

In the Silences of the Catastrophe: From the Standpoint of Reproduction

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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 “tranhistorical 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 economicist 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.

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4 Ibid.

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