna Haraway elucidates in the Cyborg Manifesto, it is through the common opposition to patriarchal forms of domination, and not the cementation of identities, that feminisms come together. She already proposes a multi-perspective approach, in which apparently incompatible viewpoints can be composed and co-navigate subversion by malleating rigid boundaries. See Haraway, 1990

to think about the interface between the critique of political economy and the construction of political organizations in a way that accounts for the plurality of effective political standpoints that a fractured social space allows for, while being able to navigate between different scales of analysis and action: from the interconnections between concrete forms of social reproduction and the demands of militant life, to the relations between organizations and their ecosystems and, finally, interactions between the space of Leftist organizations to the social world at large.

It is crucial to reiterate that such scale-relative grammar emerges not from a sociological demand, but from a political one, as a response to the organizational challenges faced by radical politics in the context of peripherization, and not as a merely theoretical expansion of social sciences - even if, as a side-effect, social theory might benefit from its development. Rather than deducing what radical politics must look like given that the social world appears in this or that way, our approach allows us to invert the universal and particular terms in this equation.

From the standpoint of our guiding theses, the ecosystem of the Left can be viewed as a possible model of the world it is embedded in - in fact, in line with this intuition, *we maintain that to organize a view of the political movement as a whole is, ultimately, to gather the resources to picture the social world in which these multiple struggles take place.* Accordingly, such theory must also invert the usual precedence of structural analysis of the economy over the questions of concrete organization: rather than expanding the structural analysis of critical sociology and economy onto political organizations, it is the organizational standpoint that must become the general theoretical framework which encompasses social and economic systems.

This is where we believe the Subset of Theoretical Practice might add its first contribution, with our theory of *socially-mediated perspectives*.

The main objective of this theory is to adopt what we have called the organizational standpoint and work out, within this framework, what it then means to "organize" ourselves collectively, in the usual sense we ascribe to the term. In other words, if we are, in some way, ourselves organized, and in constant exchange with our natural and social environments, how do we distinguish *political organization* from any other individual and social organized situations? What type of changes does this bring about? The general answer we seek to provide, through the idea of socially-mediated perspectives, is that different political organizations provide different ways to interact with the social world, and as such, to discover elements of this world otherwise inaccessible to us.

3.1 Collective organization and social mediations

The relevance of those *mediated interactions* becomes apparent when we consider the gap between the global social structures that shape our lives and our lived but local experience of this structured social reality²⁹. As our capacity to map our place in the world diminishes - for example, once induction from particular experiences to global properties is hindered by vulgarization - so does the possibility of envisioning anti-systemic socialist strategies that could help us steer the many forms of contemporary struggle into one same direction. Likewise, instead of gaining a sense for a larger political movement we are part of, individuals and political organizations are left at the mercy of either fragmented points of view or fantasy-like constructions that are meant to idealistically explain away everything, such as conspiracy theories and abstract theorizations with no strategic or programmatic counterpart.

Collective organizational practices - arranging and negotiating meetings with people, producing protocols to coordinate distant actions, deciding on certain markers to assess the success or failure of our actions, taking on new responsibilities, etc - are constantly making individuals confront their imaginary embedding in the world with new situations and normative schemas, facing us with a set of forms and forces that shape how the world appears to us. These determinations are sustained and concretized in the *social relations* between people that make up a certain organizational space: the constraints and costs of our actions, the scarcity of resources and libidinal motivations - for every increase in our collective power to act, there is also a set of new constraints and social resistances we now need to deal with. In politics, we organize the world by acting collectively, but our "social senses" are themselves re-organized by this collective activity, as they are subjected to new social constraints that require us to broaden or transform our ways of experiencing otherwise ordinary situations.

These epistemic capacities provided by social mediators resemble the ethological notion of an *umwelt*³⁰. The *umwelt* is understood for biologists as the *environment* insofar as it presents itself to particular organisms through its specific sensory organs. That is to say, the same flower will appear different to a bat using echolocation, a bird detecting ultraviolet light, and an insect following chemical signatures. In this manner, a larger world is accessible through the physical restrictions imposed by systems of sensation, each of which exhibits a different strength and interacts with a different aspect of the world (electromagnetic radiation, molecular compositions, actively probing

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²⁹ Fredric Jameson already mentions this epistemic reduction in his text *Cognitive Mapping*, although for him it is art that serves as the prime mediator between individuals and social totality. See Jameson, 1990 and Toscano & Kinkle, 2015.

³⁰ Üexkull, 2010

through touch, etc.). In a parallel way, we can think of mediating organizations as organs, each with varied mechanisms, engaging with different aspects of the social world through the particulars of their structure. At any given time individuals will have access to many mediating organs with different compositional makeups: community-based organizations³¹, the variety of state apparatuses³², different types of workplaces³³ - from factory floors to postmodern "collaborative" spaces, etc - each interacting with the social world in a particular way, and hence constituting its environment in equally diverse forms.

Consider the way school occupations *disturb* the social world by enabling the extraction of information otherwise unavailable without the political action of the students³⁴. The composition of the movement - mainly students - enables a certain form of action - interventions on the school system, the student's families, the neighborhood, the state - which in turn yields information about how schools are normally organized - their true budgetary constraints, the effective authoritarian structure hidden behind its pedagogical board. Hence, social forms that make themselves manifest through the disturbance and reaction provoked by political action. In the sense that student occupations as a political practice make available a *perspective* on the world that was not previously available, we are dealing with an *epistemic mediation* operated through collective organization itself.

Of course, in order for the epistemic mediation to effectively occur we must take into account that this particular organizational form *makes available* the perspective to the individual *cognitive* agents that participate in it³⁵. As we will argue later on, political organizing is more akin to a certain form of *experimentation* with the social world and the possible kinds of transitivity between the sensitivity of social and political organizations to their respective environments. From this follows that the composition of individual cognitive agents are a crucial component in determining political experiments as *experiments* - in the sense of verifying the consequences of adopting specific organizational hypotheses.

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31 Viveiros de Castro, 2016

32 Scott, 2020

33 Perec, 2017

34 See the video for the STP presentation for *Elements for a Logic of Struggle*, available on our website.

35 This problem was explored in the *Atlas of Experimental Politics*, by exploring Sohn-Rethel's concept of real abstraction, its relation to social synthesis, and to cognitive agents. See STP, 2021, section XII

3.2 Constraints, action spaces and reductions

Nevertheless, the idea that social mediations can be conceptualized as alternative perspectives on the social world does not in itself help us distinguish whether they are political mediations or not. In short, how do we distinguish between the occupied school, organized by its students, and the regular school in its everyday existence? What part of the social world is accessible through one and not the other? In other words, how might we formalize the gap between a typical space of capitalism and one that has been politicized, one in which *something else* is possible? To answer such questions we need conceptual tools that provide our theory with a kind of socio-political semantics.

In general, we will define social mediations as *social organs that are sensitive to social phenomena*. We will then distinguish between conservative and political mediations in terms of whether the picture of the world they produce is consistent with the current presentation of the social world or if it contains new information about it. It is important to note that we have been emphasizing the informative or epistemic dimension of political organization simply because this is usually taken to be the main feature of what a "perspective" is. But politics is not just a matter of knowledge, or better: in politics, *knowledge* is strictly connected to our capacity to *act* given how we are internally *composed*, to effect change and to recognize and respond to how the world *resists* our own advances³⁶.

This is why our basic theoretical schema does not only include individual agents, social mediations and the social world at large, but also three distinct types of relations between them:

1. *Constraints*: the structures defining the costs of our actions, the effort that it takes to go "against the grain" in a given situation.
2. *Action spaces*: the possible paths we can take when interacting in a given context.
3. *Reductions*: the relevant information about the world needed to adjust future our actions and evaluate previous ones³⁷, a useful picture of the world.

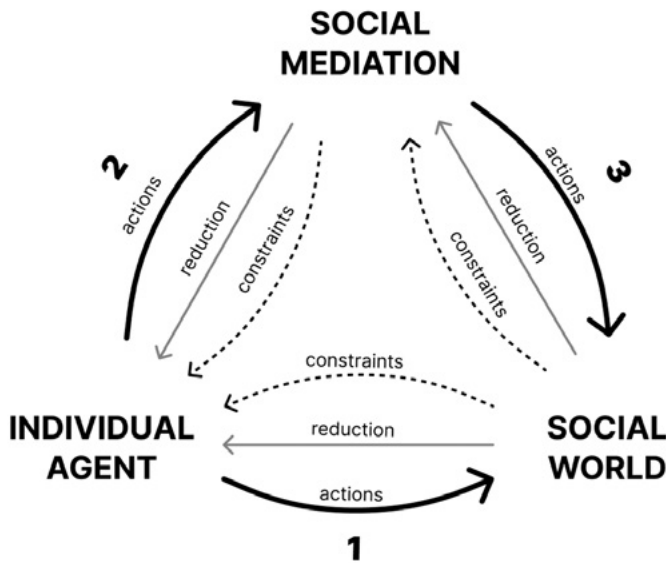
For example, a political party that is participating in an election is constrained by the rules of parliamentary democracy, partially shaping its possible courses of action and also reducing the party's picture of

³⁶ Here we draw on existing research programs to schematize social mediations, including theories of surrogate reasoning and extended cognition. We rely on category theory as a privileged formal tool for modeling the relational-compositional properties of social phenomena.

³⁷ Though we do not explore this here, reductions can be directly defined on the actions and constraints, as a sort of coefficient or differential between the former and the latter. Following an old intuition by Bogdanov himself, I learn about the world insofar as it resists my own actions: knowledge is the product of the world's resistance to labor. See Bogdanov, 1990 and Wark, 2015

the world to some relevant features - captured by the types of social entities the party effectively recognizes as existing, like other parties, candidates, "the people", its "voters", etc - but the party itself then constrains its militants, who get to participate in the electoral process in different capacities, while also seeing the social world through the lenses of the party structure. Finally, our disposition to work for the party is also constrained by our other professional, affective and personal determinations, by what action spaces are available to us and how these condition our own individual pictures of the social world.

With all of this in mind, we propose the following schema, where the bold arrows stand for *action spaces*, the dotted ones for *constraints* and *reductions* are in gray:



A first global feature of this diagram is that its arrows are asymmetric, as they should be: after all, both individuals and social mediations are parts of the social world. It follows, then, that constraints should flow from the world to its parts, just as partial pictures or "reductions" should ultimately compress the same highly complex social object, the social world itself. A second feature, possibly counterintuitive, is that political engagement - the individual's action space in a social mediation - is correlated with the assumption of *additional* social constraints, not their loosening up. Of course, by collectively organizing, individuals might change their social circumstances, acquiring more freedom to act, but our diagram articulates this as a *composite* process, going full circle from action space 2 to 3, and then to the constraint arrow 1. Political

participation itself, from the perspective of an individual, appears as the meeting point of constraint arrow **1** and the composition of constraint arrows **3** and **2**. We could say that political engagement produces a *new problem* - that of compatibilizing these two arriving arrows - before it might offer solutions to old ones - through the completion of a circular determination.

If we go back to the epistemic aspect of our theory, we can see that the present schema divides the problem of mapping the social world into *four* different paths. We can distinguish between:

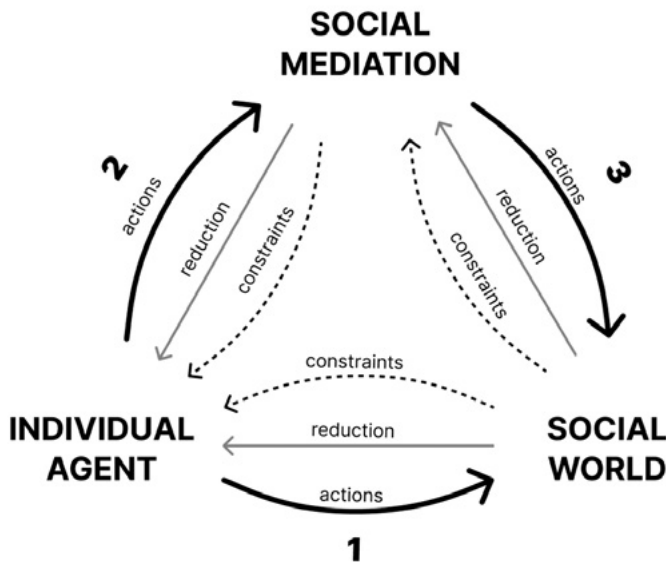
1. the way the world appears to individuals (reduction **1**),
2. the way the world appears to social mediations (reduction **3**),
3. the way mediations themselves appear to individuals (reduction **2**)
4. the way the world appears to individuals *through* mediations (composite of **3** and **2**).

The difference between the last two maps is quite easy to consider: as militants, we can tell apart the norms and values a collective holds as part of its political strategy and its theoretical worldview and those constraints that originate in the clash between a collective project and the social world - laws we now need to consider, new personal and financial relations we enter into because of how organizations are materially embedded in social life, etc. Even though, ultimately, these two arrows compose into a certain filtering of how individuals get to act as part of the organization, the fact this is a composite points to the capacity of collective life to elicit social determinations that our direct individual embedding in social life would not confront us with.

Action spaces, on the other hand, flow from individuals through social mediations to the social world - and we can think of them as establishing a certain range of possible ways to re-organize some situation, acting against its "ortogradient" tendencies, i.e. the paths that "follow the grain" of already established constraints. While individuals surely display different acting capacities, the diversity of action spaces is much clearer at the mediated level, where the action space of a student is different from a teacher, of a 'model' student as opposed to a 'delinquent' student, and so on.

3.3 Equivalent and diverging paths in the diagram

Having presented the different terms and relations that actually compose the schema, let us now focus on the two paths connecting the social world and individuals, the direct path - composed of the set of arrows **1** - and the composite path, with arrows **2** and **3**, which we notate as **3** ◦ **2**, as in "path **3** after path **2**". For the sake of visual simplicity, we are not presenting the reduction arrows in this diagram:



As we already anticipated, the difference between conservative and political social mediations hinge, for us, on the difference between paths **1** and **3** \circ **2**. But before we examine the cases where the two differ, let us first consider the cases where **1** = **3** \circ **2**. These are the situations where the way we are engaged with particular social mediators - it might be our family, an institution or an arbitrary collective group or activity - does not lead to any new information, action or constraint that was not already available in our regular dealings with the world. That is to say, the direct mapping from the social world to an individual agent is the same as the composite facilitated through social mediations. In mathematical terms we would say the diagram *commutes*. Later on, it will become important to identify cases when a diagram does or does not commute - as well as what other relations must be added to a non-commutative diagram so that it commutes again.

For example, a school can be seen as a social mediation - individuals are constrained by the school rules, they act in particular ways while there and they learn all sort of things about the world that they did not know before - but this mediated path is shaped in such a way as to better integrate the individual in the social world that awaits them as independent adults: the forms of authority and freedom they experienced, the new capacities and the picture of the world they acquired are all later reproduced in one way or another in their experience of the social world³⁸.

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38 It is important - though we will not pursue this here - to also consider the two extreme cases where **1** = **3** \circ **2**, that is, those where social mediations are indistinguishable from one of the two other focal points. These are particularly useful cases to consider because, conceptually, they help to confirm that our approach is first and foremost organizational - meaning, that despite the initial impression, *it is the intermediate term that has existential precedence over the other two*. At the same time, the very

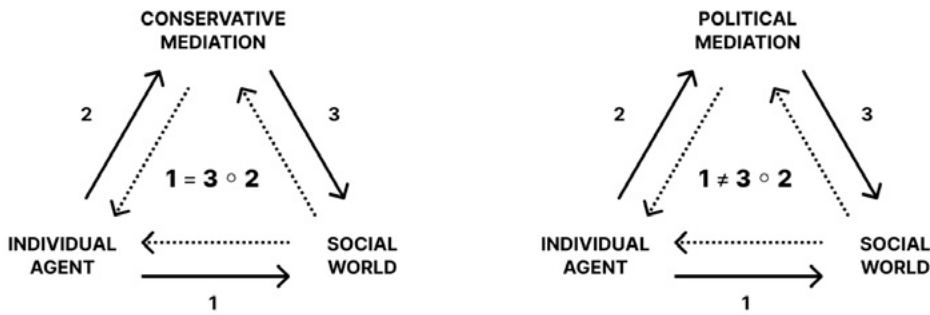
We have seen that there are two paths between the social world and the individual - either directly through the arrows **1** or indirectly via social mediations and the composition of **2** and **3** - and, in fact, the crucial function of the diagram is to explore the *difference* between cases where these two paths lead to the same result and those where they do not. This is such a central property of the schema that we believe it can function as the basis for distinguishing political inside social practices - a distinction which, living up to our initial theses, does not require any previous commitment to particular strategies, programs or particular actors.

What matters to a collective organization can be different than what matters to us individually. For example, someone might say that their life was left unchanged by the election of an authoritarian government, but if by chance they start organizing, for whatever reason, with people for whom the new governmental politics make a strong difference, the mediating collective now confronts them with a new relevant feature of the world that also influences, through the organization, their own constraints and action space. We do not need to know beforehand which type of organization this is, what it says about itself or its explicit political banner, the very logic of constraint-passing, schematized in our diagram, helps us discern a more functional or intrinsic political dimension to this process.

From this perspective we are able to differentiate between what we will call a *conservative* and a *political* practice. We will call *conservative practices* all those cases where $\mathbf{1} = \mathbf{3} \circ \mathbf{2}$, that is, where the reductions, constraints and actions made possible by a given social mediation *remain consistent with the world* when an individual interacts with it outside of that particular institution or collective. To go back to our main example, a school is a subset of the social world, and a student is someone that is constrained by the school *and thereby by the social world*.

On the other hand, a school occupied by students protesting against a government reform becomes an organization whose constraints *cannot be accounted for* by mere reference to the rules of the social world they are in. If parents or journalists ask the students "why are you doing this, disrupting classes, compromising your future?" the answer will most likely mobilize certain constraints ("we cannot let the government cut the education budget"), capacities ("the school is ours and cannot be closed down while we occupy it") and worldviews ("being a student is *more* than being educated to integrate the workforce") that are not immediately available as part of the "**1**-arrows" situating individuals in their social world - in short, this is a case where the direct and the indirect paths are *not* equivalent, that is, where $\mathbf{1} \neq \mathbf{3} \circ \mathbf{2}$.

possibility of accounting for these cases strongly suggests a deeper resonance between our organizational approach and an area of mathematics called category theory, in which objects are ultimately reducible to their relations. To explore these cases, we would need to add a new type of arrows to our diagram, called identity arrows, but these constructions are - as they say - "left as exercises to the reader".



If we consider the three types of arrows in our fully fleshed diagram for a moment, we can now name the difference between **1** and $3 \circ 2$ for each of them:

1. We call political *discipline* the case the constraints we admit by engaging in collective projects do not coincide with the constraints that the world directly imposes on us;
2. We call political *power* if the space of possible actions mediated by organizations does not coincide with our direct power as individuals in the social world;
3. We call political *knowledge* if the reduction of the world mediated by a collective organization is different than the way the world appears to our individual selves.

We are left, then, with a potentially infinite set of conservative social practices, going from social individuality all the way to large-scale social structures such as international markets, conditioned by two properties:

1. They are part of the social world, and
- 2a. Participating in these social mediations and directly participating in the social world are ultimately synonymous - just as “going to school” and “being a good citizen” are related as if the former was a particular case of the latter’s general social imperative.

On the other side, we have the more elusive set of organizational forms - again, of whatever scale these might be, from experimental forms of individuality all the way to large national and international associations, defined by:

1. Being part of the social world, and
- 2b. Being formed in such a way that the power, discipline and knowledge of the world available through them is ultimately *distinct* from how these dimensions shape our individual social lives and regulate the workings of the social world.

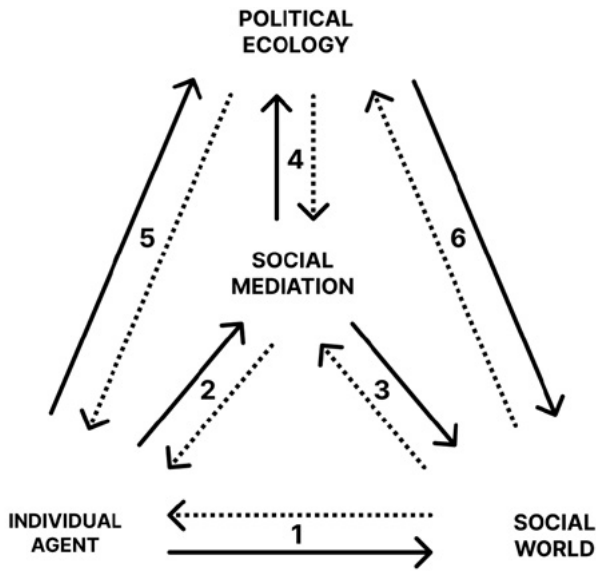
In our diagram, the first set corresponds to the cases where $1 = 3 \circ 2$ and the second to those where $1 \neq 3 \circ 2$. But this brings us to a fundamental issue: what are the *conditions* for divergence?

3.4 Political ecology

In our example of the occupied school, we mentioned that, when confronted by other social institutions, the organized students might sound unreasonable: in the “game of giving and asking for reasons”, students mobilize a series of normative commitments that are tied to the perspective opened by their embedding in the world mediated by the political occupation. From the perspective of parents, journalists, policemen - that is, institutions whose perspectives on the world are trivially embedded in its space - these are not acceptable motivations, their practices are indistinguishable from vandalism, idealist dreams and their goals ultimately appear as untenable or unrealistic. But if the occupied school, with its particular form of organization, offers a new perspective on the world, where do its own alternative characteristics come from?

Until now, we managed to construct a primarily organizational distinction between conservative and political practices and we have also indicated that, in the cases where $1 \neq 3 \circ 2$, political organizations offer non-trivial perspectives on the world. The question of where the difference between these two paths might come from brings us to the third problem we sought to address, namely, the role of the practical construction of a point of view of the political movement itself, through the composition of different political processes. The need to treat the problem of *political ecology*³⁹ with the same theoretical tools employed to understand social and political organizations was already anticipated in our last theses, after all. So let us then introduce a fourth term to our diagram, provisionally called the “political ecology”, to stand in for the larger ecosystem of different political organizations and their actual composition:

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³⁹ Again, here we follow Nunes, 2021



The introduction of this new term complicates our diagram quite a bit, since we must now consider the arrows that connect it to individuals (5), social mediations (4) and the social world (6). For now, we will only concentrate on the connection between social mediations and the political ecology - that is, the arrows labeled 4 - and assume that if a political organization is part of a political movement, that is, if it acts on the movement, is constrained by it and has a picture of this "political body", then the set of arrows 5 and 6, binding the ecology to the world, commute with 4. In fact, though we will only return to it in section 5, it is easy to realize that in order for this new diagram to commute - that is, for the relations between individuals and the movement and the movement and the world to be consistent with the relations mediated by $3 \circ 2$, both the individual and the world *would have to also appear differently* than how they appear to the conservative point of view. We will return to this point later on, as an even richer structure is needed to account for it.

But let us go back to the case of our militant students, as this new diagram helps us see that the additional constraints they are subjected to do not come from their personal eccentricities or from purely abstract principles, but are concretely passed along by the history of previous struggles in education in many other places and times, by the existence of other schools being occupied and, in all those cases, by the necessity to connect their own organizational means to a larger field of political practices. In other words, these new characteristics ultimately come from the political ecology that the occupation is actively making itself a part of. In our new expanded diagram, we can redefine the conservative and political structures in terms of their different relations to the new set of arrows we have introduced. We can now say that conservative mediations are trivially included in the social world insofar as these organizations

remain unconnected to larger political compositional spaces - that is, cases where $1 = 3 \circ 2 = 4$ - while political organizations are those mediations that are subjected both to the constraints of the world and to the constraints of trying to compose together with other political practices - that is, cases where $1 = 3 \circ 2$ *only if* $5 = 4 \circ 2$ and $6 = 3 \circ 4$.

From the point of view of this expanded diagram, we are able to situate the apparently exceptional or “irrational” character of the students’ justifications, decisions and concerns in terms of the concrete challenges of rendering their own practice of occupying their school compatible with those of other organizations in the same political ecology (other schools - occupied or yet to be occupied -, official and unofficial student entities, mobilized parents and teachers, autonomous groups and political parties, etc). What this entails may vary radically: from the mere evocation of past revolts and revolutions as inspiration - nonetheless implying some level of submission to the task of continuing in their wake - to attempts of producing strong connections with a community of supporters, to large-scale strategic needs of the students’ movement across the nation. These connections might be more or less stable, they might entail the transmission of methods, particular resources or specific problems, but they nonetheless help us situate and contextualize the *common* dimension of the otherwise exceptional divergence of politics from conservative or orthogradient social life.

The expanded diagram affirms, then, that a political organization is capable of producing new points of view on the social world - through political discipline, political power and political knowledge - in direct proportion to this organization’s connection to a political ecology or a larger political movement. The less a political process is dependent on others, the more its own constraints, action space and reductions of the social world tend to be indistinguishable from those that already subsume individuals - in other words, the more these alternative constraints and capacities exist only as representational contents, idealizations or personal preferences. And this is quite reasonable: a supposedly Leftist political party which is incapable of connecting and reshaping itself through its relations to any other political processes is pretty much indistinguishable from any other social institution in the world, regardless of its professed political leanings.

With the theory of socially-mediated perspectives we have developed a first schema to approach the main problems we originally diagnosed in our six theses: we can now situate the effect of complex worlds on their social mediations, as per the peripherization thesis; we can use our theory of political ecologies and political organizations to discuss the thesis of the systematic fragmentation of the Left, taking seriously how different forms of political organization might lead to potentially incompatible reductions of social reality; and we can use the thesis of political multiplicity and the organizational standpoint to explore

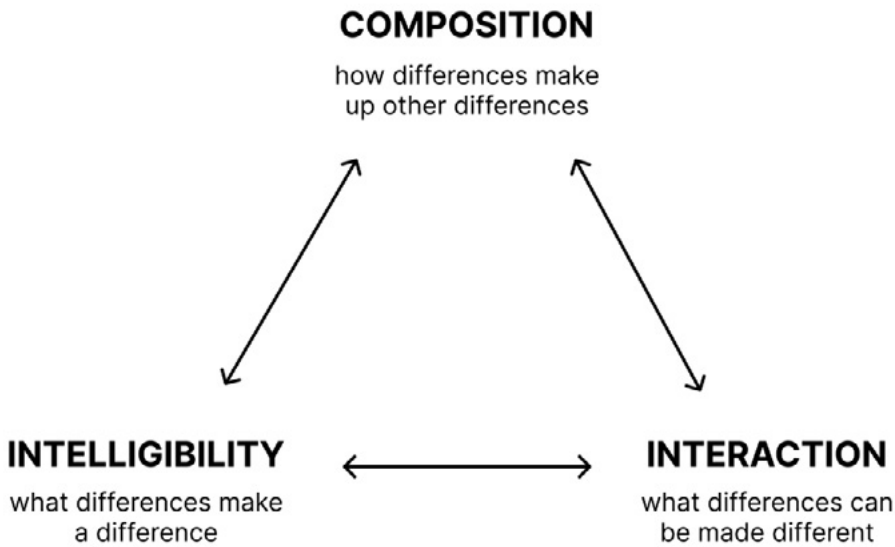
what it might mean to navigate a highly heterogeneous ecosystem of Leftist organizations, developing better conceptual and practical tools that take these compositional challenges into consideration. Returning to the parallel with the concept of "umwelt" in biology, the fragmentation of the Left must not be a reason for despair, indeed, the plethora of social experimentation allows to reconstruct a larger, multi-perspective signal because each organizing form serves as a different sensory organ, capturing distinct dimensions of the world. Carrying out this task is not particularly trivial, but we now understand it is less about finding our way out of some scorched land, and more of a task of pruning, sowing and grafting.

3.5 *Organizational trinitarianism*

Fasciously borrowing an expression employed by computer theorists, we call *organizational trinitarianism* the set of basic conditions for considering any social phenomena from the organizational point of view. For us, to adopt the organizational perspective means to admit a fundamental equivalence between the question of how organizations are *composed*, of what they manage to *interact* with and of what is *intelligible* to them. To approach a social phenomena organizationally is, for us, to frame it from the perspective of this triad, exploring each of its separate aspects while maintaining that they are ultimately expressing the same thing⁴⁰.

A nice way to understand the distinction between these three aspects is to think of composition as the logic of *how differences make up other differences* - of how small parts can make up larger structures with similar or emergent properties, for example - to think of interaction as the logic of *what differences can be made different* - of how a given object is able to affect itself and others in particular ways - and intelligibility as the logic of *which differences make a difference* - that is, of which features are relevant and irrelevant in a given context.

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⁴⁰ A longer account of our theory of organizational trinitarianism can be found in STP, 2021, section IV



The profound connection between these three poles can be intuited by considering, for example, that depending on how the occupation of the school is organized - forms of hierarchy, deliberation, the social composition of students, etc - it will meet different resistances from the world, constituting different environments with alternative mappings of social reality. A school occupation composed of poor black students in a peripheral neighborhood will, by virtue of its composition and the forces it interacts with, serve as a much better "social sensor" to the presence or absence of police cars, than the occupation of middle class white students who tacitly count with their parents social influence to protect them from certain forms of violence. Similarly, an occupation composed of the same people, but organized in two different ways - one that directly follows orientations from an anarchist political group, and another that regulates its strategies through assemblies with other nearby schools - will equally constitute different interactional spaces, with possibly heterogeneous pictures of the political world.

Social mediations can be generalized to organizations of non-human entities working as social agents in their causal capacities. Consider the case of technology, in which everyday life is organized and mediated through electronic gadgets, industrial and military machines, social media apps and surveillance and advertisement software, as well as technological extraction and distribution of energy and natural resources. Under the facade of neutral and mathematical form, algorithmic society organizes and controls human life through logical flows, automated protocols and ostensibly unambiguous directives. Take as a specific example the case of automation in the judicial system, in which algorithms are used to predict recidivism, influencing a judge's decision and endowing technology with the power of social organization:

a material rearranging of bodies determining which individuals are able to freely navigate the infrastructural, economic and social world, and which are to be caged for uncommitted but possible crimes. This specific directive works in conjunction with the larger system of technological objects mediating social life, by interacting for example with economic and resource algorithmic guarddogs, like mortgage algorithms through which the possibility of a house is realized. Having been favored by these algorithms, an individual is located in a specific neighborhood in which geographically specific goods like educational, health, political and infrastructural benefits are abundant. In this way the technological system of classifiers, predictors, recommenders, and automated protocols organizes everyday life, interpersonal connectivity networks, and relations between individuals and institutions.

4. Social complexity and multilayered social worlds

Section 2 presented six theses that characterize our approach to the challenges of thinking political organization today. Section 3 offered a diagrammatic account of social and political mediations that tries to live up to the stakes and restrictions we identify in our new conjuncture. But the picture provided by this construction remained a bit "flat", since it only approached the difference between social and political effects in terms of the equivalent or divergent paths between individuals and the social world. This is why, in section 3.5, we took a step back to the more speculative idea of "organizational trinitarianism", which helped us to introduce a more complex and rich take on the mediations presented in the previous section. In this last discussion, the questions of composition, interaction and intelligibility were not treated merely in schematic terms - do paths commute or not? - but presented a qualitative dimension, correlating different types of organizations to different accesses to the world.

This intermediate theoretical step was a necessary detour before the present section, which seeks to address more concretely the currently underdetermined nature of what we have thus far called "social worlds". We know that social mediations and individuals are, ultimately, parts of a larger social system, but if we have no way of making our theory of social reality more precise, then the theory of organization that follows from analyzing the interaction between parts of this reality will also be underdetermined and vague. Luckily, we found the means to formally and conceptually flesh out our theory of historically specific social spaces in the work of Japanese Marxist thinker Kojin Karatani.

Karatani's project⁴¹ combines two propositions, both of great interest to us. The first could be understood as a mixture of the

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41 Karatani, 2014

peripherization, vulgarization and multiplicity theses: rather than grounding historical materialism on the concept of "mode of production", Karatani takes a step back and defines three different modes of intercourse which are combined, in singular ways, to form a system of social production⁴². These three modes are defined by different social logics: mode **A** concerns communities, the logic of reciprocity and gift-economy, mode **B** the logic of property, contracts and state power and mode **C** the logic of value and the dynamic of capital⁴³. The second proposition of Karatani's theory is that concrete social phenomena are best conceived as a particular mixture of these logics, so that by analyzing them and their interactions, we are actually providing a "transcendental analysis" of world history⁴⁴ - an analysis of the historically-specific constitution of social objects. The combination of these two proposals - brought together in his magnum opus, *The Structure of World History* - deeply resonate with our own organizational point of view: depending on how these logics are composed together, different concepts of production emerge, and hence different properties for what counts as social phenomena in a given historical context. Not only this, but given a certain complex mixture of these logics, different ways of composing social mediations - parts of this world - will "slice" this world in distinct ways, interacting, seeing and being constrained in qualitatively different manners.

The question then becomes if we can construct a version of Karatani's theory within our own conceptual grammar, in view of rendering the theory of social worlds more concrete and, through it, further specifying the distinctions between conservative social mediations, political organizations and political ecologies. This leads us to another fundamental result of the STP's current research, which we call the theory of *multilayered social worlds*. A lot of our collective efforts have gone in showing the consistency of this idea, which in fact opens up to a very ambitious project. Given the constraints of this essay we will only sketch the basic tenets of the theory here⁴⁵.

We begin by defining each of Karatani's modes of intercourse as a different "transcendental" social logic. We preserve this philosophical term simply because it implies the logical analysis of determinations that *precede* the constitution of objects and phenomena. So for each of the different modes, we distinguish a transcendental labeled **T_A**, **T_B**

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42 To avoid confusion with the usual meaning of "exchange" in Social Sciences and Marxism - which have "circulationist" connotations - we prefer to alter the english translation of Karatani's theory to "modes of intercourse".

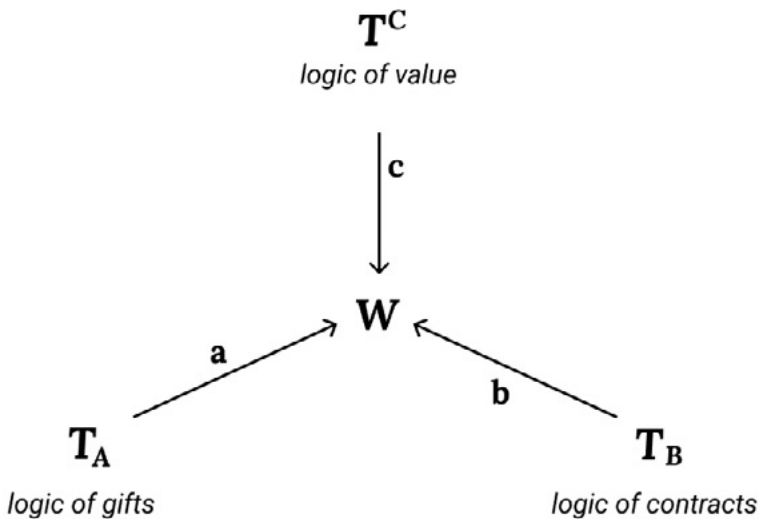
43 STP, 2021, section II

44 Karatani, 2014

45 See STP, 2021 for a longer engagement with this theory.

and T_c , respectively. The fact that these logics are “transcendental”⁴⁶ does not mean they are ahistorical or subjective: the reason why they precede consistent social reality is rather because they are inconsistent on their own, incapable of fully accounting for the organizational forms of any given social formation. The logic of reciprocity, T_A , can lead to wars and to paradoxical forms of sacrifice. The logic of property, T_B , is continuous with the logic of revolutions and paradoxes of sovereignty. Finally, the logic of value, T_c , includes the logic of crisis, and cannot avoid the paradox of unemployment. Together, however, they can “suture” their own inconsistencies via the others, expanding their reach and acquiring a logical closure and consistency.

We call W a social formation formed by the mixture and interdependence of these three social logics and specify a superscript W^x to determine which of the three logics is the dominant one in that social formation - that is, the logic which is the most responsible for the intelligibility of that social world. A capitalist world, where the logic of value has this dominant role, is therefore written as W^c .

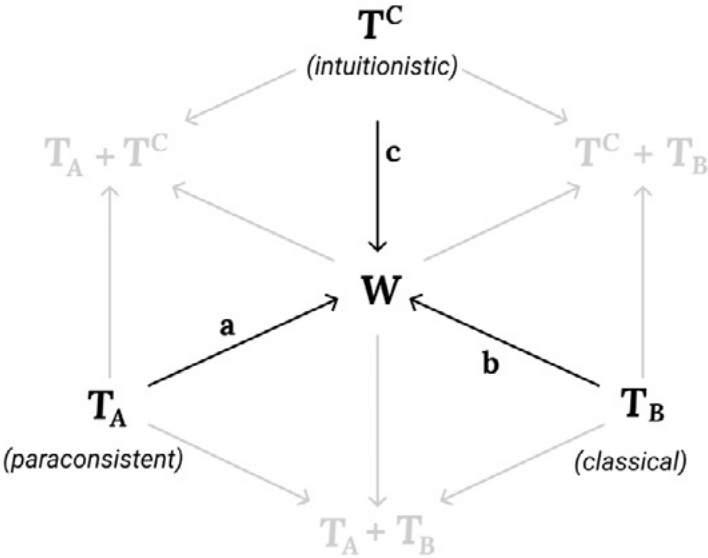


However, if we are to provide a consistent account of multilayered social worlds, the crucial step would be to distinguish these different social logics *in purely organizational terms*, that is, without taking as a given substantial distinctions between value, properties and gifts - instead, these different objects or forms of social exchange must be derivable from a homogeneous background, made up of organizations and organizations between organizations, etc. Our own approach to

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46 Our theory of "transcendentals" is very much indebted to Alain Badiou's work *Logics of Worlds*. See Badiou, 2009

this has been to show that, even without any reference to sociological data, we can already derive some of their well-known properties simply by distinguishing between different organizational *logics* - interactions which, at first, are only locally valid and then, through certain common stabilizing conditions, acquire further reach and universality, becoming increasingly distinct from one another as large social structuring principles. Our starting hypothesis, then, is that the logic of reciprocity is essentially *paraconsistent* - since the reciprocation of a gift is only ever appropriate if the counter-gift is not appropriate - while the logic of contracts would be *classical* - in that an agreement between two parties either holds or not, with no intermediate term - and the logic of value essentially *intuitionistic* - with any two given commodities being “more or less” equivalent.

Furthermore, developing Karatani’s own insights, we have found a diagram in the work of mathematician René Guitart which consistently models the relations between these different logics into what he calls a “borromean object”⁴⁷. Here, **W** is determined by **T_A**, **T_B** and **T_C**, but, once this mixture is produced, we can also define different ways of “slicing” this complex world into partial composites: **T_A+T_B**, **T_B+T_C** and **T_C+T_A**:



Ultimately, our aim is to replace the vague term “social world” in our initial diagram - originally defined in a very weak and vague way - for the complex structure of **W^C** - a social formation whose social objects are constituted by a multilayered complex structure, dominated by the logic of value. By doing this, the theory of social mediations becomes much more robust: we can now more concretely ask about the particular social

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47 Guitart, 2011

composition of a given mediation - the way it brings together the logics of \mathbf{T}_A , \mathbf{T}_B and \mathbf{T}_C - and investigate how this particular social structure might condition what such an organization is able to interact with and how other parts of the social world appears to this specific social object itself.

All of our previous examples can be understood as different assessments of how certain organizations, composed as singular mixtures of communitarian, contractual and value logic, get to interact and “see” the social world. Of course, we have already indicated that, for us, the political quality of organizations is formally captured by the idea that they are parts of the world which are *not* reducible to its composite social logic - which is why their normative structure cannot be made explicit under regular social conditions and why, ultimately, political organizations can offer new perspectives on social reality. In order to reintroduce this difference between conservative and political practices, another clause will be added to the borromean social diagram in the next section. But before we do so, let us once more explore the theory of conservative organizational mediations that remain fully caught up in the structure of the social world.

In our work of reconstruction of Marx's *Capital* from the organizational point of view⁴⁸, we realized that the theory of value-form can be perfectly conceptualized as a particular type of organizational form, the basic form of mediation in the layer \mathbf{T}_C . In fact, the famous passage from the simple form of value to the expanded and then universal equivalent-form can be seen as the step by step construction of a social sensor - money - whose material composition, which Marx calls its “formal use value”, allows it to express, in terms of parts of itself, differential relations it establishes with other commodities⁴⁹. And just as money is a social object that is able to interact with commodities in terms of their particular prices, capital - composed of money that becomes more money - is able to interact with commodities in terms of their particular capacities to generate more value - seeing commodities under the light of variable and constant capital. In other words, the same principle that applies to collective organization - that their composition affects what they get to sense and interact with in the social world - also applies to economic categories, a crucial feature we were looking for in our theoretical programme.

Though we cannot go into this here, similar constructions are possible for mediations at the layer \mathbf{T}_B - for example, a sovereign can

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48 The formal treatment of these ideas can be found in STP, 2021b. For a less technical description, see STP, 2021, section XI.

49 In particular, we can describe production and exchange in terms of commodity-preserving operations. The total space of such operations is the setting for an objective commodity logic, from which we can recover Marx's categories. More details can be found in our recorded meetings in which we discuss STP, 2021b.

also be understood as a social sensor through which relations between subjects are established - and T_A - as a shaman is also constituted as an object that sees relations between natural and supernatural composites⁵⁰. The underlying theory is the same, a general organizational approach, but the specific logic, consequences and operations for each of these layers are all very distinct from one another, with no direct analogies being possible. Finally, we can use our new diagram for complex worlds W and consider the composition of these layers into equally complex social objects - complex normative structures for social behavior that constraint, shape the affordances of different social practices and the way this polymorphous social structure appears to a given social object.

With the help of Karatani's theory of the modes of intercourse, we are then able to enrich our theory of social mediations, showing that there is absolutely no need to consider that just because the direct and indirect paths in our initial diagram are equivalent that then these two different institutions or social practices will be commensurate with one another. Highly complex worlds, such as the ones posited by the peripherization and vulgarization theses, in which layers T_A , T_B and T_C *do not form a homogeneous "tessellation" of social space*, can include properly incommensurate social institutions, practices and constraints, each with its own situated validity and reach, while not implying the sort of divergence between individual social embedding and collective social engagement that qualifies political organizations in our schema.

5. Communist hypothesis, political antagonism, socialist transition

5.1 Political organizing as social investigation

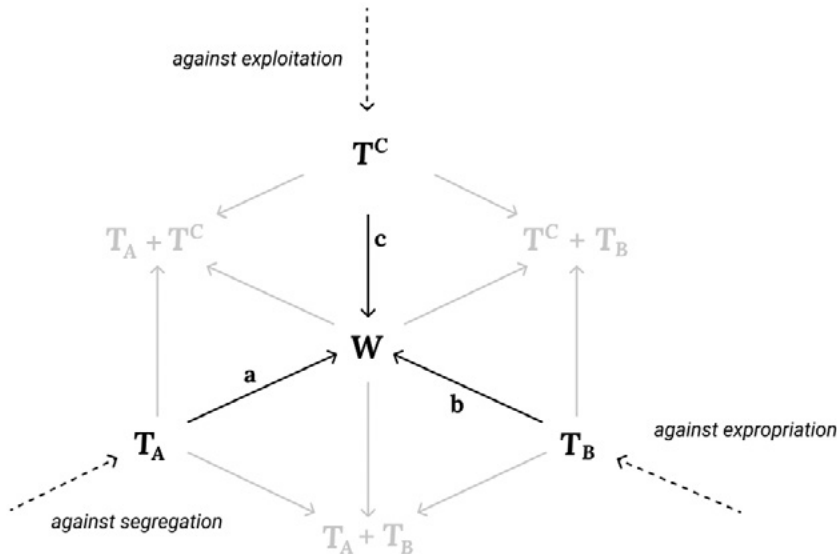
The theory of multilayered social logics allows us to add crucial and complex determinations to our understanding of social worlds and social practices - but we still need to understand how our initial distinction between conservative and political practices fits into this expanded framework. In fact, now that we have proposed a richer conception of social worlds, a new problem imposes itself, a possible contradiction: if we maintain that our access to social reality is mediated by the construction of social organizations that interact with this world, then how is it possible that we ascribe some basic characteristics to our picture of complex social reality as such? Is there not a circularity at play when we define the social terrain of political organization while claiming that it is collective organization itself which is capable of mapping this social reality?

This is where we must introduce a crucial distinction between our project and Karatani's transcendental theory of social formations.

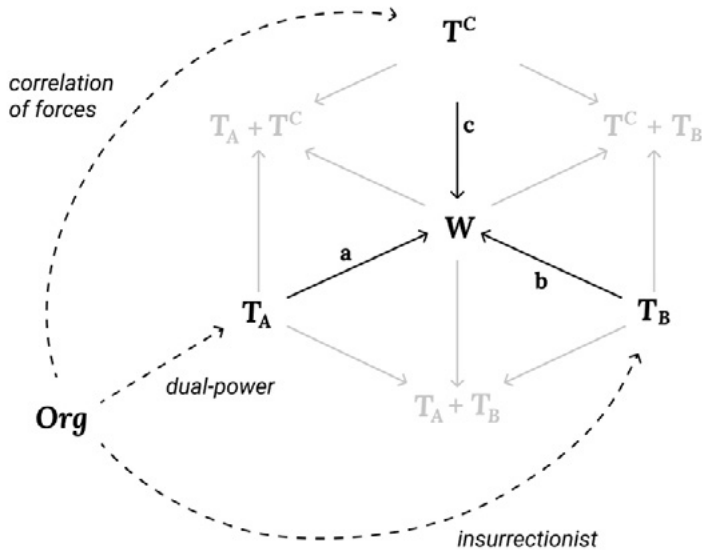
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50 See STP, 2021, sections VII to XII.

We maintain that the true origin of the accumulated knowledge we have about different modes of intercourse is in fact the long history of political struggles themselves, the collective history of how, in trying to organize otherwise, we have slowly learned what are the social constraints that resist us and thus define different aspects of historical worlds. This approach is not only consistent with our theory of socially-mediated perspectives, but it actually follows from the thesis on political multiplicity: it is precisely *because* there are multiple Leftist orientations - some which compose their collectives with emphasis on the communitarian dimension, others on the anti-state struggles, other mobilized primarily against capital - that there are multiple forms of thinking about the social world, each capable of theorizing the immanent logic of a given social logic better than the others. The naming of these ideas and their reduction into text and motifs often falls into the hands of the academic elite, yet their true elaboration lies within the historical struggle of diverse political movements, whose interactions with the world force these social structures to appear. Without this socially enacted thinking, there would be nothing to write *about*.

It is worth repeating that these three social logics T_A , T_B and T_C never appear separately, which also means that political struggles against them, even if focused on one of them, are also organizational composites and mixtures. So when we discern the history of the Lefts in terms of three strands, we are also proposing a sort of transcendental analysis of political strategies which could never appear in such pure form - at least not without running into some inconsistencies. So let us return now to our diagram **W** and add three different forms of *resistance*, one for each social layer:



Again, it is quite surprising to realize that the three arrows leaving from **Org** to **W** - which correspond to the three negations or forms of resistance to the particular layer of **T_A**, **T_B** and **T_C** in a social formation - actually correspond to the three basic types of radical political strategy we know of⁵². We mentioned that the logic of **T_A**, for us, is essentially paraconsistent - and the logic of *dual-power*, which also privileges the strategic focus on community-forming, shares this same logic, producing a new social space that is both inside and outside a given communitarian world. The logic of **T_B** is classical, and strategies which focus on the state, like the *insurrectionist* one, tend to also be binary, relying on some idea of a clear cut between the before and the after of the taking of power. Finally, we maintain that **T_C** is intuitionistic, and, once more, the logic of the *correlation of forces*, at stake in strikes and other forms of assault against capital, also works with a sliding scale of victories, negotiations and defeats. Evidently, in actual political reality, these political forms of resistance are always mixed together in different ways - but it is quite telling that this correspondence is possible in principle:



52 Nunes, 2021, p.223 splits different types of socialist strategy in similar ways to us.

Now, we call the *communist hypothesis*⁵³ the claim - which is ultimately only provable through concrete political practice - that **Org** is *larger than W*, in other words, that the world seen from the standpoint of the composition of political processes - that is, from the standpoint of a concrete political ecology - can appear *larger* than the world seen from its dominant logic⁵⁴. The communist hypothesis is precisely the proposition that the concrete social object made up of the composite of as many political organizations as possible “sees” more of a given social world than that world itself. It is a veritable *embedding* of a given social formation **W^x** into a new one, **W⁺**, where the plus-sign stands for the inclusion into the world, in a dominant form, of the logical constraints first experimented with within the political movement that carried with **W**.

We now have the means to return to our initial diagram and - using **Org** and the theory of the three forms of political negation - enrich our understanding of the formula for political organization, based on the divergence of paths, presented in section 3.3. It should now be clear that, for us, a political organization is:

1. Composed of a particular mixture of the logics **T_A**, **T_B** and **T_C** that make up **W**,
2. Composed in such a way that *at least one* of these logics is negated - which already leads to a complex typology of political practices,
3. Composed in such a way that the consistency of these negations rely to some degree on the constraints imposed by the political ecology⁵⁵.

It is crucial to note, for the sake of clarity, that **Org** does *not* correspond to what we called a political ecology in section 3.4: the latter is best understood as the concrete existence of a political ecosystem - a real and shared space of resources, methods and constraints that political processes participate in. The former remains a broader heuristic point of view, which, on the one hand, guarantees that all the terms in our concrete analysis are conceived only as organizational systems and, on the other, that under the communist hypothesis there are more organizational forms and arrangements to invent and explore than those that compose our known social world. An ecology rather forms the conditions for politics to experiment with unknown determinations in **Org**.

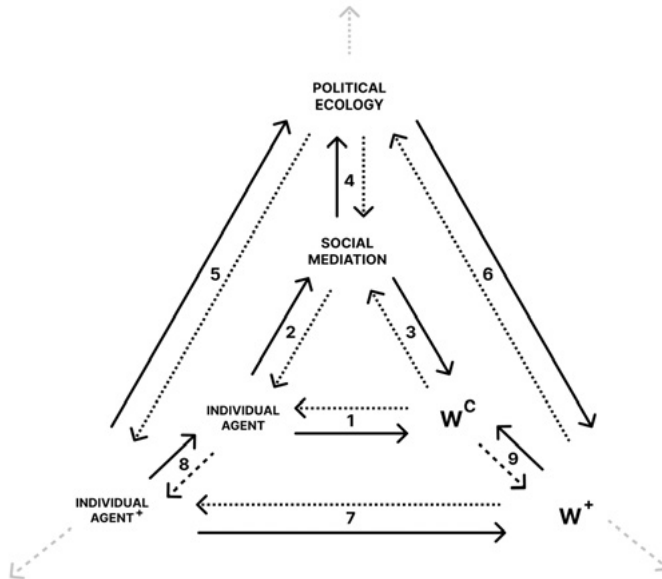
.....
53 Badiou, 2015

54 A useful discussion of this point regarding Org and our view on the scalar paradigm can be found in our meeting entitled *Open Discussion: Real Abstraction and the Communist Hypothesis*, starting at 36:35.

55 These three conditions match up nicely with Aurora Apolito's theory of instruments of complexity and instruments of connectivity - see Apolito, 2021

5.3 Emancipatory, conservative and reactionary politics

If we now return to the diagram we constructed by the end of section 3, adding to it our expanded conception of complex social worlds, their parts and possible relations, several interesting remarks become possible - especially those concerning a more robust characterization of what *emancipatory*, *conservative* and *reactionary* politics might be. But in order to introduce these ideas, we must first take up a passing remark made in section 3.3, when we claimed that if we were to propose a diagram for political organizations that captured its commutative properties, we would have to not only consider the arrows connecting organizational mediations to a political ecology, but also find a way to differentiate between individual agents and social worlds which make the conservative structure commute and new individual and social worlds that commute with the field of political struggle itself - written here as *individual agent*⁺, naming a different *type* of social individuality, and **W**⁺, for an expanded or enriched social world. Such an expanded diagram might look something like this:



We have here some recognizable paths, which we previously introduced, such as **1**, between individuals and the social world, **2** and **3**, indirect paths mediated by organizations, **4**, which accounts for how organizations make up and are constrained by political ecologies. And we have some new arrows: paths **5** and **6** account for how political ecologies act and are constrained by *new social forms of individuality* and *new social worlds* in such a way that these individual forms also relate to these expanded social realities themselves - that is arrow **7**. We also introduce arrows **8** and **9** to account for the transformation of one individual form into another and one world into another, respectively. Finally, the gray dotted arrows

coming out of each pole of the diagram indicate that every one of these terms is ultimately a part of **Org** - which helps to give a more concrete meaning to the communist hypothesis: the larger the space of what is possible in a social world, the more **W** explores what exists within **Org**.

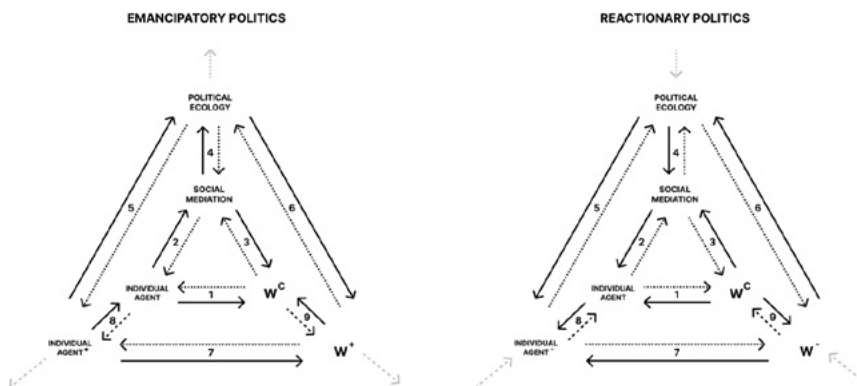
The reason for constructing this expanded diagram, however, is that it allows us to propose an interesting account of the difference between emancipatory, conservative and reactionary politics. First, let us note that our current definition of emancipatory political organizations states that it is a social mediation which challenges the composite logic of the social world in at least one of its logical layers. This means we can already distinguish between emancipatory processes that involve the negation of only one logic, the negation of two or the negation of three at the same time. Collective organizations that are perfectly ordinary when it comes to economic and legal status might still produce political effects if they interact with the communitarian layer in new ways, challenging segregational constraints, for example. We can then have political processes that involve the negation of two logics - and those which negate all three, challenging both communitarian, state and capital logics all at once, something we find in many examples of communes throughout the world. It is quite understandable - as we already established early on - that the more a political process resists integration into **T_A**, **T_B** and **T_C**, the more it relies on the composition of a common political ecology to spell out its own normative and structural commitments and to be able to expand its own reach beyond a limited situation. Political processes that resist on a particular logical front, on the other hand, can extract their consistency from those logics it did not put into question - like a Left-wing government that may implement public policies and laws that combat forms of segregation and discrimination, while also curbing the power of corporations and promoting wealth distribution, this at the expense of expanding the bureaucratic, judicial and repressive apparatus of the state in a conservative or reactionary manner.

This characterization combines the diagrammatic approach of divergent and equivalent paths between **1**, **2** and **3**, introduced in section 3.3, with our organizational take of multilayered complex worlds, from section 4. It contains as a sub-case of itself the conservative political dynamic, which we can define, diagrammatically, as the case where direct and indirect paths between individuals and social worlds are equivalent and, compositionally, where no social logics are effectively put into question. Conservative processes, for example, might be composed of organizations that lean on the consistent or proper functioning of at least one of the logics in order to reconstruct the instabilities in the others - as when patriotic values are called upon as a means to tame the wild dynamics of State and Capital - with the utmost conservatism corresponding to the full adhesion to the particular entanglement of the three logics in a particular social formation.

Using these theoretical resources, we can already distinguish emancipatory and conservative politics in terms of processes that *expand* the size of the world - that is, that produce a series of worlds **W**, **W**⁺, **W**⁺⁺.. that tend towards **Org** - and those that *preserve* it - that ultimately maintain the identity arrow of **W** → **W**. But we still lack the resources to discuss *reactionary* politics - which, we anticipate, concerns the cases where the size of the social world is effectively reduced.

We cannot develop here a full theory of right-wing and reactionary politics, but a few indications might be enough to demonstrate that such a theory would be consistent with our framework. We can define a reduction of the social world as a process that takes us from a world **W** to a smaller region of that same world - that is, **W**⁻ such that **W**⁻ ⊂ **W**. The remaining terms and arrows must also be defined in such a way that the new terms - new individual forms, the social mediations, the political ecology, etc - are all subsets of the previous social world.

Since we now have a theory of multilayered social logics, we can also analyze this reduction in a multidimensional way: a complex world can be reduced to a part of itself that is composed of similar arrangements of **T_A**, **T_B** and **T_C**, but it can also privilege some of these logics in favor of others. It might seek to reduce the capitalist world to a part of itself while preserving value-structure to the most, or compromising value and property in favor of preserving a particular community structure, or segregating entire communities for the sake of preserving a nucleus of state power, and so on. A complex typology of forms of reactionary politics could be produced here. In fact, more than a typology, it might be interesting to explore the hypothesis that the proper diagram for a reactionary reduction of the world is actually the "dual" diagram to the one for emancipatory politics⁵⁶. We arrive at the dual diagram by inverting all arrows of a given categorical construction - in this case, inverting all the "actions" (bold arrows) and "constraints" (dotted arrows), like this:



⁵⁶ This use of categorical duality is still quite tentative - any ideas on how to improve it are very welcome!

Here, the social world **W**- is dominated by a political ecology which already belonged to **W** - white supremacists, fascists, neofeudal elites, neoliberal cliques, etc - and every element in the diagram is moving from a larger and more complex form towards a subset of itself. Reactionary politics, ultimately, shies away from exploring the space of possible forms of organization - which is also why it organizes itself as if the *world was the agent of actions and existing individuals the ones positing constraints*.⁵⁷

5.4 Socialist transition

Before we conclude, however, let us go back to the expanded diagram for emancipatory political organization one more time, and consider the movement from the inner triangle **1, 2, 3** to the outer one, composed of paths **5, 6, 7** - the passage between them takes place through the set of paths **4, 8** and **9**. What are we looking at when we split it in this way? In a very coarse-grained manner, we are thinking about the *socialist transition problem*: the movement from a certain way of splitting the world, in which our political values and commitments are divergent from the already existing social structures of value, property and reciprocity - as discussed in our section 3 - to a new way of parsing out social reality where the constraints by which political organizations abide *commute* with the constraints that individuals abide to, just as the action space guaranteed by political power is now accessible *beyond* political struggle.

What is interesting about this logical account of emancipatory political transition is that, on the one hand, it clarifies the structural stakes of such a process, allowing us to separate the organizational transformation itself from the particular composition of strategies that might take us there, while, on the other, it also highlights why the problem of transition is so easily confused with the establishment of conservative or even reactionary politics. Socialist transition implies a simultaneous expansion of the social world *and* a consolidation of these new social practices into new constraints - but conservative politics offers us the shortest path to reasonable accounts of our actions (since mediations commute with individual inclusions in the world), while reactionary politics offers us the shortest path to treating actions as already established constraints (since it implies the inversion of the direction of arrows in the diagram).

.....
⁵⁷ A lot more could be explored here, but - as so many insights in this research - a lot of work must be done before we can present these ideas in more rigorous fashion.

6. Conclusion

We began this long essay with a presentation of six theses which orient our understanding of the current challenges faced by political thinking today: our belief that the heterogeneous and fractured forms of capitalist sociality in peripheral countries points to the future of advanced capitalist countries themselves (2.1), our diagnosis of how the diverse and conflicting material conditions of these social formations lead to an intense decoupling of class structure and class experience (2.2), our reading of the last sequence of political protests as a missed encounter between new social forces, shaped by this predicament, and old political forms, shaped under "modernizing" premises (2.3), our account of the conflicted and impotent state of the Left in this scenario (2.4), our belief that we must then drop some illusions about the nature of Leftist politics (2.5) and that we must adopt a theoretical point of view that facilitates reconstructing, under these new conditions, equally new conceptions of what organized social life looks like, what are political effects and how political composition can come about (2.6).

We decided to begin this text with these propositions because we knew that, without some historical and political context, the level of abstraction and generality of the work currently carried out by the *Subset of Theoretical Practice* could just seem unmotivated or unjustifiable to a regular reader or political militant. And this is a real concern for us, because we are publishing this essay not only to inform others about the research that the STP has been developing, but also to invite more people to actively engage with this project.

This is why not only the political motivations behind these ideas had to be made explicit - as they also serve as good standards to evaluate if our research is moving in an appropriate direction - but also our huge ambitions. As we said in our introductory remarks, the extent of the conceptual backtracking we propose here, reconstructing a lot of well-established ideas in a new theoretical environment, is proportional to our assessment of the depth of our current political crisis. But there is no way we can actually live up to such ambitions - and so another reason for trying to be as didactic as possible with the presentation of our ideas, while not hiding some of the technical machinery we base it on, is to make it easier for others to recognize the current limitations of our work and find a place for their own contributions, if they so desire.

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Is Politics Possible Today?

Sophie Wahnich

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to discuss and answer the question of the possibilities of doing politics today. It begins by stating that politics is indeed the inescapable condition of humanity in general, and as such it is a tragic condition. This is what is to be reformulated. It is an attempt to discuss the question of what kind of politics is effective today, in our contemporary situation.

Keywords: politics, possibility, State, egalitarianism

I. Politics is the inexorable condition of humanity and it is a tragic condition.

Therefore, we must first reformulate the question.

What kind of politics is effective today? Is it desirable and if not, can we attempt gestures that are not in vain to change them?

I would have liked not to dwell too much on current politics where a vicious circle has put democracy, as a political power of egalitarian freedom or freedom as non-domination, in a vice under three figures of adversity that feed on each other.

Neoliberalism undermines the good life and the social state. In response, it feeds two anti-democratic figures: populism and the religious orthodoxies of all monotheistic religions. In return, these two tendencies allow the neoliberals to pass themselves off as saviors in the face of fascism and fundamentalism. It seems difficult to escape from such a vice. It is becoming more pronounced in France and Sweden, for example, where right-wing parties are no longer afraid to consolidate their power by forming legitimizing alliances with these populisms. What until recently was considered despicable by those who held to the rule of law that emerged from the Enlightenment has gained a new right to exist. Now the Enlightenment enforces the "right government" à la Bodin by democratic principles and the control of cruelty.

We could have hoped that the dangers linked to the destruction of the planet and to the ecological disaster would have allowed us to re-establish a new common horizon.

But each small fundamentalism has its green policy or its technicist policy. And each one can make its market according to its belief in knowledge, science, progress, the forms he or she gives it: a molecular meat for all or a farm with Ronsard roses and a breeding of organic sheep. With or without migrants, taking into account planetary limits and global interdependencies or taking into account bioclimatic regions that look back to the 19th century peasantry.

The magazine *Limites* thus plays on the common sense of the Catholic right, ecology, and nature as a norm. Eugenics is not far away. Therefore what could have been common is pre-fragmented as is the neo-liberal society that dreams of individuals who would only be in contact

through the mediatization of innovation, meaning the connection of everything, the great dependence on energy and computers.

Populism wants war. Civil war in the USA with Trump, international or even nuclear war with Putin. A nuclear power plant receives bombs in a war that sees two nations, Ukraine and Russia with mixed blood, but which claim two antagonistic historical narratives.

In most Western countries, neo-liberalism is winning the day and is colored with variations that go from white to pink. On the African continent, post-revolutionary or jihadist conquest fundamentalisms are on the rise, and many countries are undergoing Chinese neo-colonial imperialism.

The countries of Eastern and Northern Europe have seen populist extreme right-wing groups make their mark and even take power. South America is struggling with its demons. Chile has just given up on a democratic constitution and is still working on its constitution. Colombia is thinking about its wounds and hopes in its renewal. Brazil will see the extreme right allied with the army under the figure of Bolsonaro again, and a beloved but ambiguous socialist figure with Lula again.

In the Middle East, both Israel and Palestine are bogged down. Democratic Syria has failed to emerge, Iran worries us about its nuclear ambitions and its support for dictatorships. Lebanon is struggling... it is a strange list of disastrous situations that should be drawn up. We can despair and consider that we have entered a great age of tyranny where we should keep a low profile to save our skins and go underground to prepare a radical alternative able to face the planetary disaster. As for ecological disasters, the planetary limits have been crossed and few care; as for social disasters, the pauperization is getting worse every year; and as for political disasters, the democratic and utopian revolutionary hope seems to have disappeared from the map. *Socialism or barbarism*, it sounded in 1948, to fight against the totalitarian cruelty. Our "becoming [a] ferocious beast" is not absolutely new, but it seems even more difficult to circumscribe. "The Revolution" (a word hijacked by E. Macron) is a political and moral monster if its purpose is to ensure the felicity of a few hundred individuals, and to consolidate the misery of millions of citizens. It is an insulting derision to humanity, to claim unceasingly the name of equality, when immense intervals of happiness separate man from man, and that one sees smothered under the distinctions of opulence and poverty, of happiness and misery, the declaration of rights which recognized no other distinction than that of talents and virtues." Thus Collot d'Herbois expressed himself in 1793 in front of the rich Lyonnais exploiters and monopolizers, said the women who didn't accept the inflation with "assignats".

However, the desire of emancipation remains, anchored in a myriad of movements of self-emancipation, popular universities, places of associative life, spaces of reciprocal help in food banks which are

politicized around a radical ecology, and then there are the Zone to defender (ZAD, inventive and courageous. In the order of the more classic struggles, the struggles against the labor law and to a lesser extent against the state of emergency, against police violence, for dignity and against racism, testify to a real liveliness, but nevertheless a minority. And then with the Yellow Vests in France we know that the so-called neo-liberalism is ready for a cruel repression, as it is ready to use the criminal law of the enemy. This law that excludes from the law those who are declared "enemies" according to the law of war, but enemies from within. In this criminal law of the enemy, only the individual is criminal, the law is that of war, one can or even must put to death. Kill boxes, drones... one kills in a deep state or in bright light in countries that have abolished the death penalty in criminal law, but find it without trial in the criminal law of the enemy.

So, what to do? The question is eminently topical!

II. What to do?

Serious ideological stakes, or ideological displacement that is worked.

There is no magic social transformation that would be linked to a ritualized event like the elections. The moment of the ritual has only one virtue, it can be de-ritualized, but otherwise things are played out upstream. To change the world, one needs first of all a discursive formation, that is to say a project, a utopia, an imaginary, and arguments that make another possible world sparkle, then a social formation, homogeneous or heterogeneous, that recognizes this discourse. And at the intersection, a political formation. For the French revolutionary period, the discourse was of the Enlightenment, the Third Estate and the party of patriots. We have not constructed this triad.

The social formation of the oppressed does not have a unified consciousness of its interests, locally or globally. Alienation remains strong. How many dispossessed people are there in this world? However, if those who have internalized the idea that each country must pay the debt like a family that keeps its accounts remain numerous, others are calling for a stop to the dismantling of health and education. The quest for critical lucidity is too often met with expert discourse that forgets about doubt and responds with conspiracy and fake news. It is on a legitimate desire of criticism which has become hypertrophied that it becomes difficult to assert any idea of "truth" whether it is scientific, subjective, or situational.

But how many are those who think that it is necessary to admit hierarchies and borders and that it is necessary to know how to stay in one's own place. The worse for equality. And equality is the only horizon of a democracy.

Why so much alienation? Because our discursive formation is colonized by the right. In France, but this is only one example, Marine Le Pen is the product of a long process which began after the events of 1968. The theoreticians of the right and of the extreme right decide to manufacture the hegemony of an anti-Marxist discursive formation that could capture the misfortune of the deprived on the side of the extreme right. Without having conquered all the ground, far from it, this work is well advanced because it has been supported by second-left and liberal anti-Marxists. In short, on this side the ritual event cannot do much. The social transformation as denaturalization of the social is certainly in the minds, but its dynamics seem to be on this right side.

So, no work is futile. To displace ideology we need scientific research, we need to know our possibilities and to maintain the critical spur, and for that not to be afraid to make alliances with all the places of criticism in hard science or in human science, the scientists are not all in the desire to optimize capitalism, to manufacture facial recognition and lab-grown meat. To have techno-scientific platforms engage in decisions that are ideological, and to act on this plan, leads to avenues of research that allow a subverted use of the new techniques, in short to think of socio-technical alternatives

and to be aware of global systemic risks. We need literary research, that is to say a new utopian imaginary to clear the dystopian imaginary that has been flourishing for so long and that requires more effort of imagination, not only to take out one's magnifying glass but really to imagine the "other". We need films, novels, debates, family debates on Sundays, at work around the coffee shop, we need amateur shows and songs. We need to affirm our dream world and believe in our dreams.

Most radicals in their desire for *buen vivir* want to abandon written, narrated, and filmed utopias and they instead declare that we must act, and make concrete and immediate utopias, acting where it was possible and urgent. I believe that we need to reconcile these beliefs, not only because the written word remains a good ideological vector, but moreso that the people of Marseilles are right to denounce those who would only have "mouths" and would never put into action their promises, whether they are amorous or political, would never put into practice the common good. But I also believe that the refusal of any projected theoretical thought is a mistake, a way of shooting oneself in the foot, that it is necessary to have a thought in advance and to rectify it, because we never start from nothing but from our lived and reflected experiences. But what is an experience? According to Canguilhem, human beings, by polarizing the world into values, create an anti-fatalism. This is why they act. There are therefore first value judgments, the cry of the heart "it is unjust!", then an activity to reduce the felt injustice. For Canguilhem as for Kant, sensations are already perceptions, they are already marked by the understanding. Without sensibility, no object would be given to us, and

without the understanding, none would be thought. It is only to the extent that they combine that critical knowledge can be produced. Experience is then based on the activity by which the mind freely orders the lived world, polarized into values. Knowledge and morality are thus in fact closely linked and linked in particular to orient the thought of action. The strategy of a movement rests then on this critical competence, which consists in experiencing the action and from one step to another, in revising it in view of a greater success or at least of a better adjustment to the analysis of the situation. The making of a critical knowledge is an operation which, far from arising from a comparison between a representation, a definition, and an object which would be external to the thinking subject, proceeds according to Canguilhem from an operation of connection carried out by the subject within its representations and in contact with the action as impulse. The critical position is both impulse and judgment; it is a criticism in action. Then comes the critical knowledge, linked to the indissociable moral and reflexive reversal on this impulse. The "experience" is then the combination of an experimental reason, in situation and of values put on the lived world. The "experience" would be a reflected, evaluated, and judged experience. So far from just repeating gestures, each one makes them evolve thanks to his critical competence; gestures complexified, sometimes abandoned or self-subverted. The resulting movement is based on what I call a dynamic of criticism. In this dynamic, emotions are fully-fledged faculties to judge in action. But these emotions are always linked to a reflexivity that allows making decisions, that is to say, to choose orientations. That these experiences are partial and biased is certain, but they are what make us living beings who continue to desire the best, the most beautiful, the most joyful, the most alive, and the most clever.

Among these dreams today disqualified, that of the hybrid, of the mixed race, that of the desire of spawning with the other, the different.

Identity logics always end up essentializing beings, declaring the only structures responsible for the oppression of majorities over minorities, by cornering victims into demanding protected and therefore separate places, reproducing ghettos in the name of the cause. This is why they are not emancipatory, at best they protect, at worst they reinforce social, mental and spatial segregation.

If in the 1970s and 1980s some people thought they could implement a strategic essentialism, it has gone wrong and today we have to rethink the question differently. We need to think of antidotes to all oppressions: gender oppressions, ethnicized groups, cultural oppressions of all kinds, ideological oppressions that will not only be dissolved by political and social non subordination. This will help, of course, in the long term, but in private contracts, in homes, in inherited and reproduced imaginaries it will remain present and tools will be needed to firmly refuse it. Because to obtain democratic control without controlling the potential of domination

of a majority cultural group on the culture and knowledge, with all the available forms in order to create a cultural counter-hegemony to the one we are experiencing.

"It is necessary to stop believing that to be free is to declare oneself independent to do evil"¹. For my friend Saint-Just, to do evil is to exercise domination, whether it is that of men over women, of the rich over the poor, of the old over the young, or of the young over the old... of some over others. This domination is an oppression, but in the same way that the oppression of men over women will not be stopped by producing a unique gender with two sexes, we cannot imagine stopping the oppression of social or cultural groups over each other, by simply making them disappear in an ideological acid bath. To reimagine the current conditions of freedom as non-domination supposes to think in a new way the religious, cultural, political coexistence, the religious, cultural and political hybridization. Finally, it is necessary to give back empirical reserves of freedom of conscience to the concept of secularism too often deviated by its association with the imaginary of the eradication of the religious, even of the eradication of the religious other. The ideal of those who founded secularism did not aim at neutralizing the religious, the political, the cultural, the minority, but at allowing it to be recognized in its very plurality in the school, which led to create effectively with the school a "safe space" for all. What does that mean? A place where otherness must be welcomed by teachers who must never hurt the conscience of a child or a family by derogatory remarks about a group, a religion, a people. Do not degrade, scorn, humiliate, disqualify... but welcome differences and put them to work for a school community. Even religious norms must be respected in their dignity, provided that they do not hinder scientific instruction and common education. On the other hand, religious, cultural and social quarrels and vindictiveness must be left at the door. The school does not have to be an eradicator, it must also preserve the freedom of conscience. Everywhere it would be necessary to take into account all the religious calendars so that no determining test can take place on a day considered as sacred by the family of a schoolchild. This would be a good arrangement and a good start. Schools should not force debates, but should provide tools for children to debate, to defend their opinions, their history and their worldview, and to learn to develop their point of view, as individuals and as members of a group. This cannot be done without a truly democratic political framework, and the school can only fulfill our desires if it is part of such a framework.

The wanderings stem from the impossibility of teaching democracy when it is flouted day after day in the ordinary world. The "safe space" is not there to create a fragile bubble, but so that in this elementary school common, the temptations of gate communities like ghettos can

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¹ Saint-Just 2004, p.764.

be thwarted. The process of this desire for non-dominance and non-segregation cannot be accomplished outside of a democratic context. They must accompany each other.

There are men and women, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and a thousand other ways of believing and shamanizing and thinking and laughing and living. We must protect this multiplicity, and to protect it, let it become even more multiple, not by favoring serial hegemony, but by making sure that each living culture hybridizes with every living culture, according to its subjective affinities. For subjectivity is not identity, and rather than thinking of a homogeneous and grey world, we should know how to appreciate the kaleidoscope of our incessant brainstorming and recognize that even in the face of adversity, it is not necessary to resemble each other in order to come together.

For if we inherit a history, a heritage, a tradition, which can either nourish us or oppress us – in fact often both at the same time – we are also actors of the history that we make and we can fork, squander, or make the inheritance bear fruit, we can also make our tradition fork, we can invent its future.

Economic and ecological conditions

The questions seem insoluble. If growth is there, then unemployment falls, but if growth is deployed according to the current rules of the market, not only does the planet go haywire, but the standards of social well-being fall and have been falling for more than 20 years at an ever faster rate, not only in terms of purchasing power, but in terms of social protection, of the right to health, to retirement, to education, to unemployment, to any procedure of securing a vast right to a dignified existence, a vast right to live in a living world recognized as such, that is to say in its fragility and consequently which must be respected in this fragility.

This knowledge is not new, but the natural parks which aimed at protecting ecosystems recognized as heritage have shown their limits for a long time. They have too often authorized the manufacture of garbage cans at their borders: there uranium is mined, there PFOE is manufactured, there cement, there glyphosate, a factory classified as SEVESO explodes, bodies suffer, children vomit, but the State affirms that everything is fine... They have also led to authorize a deleterious urban sprawl, the polluting car, the unfair taxes that weigh on those who live far from the center but need the center...

The world is one and either we protect it everywhere or we end up protecting it nowhere, as we know from experience now with global warming and the pandemic.

We should therefore give up this idea of growth, or, as heterodox economists tell us, propose a new calculation for this growth that includes on the side of gains what is today considered as losses. Quality

of air, water, food, life, protection of biodiversity could be part of the calculation. In order to invent this growth, it would be necessary to accept industrial decline and to value the growth in the number of farmers, teachers, caregivers, researchers, artists, etc. To increase the share of added value recognized for all these professions which certainly do not bring in money but which found the social relationship by educating, raising, and caring. For the Montesquieu's "*doux commerce*" is first of all the commerce of people, that is to say not slavery but the free links that they spin, knot, and weave, not in a commercial relationship but in a relationship of social affects: hospitality, friendship, fraternity, solidarity, even love.

The market relationship is harsh and calculating, cold by definition. The current squaring would consist in re-articulating the polarity between these non-market and incommensurable activities and market activities and in recognizing that the value of societies rests on the incommensurable rather than on the commodity.

Certainly, we live in a regime of scarcity of certain things, but also in a regime of overabundance of many others. Producing to destroy is no longer reasonable. We should therefore try to redefine the share of luxury and the share of ordinary in our consumption and offer luxury and ordinary to everyone.

It is clear that such a proposal consists in jointly rethinking our production and our consumption, but also in equalizing our living conditions. But such a process supposes, of course, and above all, to reverse the embedding of the economic and the political. Today, the naturalized economy dictates its laws to politics, to the point of having only managers in charge of decisions. Trump and Macron are archetypes of this situation of the embedding of politics in economics. The de-subordination of politics with respect to economics would allow it to be disembedded and thus to be able to conduct another public policy, including one on debt and money.

We could then recognize the fictitious character of money as a convention and thus the possibility of distinguishing debts over the long term that are certain public debts, possible to cancel as soon as they have operated their effect of satisfactory revival of life. Debts of medium duration (social actors) with rules allowing the initiative in favor of decarbonization and reasoned degrowth to make a new *buen vivir* (time scale three to five generations) and debts on the scale of a life, or of a sequence of life for individuals or private actors.

The Covid experience has shown us two things. Easy money exists. Billions have been poured into the sectors that the state manager wanted to revive, but this easy money has not been poured into the public hospital, research, or education. What is rejected is money that produces a return on investment that is not commercial but living. What is rejected is public expenditure or investment to make sociality bear fruit and not

individual enrichment. In short, we will not be able to say that we do not know that these choices are first of all ideological choices and that it is a question of changing ideology and therefore political economy. We need to reinvent the role of debt, of individual property, of collective or common property, of national goods. We no longer want losses to be nationalized and gains privatized. We want to live from our work and live well, not just survive.

The squaring then lies in the global economic situation, because it would be necessary to be able to act in concert with other partners, other countries, other organizations, this reversal will probably not be able to be done in a single country, unless we regain a banking power that has been despoiled, but not so long ago.

Banks are one of the first places that could be communalized and this depends on the state, so in our proposal on the political. The banking desubordination could be realized with our wages. It is our effort, our sweat, our time, our life that this money that we deposit every month, and we must take possession of it.

Reinventing political organization is urgent

When it comes to political organization, the rubble of the old parties seems to prevent anything from being invented today. The experience of the pitfalls is not transmitted and on this level, hope is in limbo. But this does not mean that we are not going to find something else, something more in line with our dreams, political cooperatives, a better articulation of the local, municipal or libertarian and the central, whether it be a national or wider centrality, since the questions to be resolved are on a planetary scale. This is urgent because the desire for a leader is very different from the desire for centrality and some people confuse it. Centrality is a relationship to the common law and it can and must even be realized under the cover of democratic control, while « leadership is in many ways a relationship of obedience that removes all responsibility, all anguish. Also, wanting to solve the political squaring supposes to think together the organization of the common and the state question. For it is this whole that is at the heart of our turmoil when disaster takes shape. The spring of 2020, in the face of Covid, the organization of the common was played out, for example, in the coordination of work at the hospital from March to June 2020, the state question in the elaboration of public policies without democratic control, or even sometimes without governmental control, of which the hospital has been the plaything for the last ten years. Many doctors warned that the hospital was going to collapse, they explained, demonstrated, went on strike, but the governments remained deaf and dumb. Caregivers have stood up valiantly thanks to their collective intelligence, department by department, when the undemocratic state has been unable to organize brigades of voluntary

auxiliaries. They signaled themselves and were never called: doctors just retired, nurses on leave are numerous to have been simply ignored. Then, the executive power which has in fact become an absolute power which concentrates the decision and takes the parliament for a recording chamber worthy of the Parliaments of the Ancien Régime. But the hospital cannot do without the State, it is an institution that needs a national scale because its investments are heavy. And the State cannot do without the hospital because it is the body invested to protect the population. It is the place *par excellence* where it is necessary to articulate social and state expenditure as a right of claim, and the social organization of work as a disobedience in the relationship to the state. Already in 1793, public assistance, of which the hospital is a part, is thought of as a "sacred debt" that society owes to its members. A department head must be able to invent, with his caregivers, his way of working in the best way possible within this logic of debt, where the immeasurable medical work is compensated by society, so that everyone is well cared for. We knew how to do it, so we have to do it better. Perhaps one day, this department head will no longer be a department head and will become a referent in case of doubt. The imaginary symphony orchestra with its fiery conductor and bored musicians cannot serve as a model. It is necessary to return to the baroque ensemble, where mutual listening, the flights of singular *affetti* make the quality of the musical as "ensemble".

But, if the State has a de facto protective or predatory function, the elaboration of norms by global institutions that decide with or without the States, but never with the people, on the circulation of capital and men, is also a State function. If the State is the pole that claims to decide for us, to organize our life, our survival, our well-being, then the State is also lodged in moving sovereignties that decide without us what happens to us, large international organizations like the WTO, multinationals, stock exchanges, complex NGOs... If we must think together the local common and the global, it is without the illusion that the local receptacle of the global can alone fight against its now unquestionable oppression. To think together, therefore, not to imagine that the common can alone overcome the molar State, but to question other scales of politics where our experience is only in ricochet; for the better when statism is synonymous with the generalization of the progress of social protection, for the worse when statism is synonymous with the confiscation of the tax deducted at source to pay oppressive debts, armed police, for the worst when statism is synonymous with the abandonment of the responsibility for health and the confiscation of the mutualist spirit of the social security. The State is tyrannical when it acts against the common good, against the general interest. The alibi of the trickle-down effect is long gone and if it can still be used to camouflage voluntary servitude, it is not a figure of the common good, but of the confiscation of the intelligence of each person and of the collective intelligence by the subordination

that is not only organized but sealed by the laws on work, the state of emergency, the universities, the auctioning of assets, in Greece, in France and everywhere else where short-termism is at work for a return on investment that only benefits the richest.

The question of democratic control today has become crucial, those who act, make life on a daily basis, cultivate, teach, care, create things, ideas, forms, receive clients, those who found homes, create beings, know intimately what is just or unjust, efficient or not, and it is necessary to valorize all the current and inactual forms so that they can, in democracy, be heard and listened to, so that their intelligence is translated into laws. Demonstrations, petitions, conventions, primary assemblies, referendum, all these tools must make the panoply of a political disubordination. This desubordination cannot be only local or national, it would be to fall back into the ferocity of the isolation indifferent to the fate of the common humanity and to ignore the reality of our situation.

This first squaring supposes therefore to rethink step by step our conception of the social and political links: in order not to have to produce in front of unjust laws of insubordination, it would be necessary to tend to this desubordination, to take again possession of our intelligence without giving ourselves up to leaders, persons in charge, decision-makers, administrators, soft consensus and without debate, words of authority, charismatic figures... It is thus a question of re-founding democratic institutions which guarantee this desubordination, organize it, protect it. It is not a question of waiting for the miracle of the common to happen, but of re-founding the common humanity and the tools of democratic control that could protect it.

But this will not be miraculous either. It is necessary to have this aim and to think at the same time of an overthrow of the current regimes. So we need to rethink revolution.

The hegemonic ideology that we have to fight makes of every revolution a moment of foreign interference or of conspiracy, refusing to grasp how a society, in rare moments, sees its process of resolution of contradictions accelerating, without, however, a plan has been elaborated beforehand in a limpid way. In the vocabulary of Sartre of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, a revolution is a kind of totalization without a totalizer but with tipping points that should be observed in detail. Realities are moving and uncertain, and when there is a union, ecological or even political radicalization, it testifies to a shift in consciousness. It can go stronger and faster than that of the organizations. It is then necessary to recognize the position of individuals as actors; as active subjects in history. We are far from a system that would function without observable human decision, far from structures that, as if by magic, would arrive at maturation; but just as far from these demiurge totalizers, whether they are named leader, conspiracy or authority of the political organization with political police force. A Revolution, and it is the first important

point, is first of all an event of subjectivities that resist in a new way to the oppression. They discover then that this resistance converges and becomes power of action, power of innovation, of utopia even. In short, there can only be a revolution at the moment when the ideological work is in a certain measure allied to the lived experience arrives at multiplying these subjective points of support. In the families, at the school, at the work, everything can change because everything is imaginable again.

But then begins the counter-revolutionary adversity that can go until the civil war. This concept has been used since the 1990s not to describe revolutionary processes but to describe the impossible revolution. Civil war is the entry into the scene of the counter-revolution and of what it generates of major obstacles within the revolutionary processes.

No avoidance of the problem is possible because revolutionary cruelty is generated by polymorphic counter-revolution. The stake for our historical consciousness is indeed there. Faced with those who affirm that any revolution inevitably becomes totalitarian, it is a matter of trying not to leave the tragedies of the past unresolved. Not understanding the present well is often not understanding the past well either. Now in the Russian Revolution there were early aspirations to authority, to the desire of leader and authority which is manifested from the start on the side of the base as well as the summit: "authoritarian democratic, at the base, authoritarian centralist at the top"², but from the outset authoritarian. Thus, if the bureaucratic counter-revolution is certainly to be credited to the absence of a long-term democratic culture, to the brutalization linked to the war, to the social division of labor, it is above all the product of choices, confrontations, and desires that crystallize in the end in the Party form, which relieves each one of his responsibility to make democracy live. Freedom of opinion, pluralism, elective principle are soluble in the desire of authority...

There is undoubtedly a bringing to heel of the soviets, but also a weariness to make politics, a desire to return home, and an obscure need of reassuring order. The 1920s were years of fusion and changeover when this desire for order took precedence over the libertarian revolutionary promise. Already in the 18th century, Saint-Just wondered what could have made men lose the desire to assemble and deliberate and desire to hand themselves over to a tyrant, a leader. For the latter, "men did not spontaneously abandon the social state. The wild life arrived in the long run and by an insensible alteration"³. "When the people lost the taste of the assemblies to negotiate, to cultivate the ground or to conquer, the prince separated himself from the sovereign: here ends the social life and

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2 Bensaïd 2017

3 Saint-Just 2004, p.1051.

begins the political life or the convention"⁴, still called in the text of the nature "report of force".

Now a revolution can be only a revolution of freedom. The freedom that expands by the freedom of the other and that founds thus a project of lived equality and not coercive equalization.

At a time when the desire for order is embodied in a desire for chieftaincy in all directions, there is something to ponder again. What we observe today of the handing over of oneself to chiefs, to incarnations, cannot augur anything good. The idea that the spirit of civil war, which today is called "agonistic democracy" in an oxymoron that is rarely used, can produce a new and desirable world seems very derisory.

There is a question that too often remains unanswered in the political responsibility of each revolutionary present, and it is both time and its strategic stakes. To know how to deal with temporality is also to know how to deal with politics, with strategy. At a time when the notion of strategy seems to be reduced to the choice of a qualifier to be attached to the word democracy: "agonistic", "participatory", "wild", "real", far from any fine thought of "broken time", it is necessary to reintroduce this question in a clear way. Often the revolutionary fact is seen as a moment of acceleration, mastered or not.

Walter Benjamin, and those who have read him well, have led to a Marxist critique of homogeneous and empty time addressed as much to Marxists themselves as to others. If the actors of history are thinking subjects, then time teems with branches, far from any historical determinism, far from the great programmed scansions and from a destiny conception of history. The time is the manufacture of the subject in the uncertainty and the lived perception of the rhythms, the accelerations, the *kaïros* not to be missed when it is a question of starting an insurrection. One might think that these are only epistemological sophistications of history for refined people who like conversations that unfold in beautiful gardens of knowledge. Yet in fact no, it is about what is missing today to those who claim to make radical politics, an awareness of time, therefore of strategy and tactics, a lived awareness of what is coming, of what must be tried, an awareness of what would be revealed as too late, as a missed move or too hasty. It is necessary to thwart the idea of a revolutionary event as a "purely natural phenomenon, controlled by physical laws" according to the expression of Marx himself. A "revolutionary crisis" is about beats, pulsations, rhythms, and therefore a contained impatience to choose the time parade that will make you get out of the infinite circle of antagonism between "parliamentary routine and leftism". Struggles are only effective if they are adjusted to the actual, lived temporality of the situations that have been accurately

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4 Ibid

analyzed. "The art of the watchword is an art of the conjuncture"⁵ said Bensaïd. An insurrection supposes maturation, but it is necessary not to let the situation rot, it is therefore necessary to have an awareness of "it is time". This is why the figures of the watchman and of Walter Benjamin's threshold of time are not mere literary formulas. The watchman knows that when the time comes, time must be broken in the event: there lies the revolutionary gesture.

This is why it is necessary to listen "in the manner of a psychoanalyst attentive to displacements and condensations".

But what does it mean when we continue to think that it is the party that is listening?

The party becomes what for Lenin it was: "the tool that founds the continuity in the discontinuous fluctuations of the collective conscience". But isn't this to credit it with a competence that it cannot have, because the consciousness of its members or even of its leadership is not less discontinuous? Can the apparatus and the real social movement then not enter in contradiction? We find again the question of a vanguard that can obviously become bureaucratized, even if it does not sink into the vulgate of a politics dependent on economic infrastructures. But politics is alive or it is not. It is always more multifaceted and alive than it is possible to predict when it is revolutionary. This is why there is no assimilation of social positions to political positions, and because of this very fact it is necessary to reject from the outset the primacy of the party over the classes it represents, just as it would be necessary to reject the professionalization of politics, the bad temptation, under the guise of the responsibility of the representatives before the represented, of the imperative mandate. It is necessary rather to foresee a "right of recall of the deputies" because it is necessary to be able to deliberate freely in order not to empty of all content the very idea of democracy. The latter because it rests on the effort of a heterogeneous social to govern itself must invent its own unpredictable and determining syntheses of what can happen. Therefore the real question is that of the plurality of organizations for the same class and thus the taking into account of the heterogeneity and the plurality of antagonistic tears in the same social world. Without plurality upstream, there is no synthesis to be made and thus no elaboration but rather an imposition.

The doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat conflates the party, the State, and society within the same entity. It is then finished with democracy and with the confidence given to the heterogeneity of the social. And in fact, without heterogeneity assumed as such, there is no more democracy. Beyond that, politics no longer exists, it has been dissolved in the administration of things.

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⁵ Bensaïd 2017.

Rosa Luxembourg knew intimately that socialism would be dissolved if a minority, even if it was proletarian, organized a new domination. It is therefore necessary to think jointly the art of reinforcing the extra-parliamentary action and the parliamentary art of politics. Far from this antagonism "parliamentary routine and leftism in the society", it is necessary to combine the two sides, and to militate to prescribe new elections and a constituent. Rosa Luxemburg, will be the only one to worry about a telescoping of the military decision and the political decision, of the confusion of the roles and of the confusion of the state of exception and the democratic rule. Faced with a party that wants to decide and believes itself to be clairvoyant, it revalues public opinion, those social forces that make the drum beat in the situation of any revolution. By suppressing democracy, what is obstructed is the living source of social knowledge and its competence to change the world. Without democracy, indeed, bureaucracy triumphs.

The tension between institutions and subjects of history, between communalist powers and state structure, party, class, proletariat, parliament and constituent, international, trade union, state, all these great concepts are to be re-examined and subverted in the light of their disguise or their abusive simplification, to ask ourselves what necessary roles they have played, what obstacles and impasses to reflect upon and bypass they have produced. It is not only a matter of history. At a time when the forms in which politics could move are no longer obvious, it is a way of giving ourselves light to become inventive again and to know that if the State is, as Foucault says, only one of the forms of governmentality, it is illusory to want to abandon the State for the benefit of the only civil society in islands or archipelagos, just as it was mortifying to renounce the powers of life of society for the benefit of the party-State.

There has never been a direct percolator from the ideas to the texts, from the texts to the social worlds, from the social worlds to effective politics. But, we have to advance with our political tinkering from the smallest child that resists the oppression by the very anorexia, to the most powerful union that could decide to think beyond its tradition, from the most fleeting of situations to the most structural, from the briefest of moments to the longest of projections, from the most local to the most cosmopolitical. We have to because cosmopolitics is not the global politics but the recognition at each scale of action that there are not decision-makers and agents, but free subjects, actors who can abdicate or resist, invent or repeat.

Is this a return? A return to Kant and the French Revolution of the Declaration of Peace to the World? Is it contrary to Freud? To Lacan? Is it still this illusion of a sovereign in the house of reason?

I believe that there is never a return to the native land, only tools to clear a path and yes, we must invent a cosmopolitics at the level of Freud and Lacan, but above all at our level of women, men, children in an ethic

that is as new as our desire to live in a living world and a respected earth.

Canguilhem, in the 1930s, quoting Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, calls for organization in the face of fascism: "What is the great action that is not impossible at the time it is undertaken? It is when it is accomplished that it seems possible to common beings. He addresses high school students thus: "The problem is to choose between an attitude of submission to historical contingencies or necessities, whether one considers them metaphysical or physically founded, and an attitude of resistance or rather of organization."

Time is always running out, that's our lot. But waiting for the eve of a disaster to attempt a gesture of organization, it is cruelly lacking.

So yes, politics is possible but it supposes from now on utopian imaginary, diffusion of dreams, and nevertheless this effort of organization.

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The Left and (New) Antisemitism: The Palestinian Question and the Politics of Ressentiment

Zahi Zalloua

Abstract: Zionist disappointment with the pro-Palestinian Left has resulted in a vicious counter-narrative about the Left's core antisemitism. The cause for social justice, which informs much of the Left's sympathies for Palestinians, is (mis)read as evidence of an emerging "new antisemitism." This article critically analyzes the "Zionist blackmail" that ensues from this ideological script of betrayal and alleged hatred for Jewish people. Zionist narratives about the Left's antisemitism work to paint Israel as the victim of an illegitimate delegitimation campaign. The Left is guilty by association. To be moved by the Palestinian question—a political question that speaks to and touches the Left's commitment to universal freedom—triggers *ressentiment* and the unwarranted charge of antisemitism.

Keywords: The Palestinian question, new antisemitism, politics, the Left, *ressentiment*, identity politics, Zionism, Jean Améry

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To say that the Left's solidarity with Palestinians provokes discomfort among liberal Zionists would be an understatement. There is a mixture of anger and sadness, even a feeling of betrayal, since many liberal Zionists saw common cause with the Left throughout the years. Things irrecoverably soured when it came to Israel, particularly in response to the Left's support for the Palestinian cause and increasing numbers of activists and academics backing the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel, launched in 2005. Zionist disappointment with the pro-Palestinian Left has, in turn, fueled a vicious counter-narrative about the Left's core antisemitism. The cause for social justice, which informs much of the Left's sympathies for Palestinians, is (mis)read as evidence of an emerging "new antisemitism." In what follows, I want to critically analyze the "Zionist blackmail"¹ that ensues from this ideological script of betrayal and alleged hatred for Jewish people. Zionist narratives about the Left's antisemitism work to paint Israel as the victim of an illegitimate delegitimation campaign. The Left is guilty by association. To be moved by the Palestinian question—a question that speaks to and touches the Left's commitment to universal freedom—triggers the charge of antisemitism. At this point, a common objection is introduced: *Isn't this account painting Zionism with a wide brush? Aren't there different forms of Zionism? What about liberal Zionists? Aren't they more hospitable to the pursuit of social justice and less prone to incendiary rhetoric about Palestinians?*

To this line of inquiry, we must answer categorically in the negative. First, let's clarify what is objectionable and not objectionable about

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¹ Ali 2005, p. 43.

Zionism. What makes Zionism a racist ideology is not its attachment to the historic land of Palestine, nor is it its message of Jewish emancipation. Zionism was, and continues to be, a national liberation movement for many European Jews fleeing antisemitism, especially after World War II. What is problematic about Zionism is its chauvinistic premise that one's attachment must be based on exclusivity, on the eradication and/or subjugation of the Indigenous population. While some early Zionists like Martin Buber favored cultural Zionism and urged co-operation and co-existence with Palestinians, cultural Zionists clearly lost the struggle over the meaning of Zionism after the birth of Israel in 1948. With the 1967 Six-Day War, political Zionism secured hegemonic authority and control over what it means to be Jewish, all but naturalizing the phantasmatic identification of Jewishness with the state of Israel. Many Jews who disidentify with the Israeli state are in fact subjected to a specific form of hatred, to what some have described as "Zionist antisemitism."² Indeed, Buber now would most likely be viewed by political Zionists as a post-Zionist or even anti-Zionist, a race traitor. In more recent years, Judith Butler, who has voiced support for the Palestinian cause and critique of the nation-state of Israel, has been repeatedly accused of being a self-hating Jew for her audacity to question Zionism and to imagine Jewishness *otherwise*, as hospitable to its Palestinian neighbor.³ Today's liberal Zionists are clearly not changing the horizon and trajectory of Zionism. To the contrary, in their rhetoric and policy support, they have become indistinguishable from political or religious Zionists. Liberal Zionists may publicly criticize the Gaza wars and the violent ethno-nationalism of their fellow settlers, but they fail to question their Jewish privilege, their naturalized claim over the land and its resources. Palestinians are tolerated, and Palestinian citizens of Israel even supported, as long as they don't infringe on Jewish privilege.⁴ Notice for example how Gabriel Brahm glosses Zionism, packaged for the reader as innocuously as possible: "Zionism (the idea of a Jewish and democratic state)."⁵ This parenthesis does a lot of intellectual (= ideological) labor! The gloss obfuscates, among other things, the pressing issue of the Palestinian right of return for Palestinians and the unequal status of Palestinian citizens of Israel. Can one really call oneself a democratic state if one defines Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people?

2 See Massad 2013; Žižek 2013, p. 6.

3 See Landes and Weinthal 2012. Natan Sharansky and Gil Troy would label Butler an "un-Jew," an example of academics for whom "the public and communal staging of their anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist beliefs appears to be the badge of a superior form of Judaism, stripped of its unsavory and unethical 'ethnocentric' and 'colonialist' baggage" (Sharansky and Troy 2021). Decolonizing Israel is an anathematic proposition for most Zionists.

4 Žižek 2002, p. 170.

5 Brahm 2011, p. 499.

On the Occupation, Zionists, for the most part, speak in unison: *Please, don't ask us to decolonize Israel*. Either you stand with Israel (endorse its supremacist logic, its Jewish privilege) or you're antisemitic (you want the elimination of Israel—that is, Jews). In such a framework, solidarity with Palestinians puts many leftists squarely in the camp of those who hate Jews or, at the very least, are insensitive to their existential concerns.

The Left's Anti-Zionism

The Left has changed is a common Zionist refrain. We can witness one of its earliest articulations in Holocaust survivor Jean Améry's writings of the late sixties and seventies. Though the Left's antisemitism breaks with the racist biologism of the Third Reich, we're told that it is not any less damaging to Jews. According to Améry and his acolytes, anti-Zionism—calling out Israel as a racist state—gives antisemitism a more acceptable face to the West. "Antisemitism in the guise of anti-Zionism," Améry writes, "has come to be seen as virtuous."⁶ As Alvin H. Rosenfeld argues, it hides the Left's "animosity to Jews."⁷ Finding a new home in the advocates for anti-colonialism and social justice, this antisemitism is now spreading in colleges and universities (particularly via BDS) like wildfire. For liberal Zionists, today's calls to boycott Israel conjure up not South Africa, but Nazi Germany:

The aim of these anti-Israel activities at their most extreme is to demonize and delegitimize the Jewish state in ways that recall the marginalization and dehumanization of Jews in Nazi Germany.⁸

BDS strikes profoundly emotional chords that can't be denied. Maybe that's because a boycott recalls the "Don't buy from Jews" dictum the Nazis issued as a prelude to confiscating Jewish assets and cutting our world population by more than a third, thus necessitating the building of a modern nation-state as a refuge from mass extinction.⁹

Connecting the Palestinians/the Left to the Nazis draws attention away from the inconvenient parallels between Israel and South Africa, recentring the focus on Jews as victims while at the same demonizing Israel's critics, the purported Nazification of leftist critique.

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⁶ Améry 2022f, p. 66.

⁷ Rosenfeld 2022, p. xii.

⁸ Rosenfeld 2022, p. xiv.

⁹ Grenell 2022.

The Zionist counter-attack runs: *don't be fooled by the Left's progressive pedigree*. Its anti-Zionism recycles and repeats the same hatred for Jews: "anti-Zionism is nothing other than an updated version of the age-old and evidently ineradicable, utterly irrational hatred that has been directed against the Jews since time immemorial."¹⁰ For Améry, the fallen Left has quickly forgotten about the plight of Jews, and the fact that they trump the colonized in their suffering. "The Jew is still worse off than Frantz Fanon's colonized individual," asserts Améry.¹¹ This intervention dehistoricizes the position of Israeli Jews. It magically brackets the privilege of their Israeliness—the Israeli Jew is as precarious as the *Muselmann* of Auschwitz. Améry's Oppression Olympics fail to explain how exactly the condition of Israeli Jews is worse than that of the colonized Palestinians. To make matters worse, Améry then adds: "It [the Left] is as oblivious to this fact as it is to the anti-imperialist liberation struggle fought by the Jews against the British in Mandate Palestine."¹² Collapsing the Jew and the colonized, Améry invents the anti-colonial Zionist. On his reading, the Left willfully misrepresents and misinterprets the anti-colonial scene, neglecting Zionism's struggle against the British Empire. Recasting the terrorist attacks of the Haganah (the dominant Zionist paramilitary organization) as anti-imperialist, however, grossly distorts the historical reality of the colonial situation. Zionism as an ideology is a child of European colonialism and imperialism; moreover, without the backing of Western powers, Israel's creation would not have materialized when it did. The struggle among colonizers for territorial power should not be confused with or mistaken for an anti-colonial struggle.¹³

Améry also goes on to mock the Left for treating Jews as "bogeymen," aligning Israel's critics with a long antisemitic tradition: "After all, the Jews have always had to play the bogeyman, the global foe. Little wonder, then, that they are once again being stigmatized as oppressors."¹⁴ There is nothing that Israel can do to provoke a reassessment of Zionism's ways. He offers a realist defense of Israel:

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¹⁰ Améry 2022c, p. 52.

¹¹ Améry 2022e, p. 38. Elsewhere, Améry depicts Jews as the exemplars of suffering: "the Jews... are the most tormented and tragic people on earth" (Améry 2022d, p. 44).

¹² Améry, "Virtuous Antisemitism" 38.

¹³ As Joseph Massad avers, "launching terrorist attacks against the British forces, the Jewish colonists were adamant that Britain had betrayed them. In the period between 1944 and 1948 Jewish terrorism and the British response to it led to the killing of 44 Jewish terrorists and 170 British soldiers and civilians, a ratio of 4 to 1 in favour of the terrorists. Unlike other anti-colonial struggles where the casualty figures would be astronomically in favour of the colonisers, Zionism would begin to call its terrorist war against Britain a 'war of independence,' casting itself as anti-colonial movement" (Massad 2012).

¹⁴ Améry 2022d, p. 44.

"For me, Israel is not an auspicious promise, not a biblically legitimized territorial claim, no Holy Land. It is simply the place where survivors have gathered, a state in which every inhabitant still, and for a long time to come, must fear for his life. My solidarity with Israel is a means of staying loyal to those of my comrades who perished."¹⁵ For Améry, Israel is the promise of a better future for Jews, where their being will not be determined and devalued by the gaze of antisemites: "The state of Israel is a commonwealth that has taught the Jews not to allow their self-perception to be impressed on them by the antisemites."¹⁶ The pro-Palestinian Left is an irritant, insisting on the plight of the Indigenous population.¹⁷ It insists that the Zionist supreme good cannot come at the expense of Palestinians. Améry's apology of Zionism blocks any genuine attempt to hold Israel accountable. Charges against Israel's criminality are deflected and thrown back at the Left as expressions of antisemitism. Only Israel can prevent another Jewish catastrophe. Its *raison d'être* is to avoid another Auschwitz, an "über-Auschwitz," as Améry puts it.¹⁸ The Left's anti-Zionism paves the way for an "über-Auschwitz"—this is the Zionist blackmail.

Since Améry's essays the situation has only gotten more dire, and the gap between the Left and Zionists has widened. And today's apologists of Zionism are essentially repeating Améry's basic insights.¹⁹ But they are facing a larger public's dissatisfaction with mainstream media's account of the Occupation. Their authority is starting to be questioned. Are Palestinians really to blame for all the failures to reach peace? Why isn't the Palestinian question getting deserved consideration? Consequently, there is a growing fear that Israel will

15 Améry 2022b, p. 85.

16 Améry 2022c, p. 53.

17 Améry's distinction between life and territory—"Israel is fighting for the life of each of her inhabitants. The Arabs, by contrast, are fighting for their territorial rights" (Améry 2022d, p. 44)—partakes of the crudest form of Orientalism. The Indigenous population are de-Palestinized, absorbed in the generic category of Arabs.

18 Améry 2022a, p. 49.

19 It is telling that three of the most vehement critics of the Left's anti-Zionism in the U.S. have blurbed the 2021 edited volume of Améry's writings, *Essays on Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Left*. Cary Nelson, Bruno Chaouat, and Gabriel Brahm depict the Left (cultural Marxism, French thought, theory with a social justice agenda, etc.) as harmful both to Jews and thinking in general, something that the humanities need to exorcise from its quarters. For example, Brahm denounces BDS's destructive impact on higher education. What is bad for Jews (the U.S. reception of French theory as continuing "Europe's war against Jews by other means") is bad for education: "While so selective a boycott in theory would appear facially anti-Semitic, the wholesale dereliction of the humanities it symptomatizes reflects a much broader anti-intellectual agenda—one threatening the very legitimacy of higher education in general" (Brahm 2021, pp. 167, 165).

I would also add that public intellectuals in France, many of them former leftists, also serve as inspiration for U.S. based academics for their baseless charges of antisemitism against the pro-Palestinian Left. Pascal Bruckner, for example, blames the Palestinian question for relegitimizing the hatred of the Jews, whereas Bernard Henri-Lévi and Alain Finkielkraut identify the new face of antisemitism with the anti-racist rhetoric of the Left. See Bruckner 2010; Finkielkraut 2004; Henri-Lévi 2008.

be “cancelled” by a misguided “wokeism,” irresponsibly spurred by the Left.²⁰ For liberal Zionists, it is as if the Left is going out of its way to estrange Jews. It wants to cancel what many Jews hold dear: (the idea/promise of) Israel. The pro-Palestinian Left is said to care only for the lives of Palestinians, cavalierly downplaying the targeted killing of Jews. In response, writes Alexis Grenell, antisemitism is “no fucking joke.”²¹ Putting this cheap appeal to pathos aside, the Left is accused of a double standard, of purporting to care about racism while irresponsibly neglecting antisemitism, failing to adequately attend to the lives of Jews.²² The liberal Zionist asks, Why is the Left turning its back on antisemitism (no longer ranking it a priority in its struggles for social justice)? Or worse, Why is it contributing to antisemitism (since support for BDS transforms Israeli Jews into enemies/evil actors)?

The invention of the category of “new antisemitism” aims to give voice to alienated Jews; it is arguably the Zionist response to the Left’s narrow “taxonomy of oppression,” which “doesn’t leave much room for the experience or perspective of Jews.”²³ We can describe “new antisemitism” as a kind of rhetorical counter-insurgency, a linguistic action taken against the activities of Palestinians and their leftist supporters. The designation reinstates the figure of the Jew as the timeless Victim as it invents a more elusive and formidable foe: the pro-Palestinian Left. This reactionary response to the Left bears the mark of Nietzschean *ressentiment*. Those leading the charge of new antisemitism—and they vary from public intellectuals and politicians to pundits and academics—are Nietzsche’s latest “priests.” In the hope of taking back the moral advantage, they are weaponizing *ressentiment*, healing the pride of their constituents by way of scapegoating: Palestinians and their leftist supporters, who are implicitly accused of stealing their moral authority and the enjoyment that comes in holding this position.

But what has changed? What are the activities that are provoking Zionist consternation? The Palestinian people are starting to narrativize their suffering, speaking of Israeli Jews as colonial settlers, cruel occupiers, and dispossessors of land and resources.²⁴ The Left is actively amplifying their message and is seen, consequently, as usurping Zionist authority, contesting Israel’s self-anointed role as judge of Middle Eastern politics in general and of the Jewish and Palestinian questions

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²⁰ Brahm 2021.

²¹ Grenell 2022.

²² “When we point out the double standard on the left that routinely downplays the violence and racism against us, or stand up against our own discrimination, we’re selectively carved out of the prerogative afforded to every other minority group to serve as the authority on our own” (Grenell 2022).

²³ Grenell 2022

²⁴ Said 1984.

in particular. Zionist *ressentiment* thus stems not from some leftist insensitivity to the real threat of antisemitism, but from the perceived degradation of the former's authority, from the Left/Palestinians' "theft of authority." I am adopting and adapting Žižek's notion of "the theft of enjoyment,"²⁵ which reflects the ideological belief that some unwanted intruders—such as foreigners or racialized Others—are robbing me of my enjoyment, sabotaging my rightful pursuit of happiness. These demonized Others become the objects of Zionist *ressentiment*. If the Others didn't exist, Zionists would live a harmonious life free of alienation and disappointment. They could express their support of Israel in public or social media without the fear of being labeled a racist, and thus cancelled.²⁶

To sum up: If the Left didn't critique Israel and the Palestinians simply disappeared (self-transferred or de-Palestinized), then Jews, according to Zionists, could fully enjoy their nation-state and sympathies from the West (and not just from its political leaders). Zionists are loath to admit that Israel's antagonisms are immanent to their social and economic system, and stem in no small part from coloniality and Ashkenazi supremacy.²⁷ Instead, Zionist *ressentiment* blames—and there is an undeniable *jouissance* in hating the "new antisemites," in the sanctimonious act of blaming—the Left and Palestinians for the deterioration of their moral and hermeneutic stock. It yearns for a time when liberal Zionists were not on the defense, trying to arrest or curtail the corrosive influence of the BDS movement, which is also, and more alarmingly, corrupting younger Jews, making them less amenable to Zionist dreams and lessons.²⁸ They resent having to convince their own of the "virtues" of Israel. As Dave Zirin observes:

a young generation of American Jews . . . are standing in solidarity with Palestinians like no time since the dispossession of Palestinian land that preceded the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. Appalled by occupation, oppression, and apartheid, they see solidarity with the Palestinian people as not only a moral imperative but also central to a broader fight against anti-Semitism and all

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25 Žižek 1993.

26 The rhetoric of "new antisemitism" helps to ideologically reset the problem. It is no longer about making "bigoted opinions," but the imaginary reality that Zionists have been "*wrongly* stigmatized" (Malik 2021, p. 47, emphasis added). Bigotry conveniently transmutes into intellectual courage, the willingness to uphold "unorthodox thoughts," thoughts, in this case, at odds with the Left's pro-Palestinian doxa (Weiss 2018).

27 Israel's Ashkenazi or European-born Jews embody the full privileges of Whiteness in Israel, creating a hierarchical logic, positing Sephardi or Mizrahi Jews (Arab Jews, that is, Jews of Middle Eastern or North African origin) as inferior, and Ethiopian Jews at the bottom of the racial scale.

28 Weiss 2022.

forms of oppression.²⁹

The Zionist pitch about Israel's greatness—as made for example through its pink-washing, the touting of its pro-LGBT state policies—is finding a more skeptical audience. Zionist *ressentiment* is imbued with a sense of nostalgia, nostalgia for a nationalist time when diasporic Jews displayed compulsory solidarity with Israeli Jews and fully identified with Israel (this narrative, obviously, construes a distorted vision of the past, covering over the dissenting voices of many diasporic Jews over Israel and its Occupation). This *ressentiment* is thus bitter and hateful of change and of its agents—those responsible for troubling Zionism's dominant narrative.

At the same time, the matter of *ressentiment* is more complicated. Not all expressions of *ressentiment* are equally reactionary, irremediably tied to the “rhetoric and politics of blame” decried by Edward Said.³⁰ *Ressentiment*'s attachment to victimhood is not inevitable. In fact, I want to make the case for a life-affirming *ressentiment* that breaks with the contours of victimhood and the lure of identity (as well as identity politics). The politics of *ressentiment* here can be formulated along two axes. One, *ressentiment*—exemplified by liberal Zionists—feeds a logic of identity; it is a fetishized affection, functioning as a badge of honor, proof of one's self-righteousness. In this instance, the subject of *ressentiment* always claims the moral higher ground, standing against a horde of woke liberals (cultural leftists) who have turned their back on Jews and the only democracy in the Middle East. This *ressentiment* embodies a hermeneutics of suspicion; it considers the Left's singling out of Israel as emblematic of what is wrong with the Left and “wokeism” (political correctness 2.0). The other *ressentiment* reflects the perspective of the “wretched of the earth.” It is the affect of the colonized, the racialized, the less than nothing whose lives have been rendered disposable in an array of ways.

To be sure, *ressentiment* has a checkered history. In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown meticulously documents *ressentiment*'s hold on many progressive movements; indeed, she describes “the late modern liberal subject” as “quite literally seeth[ing] with *ressentiment*.”³¹ The lure of *ressentiment*, taking refuge in the feeling of powerlessness, indulging in its festering energies, “parad[es] as radical critique.”³² “The moralizing vengeance of the powerless”³³ cannot be an end in itself. *Ressentiment* is compromised; it both articulates and conforms to “the dominant political

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29 Zirin 2022.

30 Said 1994, p. 18.

31 Brown 1995, p. 69.

32 Brown 1995, p. xi.

33 Brown 1995, p.66.

expression of the age: identity politics.”³⁴ Groups after recognition and inclusion often follow the path of rights, which, as Brown argues, works to legitimize the system. Legal protection, in the form of rights, ironically weakens political freedom; rights are “among the cruelest social objects of desire.”³⁵ Brown’s answer: democratic activism requires a decisive shift from a depoliticized, personal “I am” to a politicized collective “I want this for us.”³⁶ Politics as such depends on actualizing this shift, which necessitates loosening the hold of *ressentiment* and abandoning the corrosive path of revenge/hatred (the corrosive imperative of “making the perpetrator hurt as the sufferer does”³⁷). While I agree with much of Brown’s assessment, I do not believe that *ressentiment*’s destiny is identity politics, the cult of victimhood. *Ressentiment* holds the potential to either incapacitate or empower the subject. It is capable of generating either an “I am” or “I want this for us.”

If Zionists suffer from a kind of *ressentiment*-envy—in wanting to regain the status of unjustly wronged subject (thereby making Jewish identity the object of Western sympathies and *unconditional* support, and resenting the democratization of an identity politics grounded in victim status)—the *ressentiment* that I want to pursue here follows a universalist political project. Asserting that you’ve been historically wronged—and still continue to be—doesn’t in and of itself compel you to fetishize your victimhood. The challenge is to give primacy to *ressentiment* as an ethico-political response to woundedness without converting the “bad” affect into the basis of a reified identity: the ahistorical victim. The Left’s solidarity with the Palestinian cause—not unlike the Black-Palestinian solidarity, powerfully renewed and reinvigorated with the advent of Black Lives Matter (BLM)—is giving body to this alternative *ressentiment*, enjoining the wretched of the earth to universalize their grievances. This form of *ressentiment* politicizes the affective register. Palestinian anger is never merely their own; it is an anger that hungers for contact and communication. The wretched’s *ressentiment* opens to dislocation and dialecticization. It takes the form of a collective response to the injustices of the world.

Against Zionist Fragility

According to Zionist logic, no relationality ought to be afforded to Palestinians. Any gesture of solidarity provokes suspicion, anger, and rhetorical retaliation—none more devastating, of course, than the

³⁴ Brown 1995, p. 74.

³⁵ Brown 1995, p. 128.

³⁶ Brown 1995, p. 75.

³⁷ Brown 1995, p. 27.

charge of antisemitism.³⁸ Forging solidarity with the Palestinian cause is tantamount to supporting the annihilation of Jews. Why? To identify with the Palestinians is on this view to identify with bloodthirsty terrorists, with antisemites who are, we're constantly told, hellbent on the destruction of Israel (= the Jews). Raising the Palestinian question is thus seen as a provocation. The word "Palestine" is triggering. It makes *some* feel uncomfortable. Affect then substitutes for argumentation. Bad affect turns into proof of antisemitism.³⁹ This is why worries about cancelling Israel are ironic. Zionists, bent on exposing the antisemitism of leftists, are the exponents of cancel culture. In their weaponization of antisemitism, they are already announcing the worst features of cancel culture: bullying their detractors, demanding self-censure on threat of being denounced as antisemitic—evidence be damned.

As anyone who teaches about Palestine knows, the implications are potentially disastrous. In an academic setting, the description and discussion of Israel as a settler-colonial state or an apartheid regime is said not to be inclusive, or welcoming to Jewish students. It violates what Rana Jaleel dubs "neutral civility."⁴⁰ This is Orwellian newspeak, ideology at its purest.⁴¹ Concessions to Zionist fragility (= suppressions of Palestinian voices) masquerade here as inclusive pedagogy—a sanitized vision of academia where commonly held beliefs and opinions ought to be upheld rather than contested. First, Jewish students are not a monolith. The belief that a critique of Israel is potentially upsetting for Jewish students is itself antisemitic to the extent that it assumes that *all* Jews must identify with Israel (and thus would be upset by the content discussed, by the evidence put forward not only by Palestinians and their leftist supporters, but also by human rights groups⁴²). A 2021

38 The prohibition against solidarity with Palestinians is of course not limited to the academic Left. Take for example, the backlash against *Harry Potter* star Emma Watson, who simply shared an image on her Instagram displaying the text "Solidarity is a verb" at a pro-Palestine event. The accusations of antisemitism were immediate on social media. See Khomami 2022; Žižek 2022a.

39 One is tempted to call this transmutation of affect into evidence the "Zionist doctrine" after Dick Cheney's "one percent doctrine," which states that "If there's a one percent chance that Pakistani scientists [or any other foreign agents] are helping al Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response. . . . It's not about our analysis or finding a preponderance of evidence. . . it's about our response" (Suskind 2006, p. 62). If there is a possibility that a leftist critique of Israel harms Jews (the immanent fear of Judeocide), then Zionists must denounce it as antisemitic: it's about their response. There is no time for evidence. Zionists' Israel is in a state of permanent emergency. *Israel must be defended*. There is a further parallel to be extended. The Zionist doctrine and the one percent doctrine both claim to be safeguarding the well-being of Israel and the U.S., respectively, but in practice have been self-destructive—or "autoimmune" responses, to put it in Derridean parlance—and have done irremediable damage to the global image of both nations. See Derrida 2004.

40 Jaleel 2016, p. 25.

41 See Yancy 2016.

42 Human rights groups have documented the results of what happens when you treat a group of

poll by the Jewish Electoral Institute gives the lie to the Zionist script (which aims, among other things, to flatten the plurality of Jewish beliefs on the Palestinian question): it reveals that 25% of U.S. Jews consider Israel an “apartheid state,” 34% draw a parallel between its racism and that of the U.S., and 22% believe that it is committing genocide against Palestinians.⁴³ Second, the worry that a critique of Israel might abstractly contribute to the proliferation of antisemitism (negative news about Israel creates an environment of hostility toward all Jews) simultaneously ignores and blames the victims of the Occupation (shouldn’t the outrage *also* be aimed at the Israeli government and its subjugation of Palestinians?). Third, the Jewish right to comfort—not to be discriminated against—cannot in any way be predicated on the discomfort, discrimination, and silencing of Palestinians (and vice versa). And if it is, the right to comfort takes the form of an oppressive tool, a privilege of the powerful.

Zionist fragility is also visible in the struggle over naming. Many Zionists resent the Left’s interference, reproaching non-Jews for deciding what counts as antisemitism and what doesn’t, for determining what ought to offend Jews and what oughtn’t. Žižek comments on the title of a recent dialogue on antisemitism and the BDS movement in *Der Spiegel*, which was: “Wer Antisemit ist, bestimmt der Jude und nicht der potenzielle Antisemit [*Who is an antisemite is determined by the Jew and not by the potential antisemite*].” At first glance, Žižek notes the reasonableness of the stance: “the victim should decide their victim status.” Jews should define the contours of their offender (the antisemite, in this case). Upon further reflection, however, Žižek introduces two perspicacious points:

First shouldn’t the same hold for Palestinians in the West Bank, who should determine who is stealing their land and depriving them of their fundamental rights? Second, who is “the Jew” who determines who is anti-Semitic? What about the numerous Jews who support... BDS or who, at least, have doubts about the State of Israel politics in the West Bank? Is it not the implication of the quoted stance that Jews who oppose the Israeli state are in some deeper sense not Jews?⁴⁴

The first point exposes the limits of victimhood when victimhood is no longer exclusively claimed by Zionists, that is, when the category of the victim is properly democratized. The Native defines the contours

people as fundamentally inferior, racialized as uncivilized, whose lives basically do not matter. It constitutes apartheid, an entrenchment of racial segregation. On Israeli apartheid, see the reports by Amnesty International 2022; Human Rights Watch 2021; B’Tselem 2021.

43 “Jewish Electoral Institute: National Jewish Survey” 2021.

44 Žižek 2021.

of the occupier, the settler, the agent of Palestinian dispossession. Palestinians also resent those who tell us this is not an apartheid regime, that our occupation is temporary until a Palestinian Gandhi or Mandela emerges from our ranks. But, unlike Zionist *ressentiment*, Palestinian *ressentiment* is not deployed to fix and elevate Indigenous identity. It is *open to all*: Palestinian rights are human rights. The Zionist framework is devoid of any universalist aspirations. Indeed, the act of universalizing the conditions for what counts as offense is itself deemed antisemitic, a hidden expression of “Holocaust envy” infecting the Left and Third-World politics. Gabriel Brahm purports that “the new antisemite desires the delegitimization of a nation seen as founded on (illicit) ‘enjoyment’ of the Holocaust.”⁴⁵ For Brahm, the antisemitic Left—or what he calls the “postmodern antisemite”⁴⁶—desires what Israel unjustly possesses and enjoys: the currency of its suffering. For Brahm, that “everyone, in principle, [is] equally a victim or potential victim of human rights abuse”⁴⁷ clears the space for antisemitism, the provincialization of the Holocaust (or Holocaust relativization), a catastrophe among others. Jews are accused of “hoard[ing] stockpiles of suffering, thus leaving insufficient funds of pity in circulation for others—who are also miserable but haven’t got access to the libidinal backing needed to capitalize their suffering and mass-market it to the world—because the Jews have taken more than their share.”⁴⁸ Human rights discourse plays the role of rectifying the excesses of Holocaust attention; in its defense of the wretched of the world, it enacts the antisemitic desire of simultaneously claiming X the next Jew (the object of unconditional empathy) and of displacing Jews, putting them back in their place (the object of withdrawn empathy).

Brahm’s paranoid reading, which pathologizes anti-Zionists and post-Zionists at will, and imagines multiple leftist plots against Jews (holocausts replacing the Holocaust; the fear of a proliferation of “metaphorical Jews”⁴⁹), is obscenely self-serving, and willfully distracts from the Left’s actual critique: no one can claim monopoly over victimhood. There are no “presumptive victims.”⁵⁰ This *ressentiment*-

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45 Brahm 2011, p. 491.

46 Brahm 2011, p. 491.

47 Brahm 2011, p. 492.

48 Brahm 2011, p. 493.

49 Brahm and others lament “the practice of analogizing the Holocaust,” which “promiscuously has become widespread—with not only Palestinians suffering from ‘genocide’ (while increasing in population), but also Native Americans, African Americans, gays and lesbians, AIDS victims, and fetuses—all suffering from their own holocausts” (Brahm 2011, p. 502). Analogies are never claims of pure identification. To remove a term from any form of relationality—Jewish suffering permits no analogy—is to ontologize it and libidinally invest it with exceptional meaning—the stuff of fetishization.

50 Butler 2006, p. 103.

infused understanding of victimhood abstracts the victim from the dynamic field of power (the messiness of history), neglecting the category's significant shifts over time and space. This mystification of the victim has the damaging effect of foreclosing politics as such.⁵¹ Rather than taking up the Left's counter-claim, Brahm dreams of antisemitic motivations, opting to fantasize about the postmodern antisemite fantasizing about Jewish enjoyment of their suffering. The Left doesn't envy the authority of Jewish victims. What it flatly rejects however is the Zionist ideology of victimhood that shields Israel, that makes the Jewish victim incapable of becoming a victimizer of Palestinians—in a way that provokes a reevaluation of the interpretive scene.⁵² This is precisely the Zionist picture of the victim that hundreds of Holocaust survivors and descendants of survivors sought to correct and remove from the Zionist playbook. As a response to Israel's barbaric *Operation Protective Edge*, the 2014 Gaza war⁵³, they ran an ad in the *New York Times*,

As Jewish survivors and descendants of survivors and victims of the Nazi genocide we unequivocally condemn the massacre of Palestinians in Gaza and the ongoing occupation and colonization of historic Palestine. We further condemn the United States for providing Israel with the funding to carry out the attack, and Western states more generally for using their diplomatic muscle to protect Israel from condemnation. Genocide begins with the silence of the world.

We are alarmed by the extreme, racist dehumanization of Palestinians in Israeli society, which has reached a fever-pitch. In Israel, politicians and pundits in *The Times of Israel* and *The Jerusalem Post* have called openly for genocide of Palestinians and right-wing Israelis are adopting Neo-Nazi insignia. [...]

We must raise our collective voices and use our collective power to bring about an end to all forms of racism, including the ongoing genocide of Palestinian people. We call for an immediate end to the siege against and blockade of Gaza. We call for the full economic, cultural and academic boycott of Israel. "Never again" must mean **NEVER AGAIN FOR ANYONE!**⁵⁴

51 "No political ethics can start with the assumption that Jews monopolize the position of victim" (Butler 2006, p. 103).

52 The Israeli government can persecute the abuses of a police officer or an IDF soldier (the classic "bad apple" excuse), though it rarely does, without troubling the settler-colonial situation.

53 According to Israeli human rights group B'Tselem: "1391, or 63%, of the 2,202 Palestinians killed by Israeli security forces in Operation 'Protective Edge' did not take part in the hostilities. Of these, 526—a quarter of all Palestinians killed in the operation—were children under eighteen years of age" (B'Tselem 2016).

54 Kassel 2014.

This is a devastating rebuke of Brahm's singularization of the Holocaust. His zero-sum approach to the struggle against antisemitism—Jews or the wretched of the world?—is rendered mute. Supporting Jews must never entail the neglect of Palestinians. "Never Again" is a universalist message or it is no message at all.

What Brahm and others do put on display, however, is anxiety over their diminishing authority, and the seething *ressentiment* (for the Left and its multiple causes) that it ignites. They see that the Zionist narrative is faltering, being questioned from within and without, and that Israel's ethical legitimacy and global image is at stake.⁵⁵ Juxtapose Israel's claim that it possesses the "most moral army in the world" with the recent killing of highly respected Al Jazeera reporter Shireen Abu Akleh by Israeli gunfire during an IDF special operation in the West Bank city of Jenin on May 11, 2022. The tragic episode disclosed the utter disposability of Palestinian lives. Initially top Israelis officials blamed her death on accidental fire by Palestinian armed men, then issued a statement calling for an investigation of Abu Akleh's death, and finally reconsidered the inquiry, tabling it, since "such an investigation, which would necessitate questioning as potential criminal suspects soldiers for their actions during a military operation, would provoke opposition and controversy within the IDF and in Israeli society in general."⁵⁶ Is the demand for accountability antisemitic? Is operating with systemic impunity a Zionist right worth defending? It is more difficult to make the argument that the outrage over Israel's killing is evidence of rampant antisemitism (the typical response to bad Israeli press—cancel the victim and the messenger), that it is being singled out, since "democratic" states typically do not murder journalists. Needless to say, Western powers are embarrassed by the (settler-colonial) situation.

55 In *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, Bari Weiss exemplifies this Zionist *ressentiment*, the defensive posture of the public intellectual who spent her career promoting Israel as "an exponent of liberal democracy in the Middle East" (Weiss 2019, p. 75). With Israel's policies coming under greater scrutiny, and her relevance as a Middle East pundit diminishing, Weiss turns to antisemitism to galvanize liberals, and rescue them from leftist wokeism, recasting Jews as the global underdog fighting "a kind of three-headed dragon" (Weiss 2019, p. 17): radical Islam, the pro-Palestinian Left, and neo-Nazis. In making her argument, Weiss swiftly dismisses Zionism's character as a settler-colonial project, arguing for the Jews' metaphysical Indigeneity, for their return to the biblical land. Jews here are not the victimizers as they are made out to be by radical Islam and the Left. No, they are history's seemingly timeless victims: "two thousand years of history have shown definitively that the Jewish people require a safe haven and an army" (Weiss 2019, p. 75). What Weiss of course leaves out from her distorted and distorting account is, among other things, the fact that early Zionist leaders saw themselves as colonialists. Weiss repeatedly belittles the idea that "Zionism is not the return of a native people but a colonial replacement," describing this as "a lie" that "has become pervasive" (Weiss 2019, p. 128). But witness Vladimir Jabotinsky, speaking in 1923 from the position of a conquering settler: "Every native population in the world resists colonists as long as it has the slightest hope of being able to rid itself of the danger of being colonised. That is what the Arabs in Palestine are doing, and what they will persist in doing as long as there remains a solitary spark of hope that they will be able to prevent the transformation of 'Palestine' into the 'Land of Israel'" (Jabotinsky 1923). Is it really antisemitic to say that Israeli governments have basically continued the ruthless policies of one of Zionism's main political architects?

56 Harel 2022.

Palestinians in the West Bank are exercising the right to name their victimizers. They are effectively naming who is stealing their land and killing their journalists. Viewed in this light, the charge of Holocaust envy rings hollow. The weaponization of the Holocaust/antisemitism loses some of its ideological efficacy.⁵⁷ It must be seen as desperate attempt to restore Zionist authority by simultaneously silencing Palestinian voices and restoring the exceptionality of antisemitism: “Never again” must mean **NEVER AGAIN FOR JEWS!** Antisemitism in a settler-colonial situation can obviously still exist, and can be legitimately denounced, but the accusation cannot be wielded willy-nilly by the occupying force without additional justification. The claims, *You’re antisemitic for (violently or not) resisting your extinction[/for writing about Palestinian rights and the injustices of the Occupation* reek of bad faith and will no longer do.

Žižek’s second point challenges Zionism’s core belief, that it speaks for all Jews. It discloses the fact of an alternative way of being Jewish. These renegade Jews stand with Palestinians in their struggle for liberation. This is in many ways a repeat of the first point, especially when it is reformulated as a Zionist objection: A non-Jew is telling Jews what version of being Jewish is desirable and what isn’t. In *Is Theory Good for Jews?* Bruno Chaouat, following Gabriel Brahm, names this practice “Jew-splitting.” The Left is accused of continuing here a long antisemitic tradition of distinguishing the “good Jew” from the “bad Jew,” “the Jew in the spirit” from “the Jew of the flesh” (Paul’s distinction⁵⁸), the uncanny/cosmopolitan Jew from the rooted Zionist Jew (the Left’s distinction). Jew-splitting is not an accusation limited to non-Jews; Judith Butler, for instance, is singled out for Jew-splitting, for distinguishing the “ethical Jew” from the “ethnic Jew,” disparaging the latter for identifying with the state of Israel.⁵⁹ There is an obvious irony here. Chaouat condemns the Left’s divisions while generating his own Jew-splitting: the “good Jew” who commits to Zionism as a

57 Brahm expresses concern over the obsession with the Jewish Holocaust: “the Shoah is certainly the one man-made disaster in history that people argue about in a unique way, debating endlessly whether or not and how it was or wasn’t unique. This obsessive investment itself makes it unique, therefore, in one very important way at least: the Holocaust is uniquely discussed for its uniqueness and/or lack thereof” (Brahm 2011, p. 494). Brahm carelessly mixes discussions about the Holocaust. There is no distinction between Holocaust deniers and leftist individuals who question the instrumentalization of the Holocaust for political ends, shielding Israel from critique—rationalizing the brutality of the Occupation in the name of saving Jews from future catastrophes. For Brahm, they are both cases of antisemitism. The cases however are nothing alike. Holocaust deniers are clearly antisemitic in denying the fact of Jewish devastation. Individuals who object to the ways memories of the Holocaust are used to cancel dissenting voices are by no means antisemitic. If anything, they are the one doing justice to “the sacred memory of the Holocaust” since, as Žižek points out, it is “being mobilized to legitimize the corrupted politics of today: the apartheid practiced against Palestinians. And it’s those who do it who are the true desecrators of the Holocaust” (Žižek 2019).

58 Chaouat 2016, p. xxii.

59 Chaouat 2016, p. 214.

historical necessity to prevent an “über-Auschwitz,” and the “bad Jew” who romanticizes Jewish non-identity, distorts the righteous history of Zionism, and puts other Jews in danger. Any attempt to exit the Zionist orbit—to pursue alternative modes of relationality, a care for the non-Jew (the Palestinian, *par excellence*), foreclosed by Zionism, such as the one embodied in notion of “cohabitation,”⁶⁰ which Butler adopts and adapts from Hannah Arendt—is read malevolently as antisemitic, “undermining the core of Jewish identity.”⁶¹ To challenge Zionism via a reinvention of Jewishness is to recklessly challenge the very sovereignty of the nation-state of Israel; it is to misunderstand Israel’s relation to the Holocaust.⁶² Rebelling against Zionism is to compromise what stands between Jews and an “über-Auschwitz.” *Butler is not good for Jews.*

Toward a Politics of *Ressentiment*

Divisions are unavoidable. Politics is about choosing a division, not as an end in itself, but as a way to articulate society’s fundamental antagonisms. The taxonomy of “new antisemitism” contributes to an ideological division; it is the fruit of *ressentiment* as nostalgia, which works to occlude rather elucidate the problems facing Israel. It is never the Occupation, the illegal settlements, the apartheid regime, the settler-colonial mentality that are in need of attention. Claims that Zionism is “racist” or “genocidal” are brushed off, evidence of the other side’s unabashed antisemitism.⁶³ There is no need to reckon with Jewish

60 Butler 2012, pp. 151–80.

61 Chaouat 2016, p. 214. Chaouat’s understanding of “the core of Jewish identity” is puzzling. Is Zionism constitutive of being Jewish? Is Zionism an inextricable part of the Jewish people’s identity? Who exactly decides on the coreness of Jewish Identity? Zionists simply claim the authority, mechanically defining Jews as bound to the state of Israel. But why should Zionists have the final word on Jewishness and Jewish identity?

62 “One cannot understand the phenomenon of Israel without being fully cognizant of the Jewish catastrophe” (Améry 2022d, p. 42).

63 For Butler, Chaouat confidently notes, “no one can be a Zionist, or defend the Jewish state, and, at the same time, think, speak, or act ethically” (Chaouat 2016, p. 217). It depends: Is your Zionism exclusivist? Is it only the Zionist who can claim a special bond with the land, upholding the settler’s genocidal slogan, *a land without a people for a people without a land*? And what kind of Jewish state are you exactly defending? Is it one forged on a racial hierarchy and a well-documented apartheid logic? I’m skeptical that Zionism can shake its chauvinistic attitudes, and suspend its racialized vision of Palestinians. On the question of defending the Jewish state while still being ethical, we might turn to the figure of the *refuseniks* as a counter-example. These are Israeli soldiers who decline to complete their compulsory military service in the Occupied Territories. Refusing to serve as instruments of domination, the *refuseniks* break with the dominant Zionist ideology; they display no blind allegiance to the nation-state, but there is, in their actions, hope for a more just Israel. Consider the testimony of *refusenik* Haggai Mata: “Today, militarization and racism among the Jewish population have reached a fascist level. The repression of critical thinking, the total acceptance of the occupation’s crimes, the idolization of the army and the gradual acceptance of the principle of ‘ethnic cleansing’—all these constitute only part of our society’s collapse. To this list one should add the systematic mistreatment of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, the hateful violence addressed at peace demonstrators, and the

privilege because there is nothing wrong with it. Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish People, after all. For Zionists, Israel's actual problems find their sources in the old-fashioned antisemitism of generic Arabs and the new antisemitism of the pro-Palestinian Left. Blaming the Left sustains the collective fantasy that only Zionism can protect Jews. Zionists resent the fact that they have to repeat to the (Western) world that to be for Palestinians is to be against Israel (= the Jews) and thus antisemitic. They resent that they have to court politicians to pass anti-BDS legislation; they resent the pushback from the pro-Palestinian Left. They resent the fact that they are starting to lose in the court of public opinion.

To combat the Zionist narrative, the Left might be tempted to simply avoid the traps of *ressentiment*, and deem it reactive, all-too-prone to fetishization, a bad affect without emancipatory value. I think that this would be mistake. There is another, more productive side to *ressentiment*. The generative force lies in its negativity, in its impulse not to conform to public doxa. Here we might evoke another Améry, the earlier Améry who penned a powerful essay on the virtues of *ressentiment* in *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*.

Writing at a time when Germany was too willing to accelerate the healing process and collectively work through the trauma of the Jewish Holocaust, Améry stubbornly resisted social pressure to *forgive and forget* in the name of communal cohesion, an initiative to place the horrors of the past firmly behind, enabling "what happened to remain what it was."⁶⁴ He creatively reappropriated Nietzsche's account of *ressentiment*, arguing for its existential necessity and productivity. He parted from Nietzsche's account in a significant way, rejecting the thinker's apology of forgetfulness, where "forgetting" is elevated as "a strength, a form of *robust* health."⁶⁵ For Nietzsche, the slave moralist, who is denied the art of forgetting, "relives the sad passions of the past at the cost of losing the future."⁶⁶ Améry never entertains active forgetting as an ideal nor option. As a man of *ressentiment*, he does not forget but revolts "against reality," insisting on the memories of the deeds of his "fellows," "who flogged [him] with a horsewhip."⁶⁷ The impetus to turn the page smacks of intellectual laziness. A post-Nazi Germany is all-too-convenient. Germany and its people want the rewards of working through but without undergoing a racial reckoning.

heartless attitude towards the abnormal and the weak" (Kidron 2004, p. 76). To be sure, the *refuseniks* are fighting an uphill battle, as their refusal to serve transforms them into social pariah, or traitors in the eyes of many Zionists (despite the fact that some *refuseniks* still hold on to a notion of Zionism).

64 Améry 1980, p. 71.

65 Nietzsche 1996, II, 1.

66 van Tuinen 2018, p. 1.

67 Améry 1980, p. 69.

At its basic level, Améryean *ressentiment* is akin to the figure of the “feminist killjoy”; it is the subject who, as Sara Ahmed puts it, refuses the “promise of happiness” to the extent that “inequality is preserved through the appeal of happiness. It is as if the response to power and violence is or should be to simply adjust or modify how we feel.”⁶⁸ The subject who bears *ressentiment* does not give up on her “moral truth”⁶⁹ and conform to the appeal of happiness, but actively turns down society’s interpellative gaze, its ideological vision of the common good and programmatic call for closure and repair. Améry’s refusal to sanction reconciliation and “easy healing” echoes Gayatri Spivak’s ethico-political injunction to keep open the “wounds” of coloniality.⁷⁰ By refusing to suture the wounds of trauma, the subject of *ressentiment* holds that no genuine healing will ever take place under the existing socio-political horizon. The wound thus serves as both a remainder and reminder of Germany’s inhuman past and incessant violence. The wound affectively records the concerns of the silenced and neglected—those not represented in the official script.

And yet, there is an obvious limit to holding on to the wound. There is always the danger of ontologizing woundedness, making it constitutive of the identity of the oppressed. Améry’s “infected wound” stages what we might call the double-bind of a politics of *ressentiment*. On the one hand, there is the call to refuse false appeals to healing (which only aggravates the injury); on the other, foregrounding the wound opens it up to fetishization. The latter is the feared lure of Nietzschean *ressentiment*: the subject takes refuge in it, enjoying its pernicious energies. Ahmed cautions against transmuting woundedness into an identity:

One of the reasons that it is problematic is precisely because of its fetishism: the transformation of the wound into an identity cuts the wound off from a history of “getting hurt” or injured. It turns the wound into something that simply “is” rather than has happened in time and space. The fetishisation of the wound as a sign of identity is crucial to “testimonial culture,” in which narratives of pain and injury have proliferated.⁷¹

The alignment of *ressentiment* with *being* rather than *doing* is not unproblematic; it sets up *ressentiment* for mystification and manipulation.

This is where a politics of *ressentiment* helps; it does so precisely by weakening the lure of “wounded attachment,” disrupting the impulse

.....
68 Ahmed 2017, p. 60.

69 “Only I possessed, and still possess, the moral truth of the blows that even today roar in my skull” (Améry 1980, p. 70).

70 Spivak 2013, p. 54.

71 Ahmed 2004, p. 32.

to fetishize and ontologize one's suffering. Nietzschean *ressentiment* undergoes dislocation, its negative energy dialecticized. *Ressentiment* is repeated but with a crucial difference. As Žižek puts it, dislocation involves invention, an act of *poiesis*: "Dislocation... means that elements are thoroughly re-contextualized, integrated into a new symbolic and social space which confers on them a new meaning unrelated to the original meaning—one can in no way 'deduce' this new meaning from the original one."⁷² Simply put, this other *ressentiment/ressentiment* of the Other pushes against the tendency to reify the identity of the subject, the same tendency that Améry succumbs to in proffering aggressive support for the state of Israel. In his case, the negativity of *ressentiment* gave way to the positivity of nationalist identity:

The only connection between me and most Jews the world over is a sense of solidarity with the state of Israel, a commitment that has long since ceased to be a duty of which I need to remind myself. Not that I would want to live there. The country is too hot, too loud, in every respect too alien. Nor do I approve of everything that is done there. I abhor the theocratic tendencies, the religiously inflected nationalism. I have only visited the country once for a short period of time and may never return. Yet even though I do not speak their language and could never adopt their way of life, I am inextricably connected to the people who inhabit this unholy spot and who have been abandoned by the rest of the world. For me, Israel is not an auspicious promise, not a biblically legitimized territorial claim, no Holy Land. It is simply the place where survivors have gathered, a state in which every inhabitant still, and for a long time to come, must fear for his life. My solidarity with Israel is a means of staying loyal to those of my comrades who perished.⁷³

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Améry's libidinal attachment to Israel (compulsory solidarity) triumphs over *ressentiment's* collective appeal—Wendy Brown's "I want this for us." Identitarianism displaces *ressentiment*. The latter's eruptive energies are hermeneutically subdued and made to contribute to Israel's ideological project of the "timeless Victim" and the Palestinians, by extension, are mystified as the victimizers, as one antisemitic people among many others. Turning to a personalized, de-dialecticized form of *ressentiment*, Améry not only failed to find common cause with the Palestinians, he also took out his anger on the Left, foreclosing the legitimacy of a pro-Palestinian Left. Laying the intellectual/ideological ground for the charge of "new antisemitism," Améry's *ressentiment* fed

.....
⁷² Žižek 2022b, p. 2.

⁷³ Améry 2022b, p. 85.

a Zionist ideology that has turned the tragedy of colonial erasure into a rallying cry for Israeli sovereignty. It helped inaugurate a discourse that shamelessly blames the victims of settler colonialism for refusing to disappear, and BDS and the Left for not forgiving and forgetting the injustices of the (ongoing) Nakba, the Arabic word for “catastrophe,” referring to the forced expulsion of some 800,000 Palestinians between 1948 and 1949.⁷⁴

In sharp contrast, Palestinian *ressentiment* remains faithful to Améry’s original formulation. It is there “in order that the crime become a moral reality for the criminal [the settler], in order that he be swept into the truth of his atrocity.”⁷⁵ In today’s political constellation, there is no suturing “the wounds of the Nakba.”⁷⁶ Palestinian *ressentiment* signals to the occupiers, and Western powers, that the Natives have no interest in forgiving and forgetting the settlers for their colonial theft of land and resources. The bad affect indexes a refusal on the part of Palestinians to naturalize and normalize the crime of Indigenous genocide, to treat it as a mere historical fact, contained as an episode of Israel’s tumultuous past (not unlike that of other Western/settler nations). There is no healing, no peace with an Israeli regime that insists on its Jewish privilege (separate and unequal), that imagines a solution to the Palestinian question absent of decolonization, that envisages a Zionism with human face, without its racist excesses, that wants change-without-change, that champions a humane Occupation, and so on.

Palestinian *ressentiment* shifts from a personal, depoliticized expression of frustration (in need of management and diffusion—more talks about a defunct “two-state solution,” slowing Israel’s illegal settlements on Palestinian land, etc.) to a collective *No!* that resists the rewards of identity politics (which dictates that you fight exclusively for your, or your people’s, material interests), but finds common cause with global racial struggles, such as those of BLM and other Indigenous groups. Again, to take up the Palestinian question/cause is to adopt the position of the “feminist killjoy.” The one who resentfully refuses to play nice, to uphold the idiocy of neutrality, to cover material that is not “controversial,” steering away from Palestine/Israel, so as not to disrupt society’s, or the university’s, affective economy. The Pro-Palestinian killjoy does not manage her anger nor self-censor, but welcomes trouble and actively sabotages the happiness of those in power; she delights in her maladjustment, shunning the politics of respectability, which only preserves (the reproduction of) inequality and state violence, and serves to further silence society’s marginalized and excluded. This generative

.....
74 See Pappé 2006.

75 Améry 1980, p. 70.

76 Qabaha and Hamamra 2021, p. 30.

ressentiment both alarms the (pro-Zionist) liberal gatekeepers of the status quo—whence the taxonomy of “new antisemitism,” a desperate attempt to police or cancel critique—and promises to energize the pro-Palestinian Left in its ongoing struggles for universal justice and emancipation.

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Three Fragments on Suicide as a Political Factor

Slavoj Žižek

Abstract: This essay takes the notion of *suicide* to analyse its forms as a political factor. Divided in three fragments, the essay takes the Hegelian notion of “negation of negation”, to undertake this analysis. This is done in three sections; the first one discusses the surviving suicide as a living dead, then goes on in discussing the failed suicide in today’s capitalism, and concluding with the third fragment on the suicide as an emancipatory act.

Keywords: Ethan Frome, politics, suicide, “negation of negation”, emancipation.

There is a subspecies of the Hegelian “negation of negation” which is as a rule ignored by even the most perspicuous interpreters: the “negation of negation” as a *failure of negation itself*. Since the ultimate case of self-negation is suicide, we should focus on a failed suicide.

Surviving Suicide as a Living Dead

The masterpiece of the failed suicidal “negation” is Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1911), a short novel which takes place against a backdrop of the cold, gray, bleakness of a New England winter: in Starkfield (an invented small town), the narrator spots Ethan Frome, "the most striking figure in Starkfield", "the ruin of a man" with a "careless powerful look... in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain". The narrator gradually learns the whole story reaching decades into the past when Frome was an isolated farmer trying to scrape out a meager living while also tending to his frigid, demanding and ungrateful wife, Zeena. A ray of hope enters Ethan's life of despair when, 24 years ago, his wife's cousin Mattie arrives to help. His life is transformed as he falls in love with Mattie who returns love. Zeena suspects this and orders Mattie to leave. Since Ethan lacks money to escape with Mattie, he takes her to the train station. They stop at a hill upon which they had once planned to go sledding and decide to sled together as a way of delaying their sad parting, after which they anticipate never seeing each other again. After their first run, Mattie suggests a suicide pact: that they go down again, and steer the sled directly into a tree, so they will never be parted and so that they may spend their last moments together. Ethan first refuses to go through with the plan, but in his despair that mirrors Mattie's, he ultimately agrees, and they get on the sled, clutching each other. They crash headlong and at high speed into the elm tree. Ethan regains consciousness after the accident but Mattie lies beside him, "cheeping" in pain like a small wounded animal, while Ethan is left with a permanent limp... The epilogue returns to the present: while visiting Frome in his house, the narrator hears a complaining female voice, and it is easy to assume that it belongs to the never-happy Zeena, but it emerges that it is Mattie who now lives with the Fromes due

to having been paralyzed in the accident. Her misery over her plight and dependence has embittered and her, and, with roles reversed, Zeena is now forced to care for her as well as Ethan: she has now found the strength through necessity to be the caregiver rather than being the invalid.¹ In an agonizing irony, the love couple Ethan and Mattie have gotten their wish to stay together, but in mutual unhappiness and discontent, with Zeena as a constant presence between the two of them – the ultimate case of Mladen Dolar's formula of being as a failed non-being...

Is then the attempted suicide an authentic act, and the couple's survival a pure contingent accident, or is there an inner truth to the survival that makes the suicide attempt a fake? No wonder that, in spite of the simplicity of its plot, Ethan Frome caused such confusion among the interpreters. At the level of genre, it was described as a work of brutal realism, a Gothic tale, or an adult fairy tale (the wicked witch wins and the lovers do not live happily ever after). With regard to the ethical stance implied by Ethan Frome, a long line of critics, from Frederic Taber Cooper – who wrote back in 1911 “It is hard to forgive Mrs. Wharton for the utter remorselessness of her latest volume /.../ Art for art's sake is the one justification of a piece of work as perfect in technique as it is relentless in substance.”² – to Lionel Trilling – “In the context of morality, there is nothing to say about Ethan Frome. It presents no moral issue at all.”³ – insist on its lack of moral substance, while Robert Ebert (in his review of the movie) characterizes the novel as a “cheerless morality tale”... Especially weird is the case of Trilling. In reply to a taunt by Richard Sennett, “You have no position; you are always in between,” Trilling replied, “Between is the only honest place to be.”⁴ It sounds like those who, today, condemn Russian attack on Ukraine but show understanding for Russia... In a stance which cannot hide its elitism, Trilling dismisses average people caught in the circle of habitude, as if only a small elite is able to act in a properly ethical way: he suggests that

“the story examines what happens to individuals who are hobbled by ‘the morality of inertia.’ The lovers lack both the courage and the conviction to forge a new life for themselves, thanks to their subservience to community standards. Their fear dooms them to the routine, death-in-life existence that they so desperately yearned to transcend. The real moral of Ethan Frome is — follow the imperatives of your heart or risk losing your soul.”⁵

1 See Ethan Frome - Wikipedia.

2 Quoted from Wharton 1995 pp. 120-121.

3 Trilling 1995, p. 126.

4 See Rodden 1999.

5 Ethan Frome | Film Review | Spirituality & Practice (spiritualityandpractice.com).

Again, there is the opposite reading: “the ending turns Ethan Frome into a cautionary tale, a warning to the readers that not following your dreams can have serious negative consequences.”⁶ But is this really the case? Ethan abandons his plan to borrow money and escape with Mattie for moral reasons – he is a sensitive moral person. What brings him to self-destruction are class distinctions: the harsh poverty deprives him of choices. In the pre-accident part of the story, Mattie and Ethan seem to think that the best they can hope for is to be able to continue living together with Zeena, seeing each other as often as possible. This plan comes true in a hideous way: they are forever together, but as two crippled living dead. Ethan and Mattie end up in a desperate situation because they were NOT ready to follow their dreams (and, say, escape together, or at least openly confront Zeena with the fact that they cannot stay away from each other), i.e., in Lacanese, because they compromised their desire... but did they? Here enters the final twist of the story: in the very last pages, Mrs. Ruth Hale tells to the narrator something that changes everything:

“Mrs. Hale glanced at me tentatively, as though trying to see how much footing my conjectures gave her; and I guessed that if she had kept silence till now it was because she had been waiting, through all the years, for someone who should see what she alone had seen.

I waited to let her trust in me gather strength before I said:

“Yes, it's pretty bad, seeing all three of them there together.”

She drew her mild brows into a frown of pain. “It was just awful from the beginning. I was here in the house when they were carried up - they laid Mattie Silver in the room you're in. She and I were great friends, and she was to have been my bridesmaid in the spring... When she came to I went up to her and stayed all night. They gave her things to quiet her, and she didn't know much till to'rd morning, and then all of a sudden she woke up just like herself, and looked straight at me out of her big eyes, and said... Oh, I don't know why I'm telling you all this,” Mrs. Hale broke off, crying.”

What exactly did Mattie say to Ruth when she woke up after the accident? Why couldn't Ruth bear to repeat it to the narrator? Whatever it was, it, combined with the change (for the worse) in Mattie's personality (who now acts and even looks like Zeena 24 years ago), leads Ruth to speak the novella's final lines:

“There was one day, about a week after the accident, when they all thought Mattie couldn't live. Well, I say it's a pity she did. I said it right out to our minister once, and he was shocked at me. Only he wasn't with me that morning when she first came to... And I say, if

.....
⁶ Ethan Frome Epilogue Summary & Analysis | LitCharts.

she'd ha' died, Ethan might ha' lived; and the way they are now, I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues."

Are these last words – “the women have got to hold their tongues” – really anti-feminine, resuscitating the old cliché that women chatter too much? Things are not so simple: to what exactly does “holding tongues” refer? Not to general rumors that circulate in a small town but quite specifically to Mattie’s words when she awakened after the snow accident – and they were not mere gossip, they possessed almost testimonial value of the last words one says when one is not sure one will survive. Mrs. Hale’s last words can thus more appropriately be read as a defense of mere chatter: hold your tongue instead of saying something that is a matter of life and death... Although we never learn what these words were, we can safely presume that they concern what happened between Mattie and Ethan. Since it must have been something really shocking, it can only be that the two had sex and/or then tried to kill themselves.⁷ The often advocated reading according to which the finally revealed truth of the attempted escape and suicide is narrator’s fiction into which he projects his own “shadow” (in the Jungian sense of the dark repressed part of his Self) should thus be flatly rejected:

“Within Ethan Frome the narrator lapses into a vision (the tale of Ethan which is, as we have seen, a terrified expression of the narrator’s latent self /.../ The novel focuses on the narrator’s problem, the tension between his public self and his shadow self, his terror of a seductive and enveloping void.”⁸

Mrs. Hales’s final words add an additional twist, they confirm that the narrator’s “fiction” did lay a hand on some traumatic Real which is too strong to be directly put into words. Echoing Lacan’s dictum “truth has the structure of a fiction,” the narrator’s fiction touches the Real... in short, Freud wins over Jung.⁹

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7 I follow here the reading by Jean Frantz Blackall Wharthon 1995, p. 174.

8 Wolff 1995, p. 145.

9 The movie version (John Madden, 1993) misses it all: the narrator is a new priest in the town (so the parallel between the narrator and Ethan – both are/were in their youth ambitious and interested in technical education – is lost), there is full sex between Ethan and Mattie, but the trauma – indicated by Mrs. Hale’s final words – is censured.

A Failed Suicide in Today's Global Capitalism

The motif of failed negation can also be a part (or, rather, the final touch) of a more complex plot, as is the case with Tana French's *Broken Harbour*,¹⁰ which depicts a perfect case of how the capitalist self-reproduction can drive those who blindly adhere to the predominant ethics to murderous madness. Every theorist who loses time with musings on the complex relationship between the "economic base" and subjective libidinal economy should read her novel; while the liberal-capitalist financial speculations and their brutal consequences for individual lives are its massive background presence of the novel, it focuses on the way the affected individuals react to their economic and social predicament, bringing out all their idiosyncrasies, their unique ways of doing what each of them considers the right thing to do. None of them is dishonest, they are all ready to sacrifice everything, including their own life, to set things straight, and the novel presents different ways of how "doing the right thing" can go wrong. Therein resides the sad lesson of the novel: it is not simply that the turmoil of global capitalism corrupts individuals, pushing them to betray their basic ethical stance; even when they try to follow their ethical stance, the system insidiously to achieve the opposite effect.

Two young kids of the Spain family are found smothered in their beds, while their parents, Pat and Jenny, are stabbed in the kitchen downstairs - against the odds, the mother may survive. These multiple murders happen in "Brianstown," a Dublin suburb planned as a glamorous multi-purpose, all-inclusive community; things went wrong when the market collapsed in 2008, leaving most of the estate unfinished and uninhabited. Only four families remained on the property, prisoners of a housing market where they owed more than the houses were worth after the developers cut corners and can't be located... and now the multiple murder of the Spains haunts the eerie location. (Empty apartments and whole apartment blocks are one of the key symptoms of today's global capitalism, they abound in all big cities from New York to Dubai; in China alone, there are today enough uninhabited apartments to locate the entire population of Germany and France.)

The murders are investigated by Mick "Scorcher" Kennedy, the Murder Squad's star detective whose fundamental belief is that if one toes the line and follows the rules, everything will turn out right. The Spains pose a challenge to this belief because they did everything "right," they invested deeply into the way people are "supposed" to live. The house was beautifully furnished and maintained, they themselves were lovely, they seemed to be doing everything they were supposed to. They met and married young, they adored each other, they had two beautiful children. Pat had a prestigious job that earned enough that Jenny could

¹⁰ French 2013. In my observations on *Broken Harbor*, I rely heavily on Amy Adams's blog - see *The Book Blog of Evil: Broken Harbor*, by Tana French (maebookblog.blogspot.com).

stay home with the children. They drove the right cars, had the right parties, wore the right clothes, invested in home ownership so they could get onto "the property ladder." Jenny made herself into the perfect housewife, even switching out scented candles with the seasons. Then the economy collapsed, Pat lost his job and couldn't find another one, and they ended up dead.

Since Pat was, like Scorch, also a man who played by the rules, Scorch resists the evidence that would implicate Pat as the murderer, and insists on pinning the deaths on a loner, Conor, who had loved Jenny since they were teens. Conor had his own personal financial crisis, and had taken to hiding in an empty building on the estate where he could watch Pat and Jenny enact the kind of perfect life he dreamed of for himself. Early on in the novel, he is arrested and confesses to the murders. However, even as Scorch celebrates the solve, he can't stop questioning: there are too many loose ends - why were there holes cut into the walls all over the house? Why were there baby monitors scattered around? Who wiped the browser history from the computer and why? Why did the killer use a kitchen knife rather than bringing his own weapon?

At the end we discover it was neither Conor nor Pat who did the killings: it was Jenny who caved into the psychological pressure of watching her husband become unmoored. As the months go by, Pat stops searching for work and slowly falls into his own obsession. He becomes convinced that his own worth as a husband and father is inextricably bound up in capturing an animal who lives in the attic; although they have almost no money left, he starts buying electronic equipment to capture this animal. First he wants to protect his family, but as the weeks go by with no physical evidence of the animal, he cuts holes and sets up video baby monitors hoping to catch sight of it. He buys live bait (a mouse from a pet store) that he sticks to a glue trap and then places in the attic with the trap door open... The beast haunting the house is a Real that is not part of reality: a pure embodiment of negativity/antagonism, an anamorphic stain which, "looked on as it is, is naught but shadows of what it is not" (as Shakespeare put it in Richard II).

Jenny never believed in this animal, she just indulged Pat's weird hobby, but when Emma, Pat's and Jenny's daughter, returns home with a picture of her house, and she has drawn a large black animal with glowing eyes in a tree in the yard, Jenny is pushed to act: she goes upstairs and smothers the children to save them from their father's madness. She then goes into the kitchen, where Pat has stuck his own hand into one of the holes he's cut into the walls, using himself as live bait; in his other hand, he has a large kitchen knife. Jenny takes the knife and kills him; however, she's too exhausted to finish the job, killing herself also. This is when Conor rushes in: he's seen the struggle from his hide-out, and runs to the Spain's house to save them; Jenny doesn't want to live, and she asks him to finish her off. He loves her, so he tries, but he's not ruthless enough,

and she survives. It is Conor who also tries to save Pat's posthumous reputation by wiping the computer history. His final act is to confess to the murders, to save Jenny the horror of realizing what she has done when she will awaken.

Curran finds in Conor's apartment a piece of evidence that seems to implicate Jenny, but he doesn't turn it in – he thinks that it might be better to let Pat be blamed for the deaths, and leave Jenny free to take her own life. Because Curran got the evidence tainted, this is the end of his career as a detective. He wanted to act on his own recognizance, his own belief as to the "right" thing to do – but if you do this, the system collapses. Scorcher falls into the same trap: over-identified with Pat as he is he simply cannot allow Pat to be thought of as a murderer, even though Pat is dead and it wouldn't matter to him to be considered a murderer. So Scorcher manufactures his own evidence in order to put the case back on what he considers the right path: he enlists Jenny's sister in the play of "discovering" a piece of Jenny's jewelry and "remembering" she had picked it up at the crime scene... in this way, Scorcher also destroys his own career.

Broken Harbour thus tells the story of the repeated failure of people who desperately want to do the right thing to do. Pat's case is straight: the father-provider who just wants to maintain a safe haven for his family isolates himself from them and ends up in full paranoia. Conan who loves Jenny and is ready to ruin his life to save her, bungles things further and enacts a meaningless sacrifice. Curran and Scorcher, the two detectives investigating the case, are both brought by their ethical commitment to violate the rules of police investigation... Jenny's fate is the most desperate – her plan is to obliterate her entire family, but she fails to include herself into the series of corpses, so she survives as a miserable totally broken leftover, turning her intended tragic act into a ridiculous, almost comical, performance. We don't know what will happen when/if Jenny awakens from her coma: will she persist in her miserable depression, kill herself, awaken with no memory and thus become able to begin again, or somehow manage to go through the painful process of mourning? There is a totally crazy optimist potential at the margin of the story: what if she awakens and gets together with Conan who truly loves her?

Suicide as an Emancipatory Political Act

But is this the last word on this topic, or can we nonetheless imagine a successful suicide as an emancipatory political act? The first association are here of course public suicides as a protest against foreign occupation, from Vietnam to Poland in the 1980s. In the last years, however, a suicidal proposal aroused a wide debate in South Africa. Derek Hook¹¹

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11 I owe this reference to Delpont, Hook, and Moss to Stephen Frosh (Birkbeck College, University of London).

reports how, in March 2016 Terblanche Delport, a young white academic, sparked outrage at a Johannesburg conference at the University of the Witwatersrand, when he called on white people in South Africa “to commit suicide as an ethical act” – here are Delport’s own words:

“The reality [in South Africa] is that most white people spend their whole lives only engaging black people in subservient positions – cleaners, gardeners, etc. My question is then how can a person not be racist if that’s the way they live their lives? The only way then for white people to become part of Africa is to not exist as white people anymore. If the goal is to dismantle white supremacy, and white supremacy is white culture and vice versa, then the goal has to be to dismantle white culture and ultimately white people themselves. The total integration into Africa by white people will also automatically then mean the death of white people as white as a concept would not exist anymore.”¹²

How, more concretely, are we to imagine the symbolic suicide of the South African Whites? Donald Moss proposed a simple but problematic (for me, at least) solution: the racist Whiteness is a parasitic formation which parasitizes on Whites themselves:

“Whiteness is a condition one first acquires and then one has—a malignant, parasitic-like condition to which “white” people have a particular susceptibility. The condition is foundational, generating characteristic ways of being in one’s body, in one’s mind, and in one’s world. Parasitic Whiteness renders its hosts’ appetites voracious, insatiable, and perverse. These deformed appetites particularly target nonwhite peoples. Once established, these appetites are nearly impossible to eliminate.”¹³

To get rid of their racist stance, the whites have to get rid of the parasitic whiteness which is not part of their substantial nature but just parasitizes on them, which means that, in getting rid of their racism, they do not lose the substance of their being – they even regain it, obliterating its distortion... I prefer to this easy way out Hook’s comment (inspired by Lacanian theory):

“Delport’s rhetorical and deliberately provocative suggestion is perhaps not as counter-intuitive or crazy as it at first sounds. Arguably, it is the gesture of giving up what one is – the shedding

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12 Quoted from Hook2020_Article_WhiteAnxietyInPostApartheidSou.pdf.

13 On Having Whiteness - Donald Moss, 2021 (sagepub.com).

of narcissistic investments, and symbolic and fantasmatic identities – that proves a necessary first step to becoming what one is not, but might become. This is the transformative potential of anxiety that clinicians work so hard to facilitate, and that I think can also be discerned – however fleetingly – in the instances of white anxiety discussed above: the potentiality that a new – and hitherto unthinkable – form of identification is being unconsciously processed and negotiated.”¹⁴

What I nonetheless find problematic in these lines is the optimist turn: suicide does not mean the actual collective self-killing of the South African whites, it means a symbolic erasure of their identity which already points towards new forms of identity... I find it much more productive to establish a link between this idea of the whites' collective suicide and the idea of so-called afro-pessimism. Recall Fanon's claim that “the Negro is a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly declining declivity”: is the experience that grounds today's “afro-pessimism” not a similar one? Does the insistence of afro-pessimists that Black subordination is much more radical than that of other underprivileged groups (Asians, LGBT+, women...), i.e., that Blacks should not be put into the series with other forms of “colonization,” not grounded in the act of assuming that one belongs to such a “zone of non-being”? This is why Fredric Jameson is right when he insists that one cannot understand class struggle in the US without taking into account anti-Black racism: any talk which equalizes white and Black proletarians is a fake. (A point to be noted here is that, when the young Gandhi protested against the white rule in South Africa, he ignored the plight of the Black majority and just demanded the inclusion of Indians into the privileged White block.)

So what if we turn Delport's suggestion, radical as it may appear, around and propose that it is the Blacks in South Africa who should commit a collective symbolic suicide, to shed their socio-symbolic identity which is profoundly marked by white domination and resistance to it, and which contains its own fantasies and even narcissistic investments of victimization. (In the US, the Blacks are right in using the term “Victim!” to insult their Black opponents.) One can thus repeat exactly the same words: the Blacks need to perform “the gesture of giving up what one is – the shedding of narcissistic investments, and symbolic and fantasmatic identities – that proves a necessary first step to becoming what one is not, but might become.” Consequently, I see afro-pessimism not just as a recognition of dismal social reality but also and above all as something that announces “the potentiality that a new – and hitherto unthinkable – form of identification is being unconsciously

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¹⁴ Op.cit.

processed and negotiated." To put it brutally, let's imagine that, in one way or another, all the Whites would disappear from South Africa – the ANC inefficiency and corruption would remain, and the poor black majority would find itself even more strongly dislocated, lacking the designated cause of its poverty... To revolutionize a system is never equal to just eliminating one of its parts, in the same way that the disappearance of Jews as the disturbing element never restores social harmony.

The key move has to be done by Blacks themselves - was Malcolm X not following this insight when he adopted X as his family name? The point of choosing X as his family name and thereby signaling that the slave traders who brought the enslaved Africans from their homeland brutally deprived them of their family and ethnic roots, of their entire cultural life-world, was not to mobilize the blacks to fight for the return to some primordial African roots, but precisely to seize the opening provided by X, an unknown new (lack of) identity engendered by the very process of slavery which made the African roots forever lost. The idea is that this X which deprives the blacks of their particular tradition offers a unique chance to redefine (reinvent) themselves, to freely form a new identity much more universal than white people's professed universality. (As is well known, Malcolm X found this new identity in the universalism of Islam.) To put it in Hook's terms, Malcolm X proposes for Blacks themselves to bring to the end their deracination with a gesture of symbolic suicide, the passage through zero-point, in order to free the space for a new identity. Such a gesture would render the White domination simply pointless, a solipsist dream, a game missing a partner with whom it can only be played.

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Volume 9
Issue 2

Politics Today: Interview with Wolfgang Streeck

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

1) We cannot not begin with the ongoing war in Ukraine. It appears on some level to be very difficult to assess or analyze such a situation which is not only heated but also still intensely developing. In addition, none of us is a military analyst. But we nevertheless want to start with a rather huge question: What should we expect from this war?

However the war ends, or more likely: drags on, it will result in a resurrection under American leadership of what is called “the West”, with Western Europe closely tied to the United States, and NATO rather than the European Union as the dominant international organization for Western Europe. For a long time, there will be no rapprochement between Western Europe and Russia, therefore no French-led third-party role for Europe in the evolving post-neoliberal global system. Russia will be allied with China, Europe with the United States, both blocs getting ready to battle over global dominance or, alternatively, the structure of a bipolar world order. NATO will be the European arm of the United States, the EU the bridgehead of the United States on the other side of the Atlantic.

2) You have very insistently and incisively analyzed the internal deadlocks and problems within the current representational politics in the EU for example. Is there any and if so what kind of political action, political options, political agents do you identify on an international stage?

The EU will play much less of a role in the next one or two decades, and its internal problems will be overlaid by its service for the resurrected West. The United States will want the EU to be less picky about “rule of law” in its Eastern frontier states; they will also want the EU to admit into membership Ukraine, Moldavia, the West Balkans, even Georgia. This will make enormous fiscal demands on the EU and its member states, adding to their obligation under NATO to increase their defense spending to two percent of GDP. The EU will become a receptacle for collective-European public debt, on the model of the NGEU Corona Recovery Fund. Old tensions between German Atlanticism and French Gaullism will be resolved in favor of the former. As unprecedented financial resources will be needed for supporting the Eastern European front states and upgrading the European military, financial support for Mediterranean countries, in particular Italy, will come under pressure.

3) One of your diagnoses led you to argue that -- in difference from the famous saying that this is more difficult to do than to imagine the end of the world -- one can in fact imagine the end of capitalism. But, as you then added, this imaginable end is not a happy end, not an end that ends well, but rather one that ends worse and in a disintegration that is

more disintegrating than the already existing one. What are the political implications of this? Does a new vision of politics only emerge when one thinks through the absolute disaster of the existing political-economic conditions?

It is interesting to see how the diversities of capitalism are now being overlaid by, or associated with, the diversities of states and state blocs. There is Western market capitalism, Chinese communist party capitalism, Russian crony capitalism, all with their own class of oligarchs, and all armed to their teeth and willing to go to war if they feel they must. Internally each model of capitalism is full of conflicts and contradictions, which is why they have become so reliant and dependent on strong states or state blocs, and on external enemies for their internal integration. How stable will all this be? I cannot make any prediction here. Certainly, inequality is continuing to rise everywhere, collective goods are declining, life risks for ordinary people are growing. But up to now we still are in a Gramscian interregnum: the old order is dying but no new order is as yet being born, the latter because there are no relevant political forces with a vision beyond capitalism.

4) To follow up. You have written about the crisis of capitalism and the forms or possibilities of ending it. What we would like to discuss a bit with you is perhaps grimmer than your positions. We want to read the famous sentence from *The Communist Manifesto*: "capitalism produces its own gravediggers." We think that the far more frightening realization we have come to grasp is that capitalism does reproduce its own logic, indefinitely, and it does meet an immanent limit. But this limit is not socialism nor communism, but barbarism: the utter destruction of natural and social substance in a "downward spiral" that does not recognize any "reality testing" in this destruction. In this sense, the "gravediggers" that capitalism produces are gravediggers of both capitalism and communism. Is it the time that all emancipatory projects should not use the immanent logic of capitalism on pointing a way out nor wait for the collapse of capitalism in the hope that we will not be dragged down along with it. In this sense, what can be done?

A self-destructive evolutionary logic without a happy ending, ever more destructive as it proceeds, annihilating not just itself but also any chance of a future redemption? Could be. There is no lack of dystopian scenarios one can come up with. Perhaps the only hope is that people will at some point discover their creativity, their agency, their sense of honor, their solidarity and stand up to do, or fight for, a different, less aggressive, more peaceful social order. It may take a long time, given modern means of individual and mass control and

the disorganization of human society at the global level, compared to the organization of contemporary capitalism and the modern means of violence.

5) During and after every crisis, say the financial crisis of 2008, the on-going crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, etc., the real victim of the financial crisis was not capital, but the Left itself. Yet again, the Left proved incapable of providing even a minimal idea of an alternative to global capitalism. What do you think is the reason for the Left's inability to offer an alternative?

The task is gigantic: inventing a new society and a new way of life. I think we must take leave of the modernist illusion that a new world can be created by intelligent design and implemented by revolutionary state power – the Marxist-Leninist way of changing the world. We should admit that we do not know what the better life will be like that we hope for. Nor can we expect capitalism to be canceled the way communism was canceled by Boris Yeltsin: From tomorrow on capitalism! The rise of a new order will most likely take place gradually, unnoticed first, through the accumulated expediences invented by people trying to cope with the deficiencies of the old regime. Socialists may have to be like sociologists rather than urban planners: watch what is going on and try to draw out the lines that they see, to get a sense of where they may lead. What the new order is may be possible to understand only when it has already come into existence. But of course, there is no guarantee that it will.

6) There are some contemporary economists and social theorists who are arguing that we no longer live in capitalism, but we have 'regressed' to techno-feudalism, or corporate feudalism, neo-feudalism etc. What is your take on this? Did the current crisis of capitalism change its mode of appearance but not at all its mode of operation or are we witnessing something profoundly novel?

Capitalism has always changed its appearance, from early to high to late capitalism, from trade to industrial to financial capitalism, from liberal to democratic to neoliberal capitalism, from Italian to Dutch to English to American to Chinese capitalism etc. etc. All the time its imminent demise was predicted by the best and the brightest, Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, and on the other side of the spectrum Weber, Sombart, Schumpeter – they all expected capitalism to end in their lifetime. It did not of course end. What all these capitalisms had in common is that as economic modes of production they depended for their stability on the progress of an endless accumulation of capital in private hands, for the purpose of

breeding with it more capital – and capitalist societies were ones whose order and prosperity depended on successful private capital accumulation. There are all sorts of reasons why this process cannot go on forever – and all sorts of interventions, and circumstances, why it nevertheless did go on until now, with occasional interruptions, called crises. We will see how long this will last. Capitalism is a historical phenomenon, it had a beginning, so it must have an end. But we don't know when that will be, what it will be like, and what will come next.

7) How do you see or understand the relation between theory and politics? Should we decouple them, or should politics operate only under the condition of being informed by theoretical reflections? Would you agree with the statement that politics which does not think is administration?

Yes, but I have a less elevated idea of politics. It is not just politicians or technocrats that do politics, not just the elites. We all, intentionally or not, act on, generate, destroy the collective foundations of our human existence. Theory you need to become aware of the political nature of your life, to not mistake it for a merely private life.

8) What do you think of the role of the state today? Can the state be an object of emancipatory politics, or should we focus our attention to the forms of non-statal forms of organisations? Can emancipatory politics exist within the coordinates and confines of the state?

“The state” is too general a concept for me, too indeterminate. There are small states and big states, imperial and peripheral states, states that can manage capitalism by coercing compliance of workers and states that can manage capitalism only by making concessions to workers. In any case, states cannot be considered without the societies that they face and organize – the political parties, the unions of workers, the social movements etc. Trade unions, cooperatives, self-help groups of all sorts – they must conquer space for themselves outside of state and market and protect it against their intrusion. All politics today takes place, as you put it, within the confines of states. But within those confines emancipatory politics must have, must build spaces of its own, of social autonomy, optimally protected by the state's constitution, just as it needs spaces that are not governed by the law of the market but, instead, by voluntary solidarity.

9) What are the conditions for politics in times of ecological crisis and ecological catastrophes? Is there a political grounding of such politics or

does politics need to start somewhere else, say in economy or does it even have to have a more material and natural basis?

I only have a very general answer here, which is that anti-capitalist politics must develop non-capitalist relations and practices inside and against capitalism, if possible with the assistance of a reformist state, in a struggle for collective goods, non-capitalist forms of enterprise and banking, less mobile capital, social rather than private property etc. etc. This includes solidary behavior in private everyday life, the acceptance of responsibility for one's actions, what one says and does, as a basis for more, if you will, militant kinds of political action. Politics from below, everyday politics. The labor movements of the nineteenth century were organized, not just in parties and trade unions, but also in consumer cooperatives, reading circles etc. Are there, could there be equivalents for this today? If not, forget about anti-capitalist, socialist, communist politics.

11) Do you think that Marxism is redeemable as a conceptual, intellectual and political apparatus or framework - and can there be any contemporary sense of what thinkers previously referred to as communism?

There are too many Marxisms around to answer this question sensibly. To me the Marxist tradition is an indispensable building bloc of any useful theory of society, in particular modern society: because of its premise that societies, certainly capitalist societies, are subject to objective forces, to a proper dynamic of their own, an evolutionary logic vested in their structure, not in anyone's action, a logic that has to do with the means of production and reproduction, that shapes social life and in this challenges human agency, the capacity of humans, individually and collectively, to ride or suppress that logic in their collective interest.

As to communism, to me it is something that exists, a real condition of social life: it is the common ground on which any society, including capitalist society, is based. Without that common ground there can be no human life. Capitalist individualism denies that communism exists, or in any case denies that it serves a useful function. Capitalism's project is to absorb the communism of society into the market, to commercialize it, replace it with monetized trade relations. A post-capitalist "communist" society is one that recognizes the need for collective goods, goods that do not create envy because they are the property of all, that are equally available to all of a society's members – and a society free from the need to be subservient to unending capital accumulation in private hands, at the penalty of its impoverishment.

Workerist Marxism: Interview with Antonio Negri

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

Brief introduction to the interview

We want to give the readers of the following pages a few points of orientation in advance.

This interview with Antonio Negri, the Italian philosopher and militant, is unconventional in its form. As Negri pursued a creative way of answering the questions in non-linear manner, we decided to divide the interview into two parts: the first part will consist of the questions we have asked, and the second part will have the answers of Negri. In some occasions, he condensed two questions into one broad answer.

1. We want to begin our interview with the war in Ukraine. The war has been ongoing for months already and it does not look like it is going to end anytime soon. What do you expect the outcome of this war might be? What do you think its consequences, political and otherwise, will be? Can we say that the present global political situation - and certainly not only because of the war in Ukraine - is one determined by war?

2. Let's continue with a rather biographical question. You have been involved and been one of the key figures of *operaismo*, as you were one of the founders of the *potere operaio* and of the later *autonomia*... Tell us a little about what these theoretical and practical orientations and movements meant in their time and mean for you (for) now? We are also asking this as you have published your autobiography in several volumes. What is the function and significance of one's life for your thinking?

3. You wrote your PhD thesis on Hegel's state and the law. But later on, you distanced yourself from Hegel's political position and sided with that of Spinoza. But, especially with regard to the concept of the state and its function in politics, the debate between Spinoza and Hegel is quite charged. We could maybe most easily raise a question by asking you the following: *from what position* does one speak about politics? How do we identify what we call politics in the first place?

4. Some theorists within contemporary Marxists link the renewal of Marxism to a renewed appreciation of Marxist science, namely of the critique of political economy. You seem to make a similar, yet at the same time profoundly different move. You seem to conceive of science differently: it is neither what allows us to appropriate external nature nor a form of accumulation of knowledge which would provide us with a sovereign basis for our practices. Nor is it an ontology. You rather point to what you describe in line with Spinoza as a new science, a new science of collective appropriation of the potentialities that are created by the very collective that is appropriating them. Science is then the form in

which an ontologico-practical self-knowledge, a know-how is created, by inventing the very means of knowing what a collective body can do in the (re)production of this very collective. One could understand science then as a science of the ontological consequences of collective practice, as an ontological science of collective potency. Could you tell us more about your position and the role science plays in your take on Spinoza and in your conception of materialism?

5. Could we link this discussion with your approach to Marx's *Grundrisse*. At one level of analysis, there seems to be a main point of disagreement with Althusser and his followers: Althusser locates *Grundrisse* in the pre-epistemological break, you see it as a major theoretical achievement. Is it still pertinent for you for the rethinking of Marxism as a conceptual and political tool?

6. At one point you remarked "I became a communist before becoming a Marxist." How do you describe and think through this delay or this tension?

7. You claimed that the European Union is a cage and a mess. It has rendered the general struggle against European Capital problematic if not impossible. Some claim that the alternative to the EU is the return to the nation-state and national currency. Is this or is there another alternative to the EU? Is politics possible in Europe today? Or is it only possible outside and beyond Europe and the EU?

8. You had a brief engagement with Catholicism and once stated that it was in this period when you realized that there is a possibility to unite thought and action. In what sense does this unity find an important paradigm within the domain of religion? It seems clear that if politics is separated from thought, it regresses to being something else (maybe administration or technocracy) - does the religious paradigm allow for a renewal of what regressed and lost its political capacities?

9. Can one do philosophy without being (actively) engaged in political militancy? Today what could be the link between the two? Is it philosophy which should be the theoretical form of political engagement, or is it theory, sociology, etc?

10. Some contemporary thinkers on the so-called left argue that we no longer live in capitalism, but we have 'regressed' to techno-feudalism, or corporate feudalism, neo-feudalism etc. What do you make of this?

11. We would like to address the complicated issue of violence in politics. If, as some claim, the period of revolutions are "over" in a traditional

sense and it seems difficult to say what it means to conceive of the revolution today, instead of revolutionary violence we seem to be experiencing an increase of violence in all dominant modes of "politics." How do you see the relation between violence and politics in general and in our present conjuncture?

12. Quite a few on the contemporary so-called left by an attempt to reconstruct socialism, be it democratic or otherwise. Communism, on the other side, does seem to have less of an appeal, how do you conceive of the relation between the two today

Answers by Antonio Negri

I will start by answering your second question, I prefer to keep the first for last. That second question touches on my biography - how I became an "operaista" and what *operaismo* could still mean for me. I'll take a rather short tour to answer that. As a high school teenager, growing up in a strongly Catholic environment (the Veneto of the '40-'50s), I was enamored with Giordano Bruno, whom I celebrated with an immanent impetus. If anybody asked me, what was my creed at that time, I answered: a pantheist. But when I was just a little bit older, after graduating, I happened to collide with the harsh reality of the society in which I lived in, I quickly forgot the cosmic optimism of renascimental pantheism and willingly yielded to the reasons of a materialistic and humanist reading of the world and of life. That was the spirit in the schools where I was educated - a small number of secular schools in mostly clerical Italy, critical and anti-fascist schools in a country that had only recently reopened to democracy. A vague socialism, nourished however by a first-hand experience of militancy and a strong adherence to the class struggle, qualified my thought. And all my life, ever since. In my early 20s, I had a very brief stint on a far-left kibbutz (MAPAM) in Israel - working and studying, political activity and struggle had to go hand in hand. Since those times, I have never separated thought and action; philosophy and politics - more precisely: what I came to think and what I came to live; reason and body; all together. My philosophical apprenticeship was developed within a biopolitical setting. A few years later, when I encountered *operaismo*, it immediately impacted me (even before it was structured as a grand reference figure), because it posed the prior necessity to explain the world, I was fighting against in such a way that would allow the build of another one in which people could live in freedom and justice. Subjectivity was the starting point, from which to read the reasoning of objectivity, the workers' struggle was the starting point, from which to understand the capitalist development, living work was the starting point from which to understand exploitation: in short,

Marx had to be brought back on his feet, after what Engels, the socialist economists, the Stalinist bureaucrats have done to him, little by little, by reshaping and embalming him into an economic doctrine, into a relentless objective narrative of reification and fetishism. That was not what we, *operaisti*, wanted. For us it was necessary to re-read that reified world, not like a mass of people dazing in the capital-fetish, but as a virtual plot of an activity of subversion, as a project of another possible world. Living work against dead work. We started to inquire in the factories, co-researching together with the exploited, an analysis and definition for the ever-renewed technical composition and political composition of the proletariat, for a criticism of the institutions of the workers and those of the constitution, for programs and objectives of workers' struggles, etc. etc.: this is how *operaismo* presented itself in the first phase. Then, over the years, the color palette became larger, and the new method ("only the workers' point of view reveals the structure of the capitalist command") was used to reconstruct the chain of command and to analyze the critical points which were open to subversion - from the factory to the civil society, and then up to global (imperial) order.

Amidst this *operaista* experience, I found myself locked in a maximum-security prison and accused of crimes of terrorism (including that of having kidnapped and killed the head of the government of a large North Atlantic country). Evidently, I had little to do with such accusations: but how should I pass the time until new clear skies? As often happens in great misfortunes, I sought refuge in the enthusiasms of adolescence and so I remembered the pantheistic passion, when I had embraced a new way of life. But now I was a communist who had gone through the class struggle which I read in terms of *operaismo*: how should I move in this new vital reality? What philosophical imprint, what imagination should I enact to understand the new situation? I started to read Spinoza again. What new things could he ever tell me, there, inside a prison where every year an increasing number of defeated comrades passed by an entire generation wiped out from the political and democratic scene? First of all, a "principle of hope" had to be rediscovered. And you went to search for it in Spinoza, one might ironically ask me? Yet it was precisely in Spinoza that we sought and found a principle of freedom that opened up the given being, our condition as defeated. It will not be "hope", but it looks like it. Spinoza told us that divine does not mean transcendence (but I already knew this), but rather a plural horizon of immanence, populated by infinite ways of existence, therefore with infinite capacity of singularities to build the world, not as solitary individualities but as multitudes of singular ways. My atheism then lost even the appearance of a subtle negation of transcendence: the Spinozian God was built from the bottom of ethics, in the work of singularities. Immanence was constructive freedom. I don't know if it could be called hope, it was certainly a perception of eternity. Beyond

defeat, beyond the time of prison, so was the eternal being built. It did not precede us: it would follow us when we built it. But the eternal is life, and life is made up of that living work from which I, as a communist, had planned the struggle for a better future - for myself, for all the comrades with whom and for whom I had fought. Now, even though in prison, we resisted - we showed that the Communist political commitment (which our ethics was at the time) in the resistance against prison and against the destruction of our lives, prepared the revolt for the years to come. It also helped us to reorganize our knowledge. The Spinozian ethics was transformed into a communist ontology.

By contrasting Gramsci's "pessimism of reason" with the Spinozist optimism of rational imagination, by contrasting the "optimism of the will" of socialist modernism with Spinoza's "prudence" in experimenting solidarity and building common institutions.

B.

I will try to answer questions 3 and 4 together because to me they seem to revolve around the same problem: that of the definition of a realistic, effective political science that is adequate for our time.

Let's start with Hegel: from the dialectical method that leads to Science through negation / the revelation of the real that leads to Wisdom - to Satisfaction that is, in the absolute possession of History, for what history Effectively is. History and Value are here identified. *Operaism* too, is dialectical in its method. It proceeds through a critical adhesion to reality, through a succession of negations and re-compositions that articulate the surface of the real - but always in the light of a power of liberation. *Operaism* dissociates History and Value (identifying critically their paths of becoming) and placing freedom (in a biopolitical sense) as the key to movement, as a power to be. From which position, then, can we talk about politics? From below, from the point of view of the subjectivity in struggle. A material, corporeal, singular, and common subjectivity. The Spinozian plot of this proceeding is evident from what has already been said in the previous answer - but here it is also useful to refer to Foucault, to the last cycle of lectures he gave at the Collège.

Hence starts a dialectical journey with several episodes. The first is what some have called a "critique of political economy", where "political economy" means the Real of Power - its productive capacity (capitalism) and its order of command (sovereignty), - where by "criticism" we mean that "point of view from below" which offers power to subjectivity. But to which subjectivity? To that which is at the same time exploited by the Capitalist and alienated by the Sovereign - and which reacts by constituting itself in "class consciousness". Now, class consciousness is not an essence (rediscovered), but a historical modality in continuous transformation (constructed). The inquiry is the way by which it can be

defined and understood, from time to time. The inquiry (especially as co-research, that is action/knowledge conducted in common) is a production of conscience, on which every collective political process of liberation is founded. This process arises "spontaneously" in the various situations in which there are movements against capital and its political order. This process becomes collective as soon as we recognize the possessive nature, or rather, the figure of robbery and rape typical of capitalist appropriation, and the inimical (antagonist) abstraction of the sovereign value imposed on subjectivities. If it is necessary to give recognition here this ontological passage (of Hegelian memory), it is nonetheless valid only in an inverted manner, with respect to what Hegelianism dictates: this is not the recognition of an opposite (ideally surmountable = absorbed and transformed) but the recognition of a new strength, of a constructive power that the conscience brings to the class. This passage - like other concepts on which we will dwell - is also always subjected to criticism (to the inquiry): as we will soon see.

I therefore use the term recognition (*Anerkennung*) outside of any possible reference to its reading and use by Habermas and his school. Kojève's reading of the "recognition", that exalts its humanist and creative power... to the point of ironically projecting it towards the "end of times", has always seemed more correct to me. But if we do not want to caricature the Hegelian discovery in this way and go to find it (where it was born) in the "Jenenser Philosophie", we will be able to recognize the historical and productive (therefore dialectical) figure of subjectivity as a material basis - then neglected, worse idealized - of Hegelianism. I believe I still preserve a link to this process of subjectivation - starting with my doctoral studies, including an Italian translation of the ethical system of the Hegel from Jena.

Hence, a second episode. When the critique of political economy has detected the point from which the collective power of "living labor" (= class consciousness) arises, here the whole picture is set in motion. A "new science" becomes possible - not only in terms of a collective self-awareness of the collective - of the class, of the multitude... - but in practical-political terms: one learns to recognize "what the body can do". The Spinozian model resonates here, in the face of the materialist power in the subject / class. The entire phenomenology of organizational processes - from the various party figures to the different modes of movements, from the multiple forms of counter-power to insurrectional experiences, etc. - is intertwined here, in the space of this episode. Living work, presenting itself as "class consciousness", develops collective convergences, intersections, ever wider socializations and often also a certain capacity for institution.

A third episode of this tale of recognition will consist in the effort to build the common. Class consciousness emerges here as cupiditas. Desire to build a world, a society, a life, where the faculty of humans to

work together, the status of social cooperation, the way in which singular subjects are sometimes able to invent new figures of subjectivity and new forms of life, decline this word: “the common” – a new subjectivation, composite, multitudinous, coherent, and capable of endowing itself with new institutions. *Ubi societas ibi jus*: but in an open, pluralistic way, with different names and common purposes, where *jus* / institutions is the ontological product of a collective power.

Thus, we go back to the beginning - to the event of subjectivation that determines the place from which we talk about politics. The place where it is said what desire nourishes it, what power holds it up, and what objectives it proposes to itself.

C.

With reference to question 5.

The “Grundrisse” have now been assumed, despite Althusser's reservations, as central to the contemporary reading of Marx. On the other hand, the first editors and commentators - Rosdolsky in the first place - left little room for subsequent critical positions à la Althusser. This from the philological point of view. Or, if you like, from that of the archeology of “The Capital”.

But my use of the “Grundrisse” (and that of other *operaisti* authors) is not simply philological. We met the “Grundrisse” not in books but in life, we found them through the analysis of “The Capital” applied to the contemporary world - in short, by moving the lighthouse of “Das Kapital” onto our horizon of struggle. In fact, the “Grundrisse” sets theoretical premises (and sometimes proposes definitive concepts) for understanding the current state of capitalist development, or rather where it got now, in the century and a half that distances us from the drafting of “The Capital”. The Marxian intuitions in the “Grundrisse” (the crisis of the law of value / measure; the end of the classical working day; the preeminence and hegemony of technology and cognitive work - the so-called General Intellect - in the processes of accumulation; the alternation in the succession of the accumulation of exploitation and extraction (dispossession) of value; the insistence on the new nature of cooperation - the so-called Social Individual - etc. etc.) have become figures of the capitalist production of contemporary society. *Operaismo*, by using these conceptual schemes, became able in the 70s to understand (simultaneously with its occurrence) the process of transformation of the mode of production (from Fordism to post-Fordism) which reinvested and renewed global capitalism; and again in the 80s and 90s, became able to grasp the birth and development of neoliberalism as an ideology of financial capital imposed on the rising trend of cognitive labor, to

reorganize the terrain of exploitation; and again in the 2000s, was able to understand the process of globalization of production and the markets, the new figure of networks and platforms, and the reconfiguration of the relations between reproduction and circulation (with respect to the categories of "The Capital"), etc.

But all this would only have theoretical importance if - within this analysis and anticipation of the trend - workerism did not offer the possibility of a (subversive) political attacking point of view, that is, if objective analysis did not bring with it the possibility to calibrate the working-class struggle within these processes, to move it as the engine of an antagonistic development in which it participates. The question is always: where is the point on which these transformations lead to capital crises? The answer lies in identifying a subjectivity which is able, time after time, to respond strongly to the crisis, to find insurrectional support in the crisis, to oppose command with political action, to constitute a new world. And it is in this co-measuring of the degrees of capitalist development (command) and the strength (power) of the class organization that lies the "doing politics" from the *operaista* point of view. It is in this light that the "Grundrisse" constitute an essential political weapon.

On the other hand, it is precisely by assuming the grid of the Marxian method of the "Grundrisse" that *operaismo* was able to proceed with the identification of the subject-in-struggle diversified in the various figures of capitalist development. The industrial working-class - whose technical composition Marx had begun to describe in *Capital* - is open to transformation in the "Grundrisse" - in the first place through the transformation of technologies, therefore of the different placement of living labor inside the constant capital; secondly, through the general and generic socialization of capital itself. In the first place, therefore, the technical composition of the working-class changes as cognitive function increases until it conquers hegemony in the production of value. Consequently, the political composition of the class will have to change, that is, the ways in which its antagonistic subjectivation becomes politically effective. The change in the technical composition affirms the possibility of the antagonistic transformation of the class, the political composition represents its new subjectivation.

Secondly - and we are now here, in the present - it will be a question of reconstructing the class dialectic in a situation where exploitation takes place through the "extraction" of value from the common (natural and human) - that is, from a multitude of singularities (cognitive and not) associated and precarious on the global terrain of financial command. It is within this chaotic world of common and constructed, continuous and alternative relationships that the *operaista* inquiry still moves on a global level.

I believe that Althusser, in the last period of his life and his research, came close to the same perception of the new composition of

the proletariat, understood precisely as a multitudinous set of precarious but productive existences and activities - and hence, of resistance.

D.

On question 7.

I have never considered the European Union as a cage for the working class. On the contrary, I have always thought (and acted, for example by declaring myself in favor of the referendums on the European Constitution against the opinion of most of the leftist forces) that European unity was the appropriate terrain for the working-class struggle in the age of globalization. I think even more so today, when we have entered a phase of relative (but effective) decline of the American hard (and/or soft) power (of the Washington consensus) on a global level - that is, the moment when a united Europe could play a formidable role of democratic alternative, where life forms are invented. I think that nationalist ideologies, even when they assert themselves in large patriotic movements, are always reactionary. To conclude: in the current period (of reorganization of American-dominated globalization) I think that the European Union must disengage from the NATO bond and present itself as the heir to anti-fascism and socialism of the twentieth century (exemplarily strengthening its welfare, its culture of rights, etc.).

E.

Here I will give an answer to questions 6 and 8.

Honestly, when I remember my participation in the Catholic activities, in the city of my youth, I don't feel about it as something that no longer belongs to me. It gave me an education in compassion and generosity, in the rational commitment to act, and in the concern to provide a collective operator to the action. These qualities I have transferred, such as they are, in my political action when I started to be a militant of the leftist parties. Why? I could answer that if there was a religious component in my youth (and there was, a profound one), that imprint was a participant in a sort of primitive communism, with the need to act together (all this was confirmed to me in the experience I mentioned, conducted in a communist kibbutz in Israel). Around the age of 30, all this moved into my adult consciousness, and it found its definitive habitat in Marxism. I still think that political action cannot be separated from a sort of religious breath, from a sort of ascetic élan: or better, that when politics is organized from below, from subjectivity in movement, and through massified and multiple subjectification processes, which are accompanied with desires, passions, practical purposes, and theoretical assumptions, a tension

towards the absolute is necessary. That this can be called religious, I emphasize again, I have no objection. However, I insist on the fact that, at the same time, here the absolute dissolves into theoretical knowledge and collective action: it recognizes itself as the engine that pushes us forward, towards the realization of our programs, predisposing the critical tension in the judgment of reality and in the evaluation of the means. I consider of this critical dimension an Enlightenment tradition not so much coming from French Jacobinism as from the Italian thought between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, between Vico and Leopardi - when the religious paradigm in its absoluteness is planted in history as something that must be transformed into true knowledge and political passion for liberation. It is evident that my passage through Spinoza is affected by this theoretical imprint. It amuses me to recognize that my materialism - which in my maturity has become a solid and compact habit - sometimes shines with these precious stones that religious experience has set in it. When in the proletariat I see that mass of the poor that the Franciscans wanted to organize through cooperation and solidarity in the liberation from poverty, I take on that task again in the ethical structure of the political. This attitude serves also to understand that the political project can never be detached from its movement and mass management, because politics is totally, absolutely immanent. The recognition of this confusion between politics and religion - and its subsequent dissolution - allows us to arrive at the affirmation of the immanence of the political. Through the most explicit and strong criticism of every form of transcendence (and/or transcendentality) of power, thus destroying all pre-eminence of the means over the end, of the coercion of the norm over the constituent power of social movements.

It is within this materialist horizon, which is absolutely immanent, extremist in the negation/destruction of all transcendence, that the religious inspiration is freed from any naturalistic and/or identitarian reference - that is, from any coercive envelope that may have regulatory tables and rules, mandatory for individuals and/or against the multitude. Our time is plagued by impetuous returns of reactionary normativity, against the civil rights (singular and/or collective) that the last hundred years of democratic and class struggles have conquered. This normative reaction has often been claimed as a restoration of nature and/or of norms in force in previous historical periods, considered as original. Now, nature and identity (especially considered as historical sources of norms and/or sovereignty) have become repressive devices that should be resisted and destroyed - and this can happen only if criticism and thought are accompanied by a subversive passion, in respecting the freedom of each one and the power of the multitude, in demystifying and therefore transforming nature and identity to the point of making them devices of cooperation and liberation - it is only on this condition that a warm pace of struggle for absolute democracy will still be possible.

F.

The answer for questions 10 and 11.

It seems to me that the answer to questions 10 and 11 can be constructed by following on the questions 6 and 8. Those questions pose as a problem the current conjuncture of capitalist domination, and the possibility of a revolutionary insurgency is questioned - and exactly in this regard the vexed question of political violence has been reopened.

Now, this series of problems can be grouped into a single knot, already present in previous conversations - and that is the current condition of democracy in the "West" (to use a term accustomed to reactionary thinking) and how a struggle for absolute democracy can be handled through bottom-up practices.

Let's start by asking ourselves how this current figure of the capitalist command could be configured and named. The terms "neo-feudalism", "techno" and/or "corporate feudalism" allude to the increasingly evident mixture of entrepreneurial and political-institutional power. However, these terms are not able to designate the fact that these neo-feudal figures are not given only to the structure of the productive society but have deeply penetrated the profound structure of the state and its articulations. Therefore we'd better keep the term of "political capitalism". "Political capitalism" means that we invest the entrepreneurial instances with sovereign characteristics. Here capital not only penetrates the sovereign structures but invests them entirely and rearticulates them according to financial and productivist logics. While this phenomenon partially concerns all the so-called nation-states, however, it completely involves only two or three pluri-national or imperial sovereign structures - USA, China, and a few others - which within globalization have now reached this level - because these are the only actors that we can say enjoy sovereignty in the full meaning of the term. As for the others we will speak of semi-sovereignty or, more specifically, of the degree of subjection in which they are placed in the global order. On this scale, the figures of "political capitalism" can be defined and indexes can be established, concerning its effectiveness and consistency - from a plus (+) of power granted to the conjunction of capital and state to a minus (-) which is not so much the sign for the intensity of the conjunction of power made from the fusion of entrepreneurship and political power, as for the placement in the hierarchy of global integration. A minimum of sovereignty therefore. The difficulties of the struggle for absolute democracy are multiplied by these dissymmetries of political capitalism in the global order, which prevent the repetition of internationalist slogans and make paths of global convergence impassable for the revolutionary forces. On the other hand, it is precisely in these niches of the global order that revolutionary struggles continue to take place. Violence always coexists with these struggles, not as their necessary presupposition and prefiguration, but as an elastic capacity to

react (to respond) to the repression, arrogance and provocations directed so frequently against the proletarians by the technical-bureaucratic elites which exalt themselves in political capitalism.

That said, to go back where we began, let us remember that resistance constitutes the normal condition of the citizen in the global political order - in the many forms in which the global capitalist order presents itself. To say politics is to say resistance - for as long as absolute democracy will be still lacking. It does not matter what is form in which the resistance, the counter-power present themselves: what matters is that they are there. It is resistance that gives heat to the political. Without resistance there is no politics. And with resistance there is always violence - which gets a higher temperature, degree after degree, by measuring itself against the degradation of democracy that is produced by political capitalism, at every level.

In the current conjuncture, that is, in the era of "political capitalism", the inherence of violence in government activity and in social life has become increasingly radical and invasive, so much so that the violence of the government (of the command) more and more often, overflows and stagnates in the society - everywhere: daily violence in the social sphere develops before, after and through the activities of government - and they both seem related to each-other - and in any case elusive and out of proportion. Amidst social disorder and misery and the generalized control of citizens' behavior/customs, amidst popular revolts and their repression up to "special operations", "wars on behalf of third parties", and then ... the glamour of nuclear war - amidst the so-called "civil society" and the state there is now only one thread, that of the violence of command. Are we to draw here a Hobbesian conclusion, the imperative to undergo a contract that constitutes the state as absolute sovereignty and the obligation to obey it? This question is not understandable - because the subjects have changed, they are irreducible to absolute command and to the mediations of a contractual democracy that wants to introduce them to the sovereign - even though they find themselves having to act in a time when structures and liberation movements are lacking, an ebbing time for democratic experiences, a time of melancholy and frustration. At the same time, the subjects express an exasperated singular demand for absolute democracy. The subject that appears in the era of political capitalism holds within itself a tension of resistance (in a latent way) and a potential for political rationality which, together, nourish and prepare (in an indefinite time) a boundless expression of political violence.

If the violence (which is in the society) cannot be removed, it becomes important to reason and to ask ourselves what is a legitimate measure of force that subjects can collectively express while practicing those actions of counterpower that allow them to live. The concept of legitimacy, which in other times is characterized by the democratic public

law as the right balance of state rule and civil consensus, is pulled from all sides in this contemporary period of the global order in crisis. The right balance, the measure of agreement between the figures of the global order and the actors of political capitalism is really difficult to find. Yet this is the condition in which we live. Whatever be the fog that obscures our progress and the fog that render opaque the right path that should be found, the fact persists (even made definitive, from the revolutions of the twentieth century) that we live in a society where power is dual, and consists of a relationship, always asymmetrical, never reducible to identity. Sovereignty opposes freedom, capital opposes the living labor. This double opposition, which includes various degrees of violence, must be experienced on the one hand and governed on the other. But if living in itself presents no problems and resistance can coexist with everyday life, governing is instead forced to impose his command, to seek a solution which will put it in control and allow it to overcome that now centuries-old condition of double power. But what is that solution? It cannot be an illusory peace (or the closure of the antagonistic relationship: which are what fascisms, on all continents, propose, namely violence against anyone who has their eyes fixed on absolute democracy).

The tableau now is open, dramatically open. We just have to conclude: let us advance with prudence and firmness in the direction of absolute democracy. Without fear, with hope, let us try to resolve the civil war to our advantage.

G.

I am answering here to question 9.

Here we are raising many issues. Putting them in order - in my order of understanding and constructing an adequate response - they can be summarized as follows: 1/ is the plot of political commitment perhaps traceable on the ground of sociological theory or on that of political theory? 2/ what link can exist between political philosophy and the concrete dimensions of the political phase (strategy and tactics...)? 3/ and finally, can we do politics without political militance?

To answer the first of these questions, to enter the matter in a non-bizarre way, it would be very useful, I think, to resort to some examples, that is to remember how, in the experience of politicians, every answer to the question whether in their activity prevails the reference to the political sociology or to theory, would be meaningless. Let's look at Lenin for example. During his pre-revolutionary subversive activity, he continually links the analysis of the development of capitalism in Russia to the phenomenological survey of the activities of revolutionary movements. The relationship is often contradictory, in other times the devices of knowledge and action work well together. Especially in the

post-revolutionary government activity, Lenin interprets and acts on the construction of socialism (or to put it better, on the transition to socialism) always standing on the limit between the objective conditions (economic, sociological ...) of the social and the subjective devices (tactical or strategic) that are determined by the clash between the counter-revolutionary forces. The political here is marked by a continuous ambivalence. Ambivalence as an openness and as a decision. It would not be appropriate to call it a dialectic - dialectic opens all doors, yes, it is a useful key but for that very reason often a false key, just a rhetoric one. The political is ambivalent, and even that which resolves it, what determines it, remains ambivalent. Max Weber (mainly on theoretical grounds) does not think differently when dealing with the political, even though he charges with romanticism the decision that breaks the phenomenological ambivalence of the political process - he still considers the decision homogeneous to the other analytical elements of the definition of the political. And we could give other examples. I like (in order to define the experience of the politician) to read the biography of the great politicians: Churchill, de Gaulle, Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh - all are prisoners of the reality that they break: of course, they build another one, but that would still bear the signs, certainly satisfied by escaping the first difficulty - nevertheless always in contact with that very first one.

Hence the answer to the second question: what link between political philosophy and political reality is placed by the subject, by the political actor, by the base, within the political process? Political philosophy can certainly easily transform itself into political theory when - by pruning off every passion of the subjects - you consider political processes with the gaze of the botanist or the statistician. But it is a game that does not last long. Even when the political system seems stable in the long run, it is always shaken by unforeseen events and crossed by resistance: governing always means to invest in a level of political subjectivation, it always means giving a hand to the infrastructures and the constitutive relationships of command and obedience. To govern is always to exercise (in explicit or latent form) a constituent power. Now, the ambivalence of the subject and the object that the political process nourishes is always experienced and sometimes resolved by the political work of the subjects - that is, by the multitude of singularities. It can be resolved according to various measures that make the command or the conduct antagonistic to it prevail. However, the evaluation of the concrete constitutes the decisive element. And this is not only true when you must solve tactical problems, linked to the possibilities of the present, but also when you project the action into a strategic perspective. Where, for example, moving for the communist revolution can often mean advancing only one step on the very long road that the realization of an absolute democracy draws.

The answer to the third question (can one do political philosophy without political militancy?) will be short. Yes, if doing philosophy is an operation detached from the device of absolute democracy: this is what almost all departments of political philosophy do. Otherwise no: political militancy gives consistency to philosophical thought. On the other hand, when aiming at absolute democracy one does philosophy to destroy the existing politics, how can one think of destroying it without adequate practice? Without transforming resistance into counter-power? And in the thought that will execute all this?

H.

I have put together questions 11 and 12 because they bring us back to the present. To the present history. A very murky present: there is war again in Europe, "real socialism" is no longer there - and you may add that the Revolution has disappeared from the future - lost in the mists of the twentieth century. The anti-fascist democratic remnants of the constitutional systems invented at the end of the European Civil War of the Thirty Years (1914-1945) float in putrid waters: the social-democracy that had given up the class struggle in exchange for the promise of a progressive social democracy, has reached the end of its path, while the forces that refer to the bosses, to the financial power and of course to the principles of a reactionary government, are increasingly credited with a long-term legitimacy. Communism is now spoken of as a sinister tale of a non-renewable past. As for the present, it is disgusting when it is not deadly, while the past is unspeakable when it is not erased. If you accept this image of the present, you must lower your arms, surrender.

I am a 17th century scholar. I began by studying the birth of the modern state in the seventeenth century - then finding similar paths in Foucault. Then I worked in different periods on the political thought of Descartes and Spinoza. Of the first I emphasized the ability to keep alive a line of independence of thought and an experience of freedom viable in the face of the affirmation of the absolute sovereign state and the consolidation of the reaction against the humanist subversion of the medieval order. A compromise, a "reasonable ideology", those produced by Descartes against the renewed domination of theological thought and the terrorist projections provoked by the condemnation of Galileo - that is, the Renaissance renewal of science. In Spinoza, I learned the ability to build and keep alive a humanist project of "absolute democracy".

What could have happened, that characterizes a century so deeply and offer such a dramatic background to the thought of Descartes, but above all to the thought of Spinoza? A devastating war, also lasting thirty years, which halved the population of central Europe and which was accompanied by epidemics and ecological disasters, which ended with the defeat of that revolutionary movement in knowledge, religion

and in the construction of institutions in the name of freedom which had characterized at least the previous two centuries. The absolute state that asserted itself in France and Spain, the defeat of the revolt of the reformed cities, and on the other hand the Council of Trent and the Catholic Counter-Reformation which concluded with the victory of the "cujus regio, ejus religio", in the exaltation of theology as the legitimacy of the politician. The Baroque and its culture are the artistic and ideological seal of the era. And all this takes place on a planetary sphere, in a now global world - when the crisis imposed on the traditional powers of the European territories is resolved among other things (but in an increasingly evident way) by the enterprise and by the global expansion of command and exploitation, by the nascent colonialism after the discovery of the Americas.

Well, I have seen this fairy tale of the defeat of the humanist revolution renewed, through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: the defeated subject is now the proletarian, socialist revolution, the Commune. Here everything has been projected forward and made more exemplary by the enormous dimensions of the events, the communication techniques, and the standardization of the ideological impact. No longer Europe alone, but the entire planet was then the scene of the revolutionary movement, its power and subsequent defeat. And it is the set of linguistic and ideological parameters constituting the relations of power and class that are involved in this process. The realization of economic globalization (on unimaginable technological levels) finally brings this condition to perfection. Where the state of the first modernity could have been forced (through class struggles and a laborious evolution) towards the rule of law and sometimes to embody itself in the democratic nation-state, today, in the current situation, similar processes of transformation seem impossible or in any case irrelevant compared to the establishment of some large global sovereign formations, opposed to each other. Socialism was thus defeated, communism was swept away with violence, postmodernism (a true baroque language of the present) now constitutes the ideological framework of legitimation of a transcendental - global - restoration at this level of the capitalist power against which the struggle has risen, starting from the beginning of the nineteenth century.

I am a citizen of this catastrophe - I have experienced on my skin the defeat of the class-struggle, of the exploited, the poor, the excluded - a violence that has passed through my body. In the solitude of defeat, in jail already, when it was now difficult for me to breathe, the recognition of the enemy and the sense of a possible rebirth never left me. Today there is a war between the West and the East, between two powers equally incapable of producing freedom: well, let them hurt each other! May they shatter their strength in fighting each other, and against each other, and thus weaken - it will be born, from the grief, suffering and misery that provoke, perhaps,

a new strength which rejects war in a radical way, and thinks peace as the essential condition in which men are given life, more life.

You tell me that communism, in the form that we already tried, will no longer appear as a power in action. And who will ever want to see the Bolshevik Party's Politburo perform on Red Square again? But I continue to thank heaven that in the winter of 1942 the resistance of the Communist people to the Nazis in Stalingrad allowed the Red Army to follow the path that brought it to Berlin. And to those who ask me to reread Hegel to understand the present, I answer in the affirmative: on condition that I place Stalingrad rather than Jena at the center of the dialectic of the future. And to those who point out to me that eighty years have passed since Stalingrad and that that image has fatally tarnished, I remember that the oppressed have continued to revolt relentlessly - and that globalization has shown the convergence and interaction of postcolonial and of gender movements that want to change the world, but also the anxious and militant awakening of a humanity tired of seeing the nature massacred for the purpose of accumulation.

In short, I joined the party of "absolute democracy" and as I explained to you in the previous pages, as a militant I consider with interest every movement (and all the more every event) that in any way proposes to advance on that path for that project. Without any teleological pretense and without any prophetic impulse. On the other hand, I keep seeking, inquiring, moving in the co-research of movement, discovering tendencies of mass subjectivation and then keeping myself busy by trying to translate all of them into operational devices.

I am 90 years old, but I am not tired of doing this politics, of practicing this Wissenschaft.

Translated by Arbër Zaimi

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Notes on Contributors

Alain Badiou, born 1927 in Morocco, is a world renowned French philosopher, political activist, mathematician, novelist and playwright. Among many things he is known as author of the Being-and-Event trilogy: *Being and Event* (2005), *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2* (2009), *Immanence of Truths: Being and Event, 3* (2022).

Wendy Brown is UPS Foundation Professor in Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton and Class of 1936 Chair, Emeritus, at the University of California, Berkeley. A wide-ranging political theorist of power, identity, democracy, political economy and sovereignty, her most recent works are *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (2019) and *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber* (2023).

Andrea Cavalletti teaches History of Medieval Philosophy and carries out research in Theoretical Philosophy at the University of Verona. He is the author of five books in Italian, translated into several languages, including, in English, *Class* (Seagull Books, 2019) and *Vertigo. The Temptation of Identity* (Fordham University Press, 2022). He has also edited several books by Furio Jesi, including *Spartakus: The Simbology of Revolt* (Seagull Books, 2014) and *Time and Festivity. Essays on Myth and Literature* (Seagull Books, 2021).

Andrew Benjamin is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Monash University. His recent books include. *On Gesture. Classical and Renaissance Expressions*. (Forthcoming). *Virtue in Being*. SUNY Press (2016) *Towards a Relational Ontology. Philosophy's Other Possibility*. SUNY Press. (2015) and *Art's Philosophical Work*. Rowman and Littlefield. (2015).

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Karl-Heinz Dellwo, born in 1952, grew up, from his 4th to his 14th year of age, in a small backward place in the Eifel. He was a member of the RAF up to their dissolution; in 1973, he spent a year in prison for squatting and from 1975 till 1995 he was in custody for his participation at the occupation of the German embassy in Stockholm. After prison he worked at the Hamburg Institute for Social Research and later as documentary filmmaker, author and publisher. The LAIKA-publishing house, which he founded in 2009 with Willi Baer, published numerous titles on politics, history and left-wing theorizing. See: laika-verlag.de For the publications of Dellwo, see: www.bellastoria.de

Peter Hallward teaches at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University London (UK). He works on political philosophy, recent European philosophy, and on critical and anti-colonial theory. He has written books on the French philosophers Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze, on postcolonial literature, and on contemporary Haitian politics. He is currently completing a book entitled *The Will of the People* (forthcoming from Verso), and a related book on Rousseau. Website: <http://www.kingston.ac.uk/staff/profile/professor-peter-hallward-372/>

Christian Klar was born in 1952 in South Baden/Germany. His last years of school were already determined by the social politicization of the late 1960s. His awareness of Nazi Germany and its continuities led to the rebellion against forced character and masks, socialist-oriented youth movement and anti-Vietnam War protests. What followed were reflections on the 1973 coup in Chile and prisoner solidarity. Active in the Red Army Faction from 1976 to 1982. After his arrest in November 1982, he was imprisoned until the end of 2008. After his release, he became active in various occupations and political media activism.

Sylvain Lazarus is a French sociologist, anthropologist and political theorist, and a professor at the Paris 8 University. Following the student uprising of May 1968 in France, he was a founding member of the French Communist Union (Marxist–Leninist). Fifteen years later, along with Alain Badiou and Natacha Michel, he founded the militant French political organization L'Organisation Politique. The *Anthropology of the Name*, published in French in 1996, is his most notable work.

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Robert Linhart was born in 1944 in Nice. After his studies at the Lycée Claude Bernard, and his preparatory classes at the Lycée Louis le Grand, he entered the École Normale Supérieure de la rue d'Ulm, where he became close to Althusser. Linhart was active in the *Union des Étudiants Communistes* before the *Union des Jeunes Communistes Marxistes Léninistes* in 1966, while studying philosophy. He led a delegation of this organisation to China in 1967. In 1969, he got employed as an unskilled worker in the Citroën factory. A year after, he got fired for organising a successful strike against the management. Ten years later, he wrote a book about it, *L'établi* which has been translated into ten languages and is the subject of a play and a film that will be released soon. Linhart taught sociology in the philosophy department of the University of Paris 8. He has also published two other books, *Lénine, les paysans, Taylor* and *Le sucre et la faim, enquête dans les régions sucrières du Nord Est du Brésil*. He has published numerous articles on Algeria, Mozambique, Brazil and French labour.

Ricardo Espinoza Lolas (Valparaíso, 1967) is a Chilean academic, writer, critical theorist and philosopher. He holds a PhD in Philosophy from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (2003) and is Professor of History of Contemporary Philosophy at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso and a Fellow of the Center for Philosophy and Critical Thought (Goldsmiths. University of London). Among the books he has written or co-edited are: *Realidad y tiempo en Zubiri* (Granada, Comares, 2006), *Zubiri ante Heidegger* (Barcelona, Herder, 2008), *Realidad y ser en Zubiri* (Granada, Comares, 2013), *El cuerpo y sus expresiones* (Granada, Universidad de Granada, 2014), *Hegel y las nuevas lógicas del mundo y del Estado* (Madrid, Akal, 2016; 2nd ed. 2017), *Capitalismo y empresa. Hacia una revolución del NosOtros* (Santiago de Chile, Libros Pascal, 2018), *Žižek reloaded. Políticas de lo radical* (Madrid, Akal, 2018; 2nd ed. 2019), *Aporías de la democracia* (Barcelona,

Terra Ignota, 2019), *NosOtros. Manual para disolver el Capitalismo* (Madrid, Morata, 2019), *El espacio público de la migración* (Barcelona, Terra Ignota, 2019), *Conceptos para disolver la educación capitalista* (Barcelona, Terra Ignota, 2020), *Hegel Hoy* (Barcelona, Herder, 2020), *Derechos, fronteras, naciones y estados* (Barcelona, Terra Ignota, 2021) and *30 conceptos para disolver las medidas político-sanitarias en la pandemia* (Barcelona, Terra Ignota, 2021), *Sade Reloaded* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2022), *Ariadna queer*, (Barcelona, Herder, 2022) and *Noi* (Milan, Mimesis, 2022).

Antonio Negri was born in 1933. At a very early age, he became professor of philosophy of law at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Padua, where he soon became the director. He has also been one of the leaders of social and political movements in the 1960s and 1970s in Italy. He is one of the central figures of the "operaist" reading of Marxism. Arrested in 1979 for his political activity, he spent four and a half years in maximum security prisons before being elected as a member of the Italian Parliament and released from prison. Following the removal of his parliamentary immunity, he went into exile in France, where he lived for fourteen years. In 1997, he decided to return to Italy to finish his sentence. He served a total of more than eleven years in prison. He is definitively free since 2005. His work is devoted both to studies of political philosophy (Descartes, Hegel, Leopardi, Spinoza, Marx, Foucault, etc.) and, for the past twenty years, to the analysis of the phenomenon of globalization (with four successive volumes co-authored with the American academic Michael Hardt: *Empire*, *Multitude*, *Commonwealth*, and *Assembly*). He lives and works in Paris.

Michael Löwy, born in Brazil in 1938, lives in Paris since 1969. Presently Emeritus Research Director at the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research). His books and articles have been translated into 29 languages. Coauthor with Joel Kovel of the *International Ecosocialist Manifesto* (2001). Regular collaborator of the Brazilian Landless Peasant Movement. Among his main publications: *Fire Alarm*. Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the concept of history', London, Verso, 2005; *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2009; *On Changing the World*. Essays in Political Philosophy, from Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin, Chicago, Haymarket Books 2012; *Ecosocialism. A radical alternative to the capitalist ecological catastrophe*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2015.

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Natalia Romé is a chair Professor in Social Sciences at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, where she is also the Director of the Master in Communication and Culture Studies. She is Senior Researcher in Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, Universidad de Buenos Aires, where she co-coordinates the Program of Critical Studies on Ideology, Technics and Politics. She also teaches in Universidad Nacional de La Plata. She is one of the foundation-members of the Red Latinoamericana de Estudios Althusserianos, member of the Editing Board of Demarcaciones and is part of the Organizing Committee of Althusserian Studies Conferences since 2009. Romé is the author of *La posición materialista. El pensamiento de Louis Althusser entre la práctica teórica y la práctica política* (Educp: La Plata, 2015) and co-editor of *La intervención de Althusser* (Prometeo, Buenos Aires: 2011), and *Lecturas de Althusser (Imago Mundi: Buenos Aires, 2011)*. Her book in English, *For Theory: Althusser and the Politics of Time* come out in 2021 (Rowman and Littlefield).

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2013; translated into fifteen languages; English: *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, London and New York 2014); *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System* (London and New York 2016); and *Democracy at Work: Contract, Status and Post-Industrial Justice* (Polity, 2022 with Ruth Dukes).

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