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The global moment
Seattle, ten years on

Rodrigo Nunes

What are we to make of an anniversary that no one celebrates? The year 2009 may be remembered for many things: the greatest capitalist crisis in over a century, the first year of the Obama presidency, the transformation of the G8 into a G20 (and the first massive geopolitical rearrangement since the fall of the Soviet bloc), the ecological crisis definitively establishing itself as a widespread concern (even if it means very different things to different groups). One thing, however, was conspicuously absent from the year’s calendar: the tenth anniversary of the protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle, which made of 1999 the year when the ‘anti-’ or ‘alter-globalization’ movement, or ‘movement of movements’, or ‘global movement’ became a visible phenomenon across the world.

In 2009, of course, ‘celebration’ was not very high on the agenda, even – or especially – if looked at from the point of view of those protests. If anything, the problems highlighted then seem more pressing now, the threats they pose more acute. More importantly, while the danger grows, the redeeming power seems to recede. It is tempting to say that time has proved those protesters ten years ago right, but the capacity for immediate action in the present seems ever more remote. Today, the liveliness of debate, the wealth of different experiences and – more importantly – the intensity of mobilization, the determination and the hope of those years seem far away. Surely this is sufficient reason to revisit the period, as a source of inspiration and a way of stoking whatever embers are left? in which case, should the silence be interpreted as yet another symptom of the present lethargy? Or could it also be a sign of something else: an unspoken avoidance or implicit recognition of that period as a source of impasse, a dead end?

The failure of the 2003 anti-war mobilizations to stop the Iraq war opened the season of public questioning regarding the effectiveness of ‘the movement’. Thus, for instance, Paolo Virno:

The global movement, from Seattle forward, appears as a battery that only half works: it accumulates energy without pause, but it does not know how or where to discharge it. It is faced with an amazing accumulation, which has no correlate, at the moment, in adequate investments. It is like being in front of a new technological apparatus, potent and refined, but ignoring the instructions for its use.

By 2007, a major player in the World Social Forum process wondered whether the time had not come for it, ‘having fulfilled its historic function of aggregating and linking the diverse counter-movements spawned by global capitalism… to give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation’. It became common to hear that ‘the movement’ had failed to produce ‘proposals’ or ‘alternatives’, and hence squandered its accumulated energy and opportunities to deliver on the promise.
that the blue-sky lightning of Seattle had suggested. There were many alleged culprits: the incapacity to deal with diversity, or an absolute emphasis on diversity making political definitions impossible, depoliticized ‘movementism’ and ‘life-stylist’, the atavistic reformism of parties and unions (and of course NGOs).

Yet if one asks the seemingly straightforward question of what has been achieved since then, it is just as true to say ‘a lot’ as ‘not nearly enough’. The various blows to the WTO project, successful anti-privatization campaigns such as the ones around water and gas in Bolivia, the election of progressive governments across Latin America, the opposition to the neoliberal constitution in Europe, the defeat of the CPE in France… plus a huge number of local victories, small victories, partial victories, even defeats that resulted in the creation of new possibilities that might one day result in victories. One could certainly ask: what does any of this have to do with the ‘global movement’ as such? But this, precisely, takes us to the crucial difficulty in talking about a ‘global movement’: how are we to tell it apart from its constituent parts? How are we to isolate whatever these parts do as parts from what they do in conjunction with others, or the aggregate effect of what all of them do?

Take the struggles against the WTO – the one example from those above that can be least problematically attributed to the ‘global movement’. Until the Seattle protests, negotiations soldiered on with the time’s distinctive sense of inevitability, and governments would hardly bother to inform, let alone consult, their citizens. That sudden crystallization managed to foreground a dissent that could have remained marginal and powerless if not for that instant when certain forces recognized themselves in a common struggle, and it certainly began to tilt the agenda. A series was opened that made it possible for opposition to neoliberal policies to grow, for different movements to communicate with and reinforce each other, for other moments of convergence to occur, in a chain of positive feedbacks that undoubtedly contributed to, for example, the election of progressive governments in Latin America. It may be that the effective cause of the WTO’s ‘derailing’ was, in the end, the stronger stance taken by the governments of some developing states around the negotiating table; this, however, would probably not have happened had it not been for the presence of movements outside the gates, or for the broader sequence at the turn of the century through which this series unfolded.

Nevertheless, at the time when these ultimate effects were produced, the ‘global movement’ was already regarded by many of its participants as a spent force. How are we to think through this paradox: that its greatest victory arrived after its wane? What if the reluctance to celebrate today comes from a difficulty in thinking of a ‘global movement’ in any meaningful way? What if this, rather than dichotomies such as ‘openness’ versus ‘decision-making’, is the impasse that is sensed? And what if – to advance a hypothesis in the bluntest possible way – the global movement never existed? What if it was a moment, rather than a movement?

One world is possible
The most literal way of speaking of a ‘global movement’ would be as a reference to those groups posing only explicit global goals, or whose space of action was essentially transnational. In the face of the plethora of social forces mobilized around the world at the time, however, such a definition seems scandalously narrow. (The greater currency enjoyed among many by the phrase ‘global movement of movements’ was no doubt due precisely to its indefinite, near-infinite inclusivity.) To limit the frame of reference in such a way would turn ‘global movement’ into a very reductive synecdoche. Yet this is exactly the pars pro toto logic that was (and is) often used by media commentators, whereby the expression comes to refer to what, in the global North, was the period’s most visible manifestation: the cycle of summit protests (Seattle, Prague, Quebec City, Genoa and so on) and counter-summits (Social Fora and the like).
Avoiding this synecdoche is crucial, not only to stay close to the self-understanding of the actors concerned, but also to undo the confusion at the source of the present impasse. Thinking in terms of moment allows us to do so. This was a moment, first, because there was an intensification of activity on various fronts, including mobilizations against structural adjustment and privatization (Bolivia, South Korea, various African countries, Canada), against multinational corporations (oil companies, as in the Niger Delta; sweatshop-based brands, as in the USA), against migration policies (the sans papiers in France, various border camps in Europe, North America, Australia), against GMOs (several Via Campesina campaigns around the world), and many more. In most cases, these were not pitched as ‘global’ campaigns as such; they took place in the space of local or national politics, had national legislation and policies as their referents, and unfolded within a complex, multilayered field of relations and causal series where their ‘global’ dimension was always filtered by local, national and regional struggles, correlations of forces, institutional arrangements, conjunctures and contingent events. In this case, speaking of a ‘global movement’ appropriately would refer to nothing more than the sum total of these various forces’ activities, the outcome of their political interventions and the transformation of social relations they managed to produce. Except that ‘movement’ would still have a metaphorical sense, calling a whole what is really only a collection: something whose only criteria for membership would be existence on the same globe, something that could never be totalized or given any kind of unitary shape or direction – a ‘wild’ in-itself, never to be fully appropriated for-itself.

However, there is one characteristic of the moment that began in the mid-1990s that sets it apart from previous cycles of struggle that took place simultaneously in various parts of the globe, such as those of the 1840s, 1920s–30s and 1960s–70s. In the sense disclosed by it, the ‘global movement’ would in fact exist only for-itself, and this for-itselfness would be the very quality making its emergence unique: a for-itself whose in-itself is not given. What is the unique characteristic of that emergence? This was the first cycle of struggles that defined itself in terms of its global dimension. The material element determining this difference was, of course, capitalist globalization itself, which created and strengthened structures and flows of communication, movements of people and goods to such a scale that the potential for connections between different local realities became widely accessible not only to the actors instrumental in the advance of capital, but potentially also to those who wished to resist it. This expanded potential for exchange and the production of commonalities resulted in enhanced awareness of the different impacts of neoliberal globalization, their interconnectedness, the
forms taken by resistance to them, and the ways in which these resistances could be placed in relation with each other. This, in turn, enabled concrete exchanges and mutual support between different local experiences, which, finally, conjured a potential: that of momentarily focusing this localized political activity into moments of shared relevance, whether at a global level (such as the mobilizations against the WTO or the Iraq war) or more locally.

These three factors—awareness, concrete exchanges and potential for convergence—constitute that moment’s global dimension; and there is no contradiction between affirming this dimension as its defining feature and the fact that most of the movements and campaigns then active had local or national politics as their space of action and main referents. As a matter of fact, these three factors are precisely what created the mirage of a movement, when in fact what one had was a moment of rapidly increased capacity for communication and coordination, and wide-eyed astonishment at a just-discovered potential for channelling much of that activity into determinate spatio-temporal coordinates, creating moments of convergence whose collective power was much greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, while most of the activity effectively occupied the national or local political space, the key characteristic of that period was the widened perception of global processes. The ‘global movement’, in this sense, was literally something that existed in people’s heads, and in the communication between them.

This is distinct from previous generations’ ‘internationalism’: it refers to a shared belonging to an interconnected, interdependent world, rather than an aggregate of nation-states to be revolutionized or reformed one by one.4 This means not only a heightened awareness of the commonality of natural commons, but a clearer grasp of the effects at a distance produced by a global market, and of the possibility of intervening in relation to these effects in ways that are necessarily restricted neither to national borders nor to the nation-state as the sole agency to be addressed. It is the increase in types of connection today—supranational (multilateral organisms, information networks), transnational (migrant networks) and infranational (among different regions affected by the same problem, for example, dams)—that opens up the possibility of interventions that need neither depart from the nation-state, nor retain it as their sole or immediate referent.

It has been argued that the famous ‘Earth rising’ photograph had an effect on the development of environmentalism; and indeed there is enormous power in the idea that ‘there is only one world’: once a physical limit is placed on the capacity to universalize, the rational operation of seeing one’s lot as necessarily tangled with others’ is given a concrete outline. That this ‘concrete universalism’ is coupled with the increase in the capacity to exchange and cooperate with ‘concrete others’ from all over the globe is one of the novelties of ‘globalism’. Under its light, every struggle appears as neither exclusively local nor exclusively global: all struggles communicate on different levels, while no struggle can in practice subsume all others. There are no partial, ‘local’ solutions that can stand in isolation, and there is no ‘global’ solution unless this is understood as a certain possible configuration of local ones. What ended up being labelled as a ‘movement’ (the cycle of summit protests and counter-summits) was therefore nothing but the tip of the iceberg: the convergences produced by a much wider and deeper weft of connections, both direct (as when groups engaged in communication and coordination with each other) and indirect (when struggles resonated and reinforced each other without any coordination), among initiatives that were sometimes very local, sometimes very different, sometimes even contradictory.

That there was no ‘movement’ as such does not mean that it did not produce concrete effects; every moment of convergence fed back into these initiatives, creating and reinforcing connections, and strengthening the globalism that defined the moment,
nourishing the (subjectively effective) notion that all of this belonged in the same movement. This strength, however, would reveal itself as also being a weakness. The ‘we’ of that period became progressively stabilized as the ‘we’ of the summit protests and counter-summits – certainly a multitudinous, diverse ‘we’, but one which managed to sustain itself largely because of the short-lived nature of those convergences, their externally, negatively given object (where the ‘one no’ always had precedence over the ‘many yeses’), and the positive feedback produced by their own spectacular, mediatic strength. The more entrenched the synecdoche became, the more these convergences came to be treated as an end in themselves, rather than strategic tools and tactical moments in what should be the constitution of ‘another world’.

**Yes and no**

That moment’s passing can be partially explained by the impossibility of inhabiting the global level as such. The technological and tactical innovations (‘swarming’, the ‘diversity of tactics’ principle) that enabled large-scale convergences can only function at such a scale when their objects are externally given and negatively defined: anti-WTO, anti-war, and so on. The much-lamented lack of ‘proposals’ was never actually that; there was a dizzying collection of proposals, and what was perceived as a lack was in fact the impossibility of having ‘the movement’ subscribe to any of them as global movement – that is, as a whole. Moreover, there is a serious difficulty in thinking of global ‘proposals’ by analogy with those that can be placed in national political space, given that at the global level there is no one to address directly. One cannot lobby or influence transnational structures in the same way as national governments, as the unaccountability and imperviousness of the latter to political process is structural rather than contingent; whatever accountability they may have is ultimately mediated by national structures.

This became evident in 2005 in the attempt by a group of intellectuals associated with the World Social Forum to elaborate what they saw as a distillation of that profusion of ideas into a minimal, consensual programme. Ultimately, the main problem with this document was not the way in which it was drafted, the lack of gender balance, or any of the other criticisms raised at the time, but that it is entirely unclear what its presumed target audience (the WSF, ‘the movement’) could actually do about proposals pitched at such a global level – apart from organizing demonstrations incorporating them as rallying points. They do not even function as demands, as there is no one to demand them from. At this level, antagonism remains purely representative: expressing a dissent that has no means of enforcement. This kind of dissent has some effectiveness in a parliamentary democracy, of course, provided it corresponds to a large enough constituency representing a relevant electoral variable. The problem is that, at the global level, this is impossible. However crucial it is to keep open the potential to focus political activity on singular global moments, such potential exists only as a consequence of capacity built at the local level, not as its substitute; it is only to the extent that local struggles enhance their capacity to act in their immediate environment that they can act globally in meaningful ways. In fact, privileging convergences can sap resources from local capacity-building, when the point should be precisely that the former reinforce the latter. If they do not, antagonism, rather than being the other half of building autonomy, comes to replace it; and, in doing so, it loses the grounds on which it can find support. It becomes the expression of political contents from which it is impossible to draw political consequences. There was another reason why the global became uninhabitable. The context in which the ‘global moment’ unfolded changed drastically with the onset of the ‘war on terror’. Not only was the main focus of conflict moved elsewhere (‘good’ versus ‘rogue’
states, ‘fundamentalism’ versus ‘democracy’, ‘Islam’ versus ‘the West’), it was displaced to a level of confrontation no movements were willing or able to occupy (state apparatus versus ‘terror’). Moreover, the combination of an atmosphere of constantly reiterated alarm, and the creep into spheres of legislative and policing measures that served to criminalize social movements, had the subjective impact of reinforcing feelings of isolation, fear and impotence. Many individuals abandoned political involvement altogether; individuals and groups disengaged from the global level, refocusing on the local. In other cases, investment in the global at the expense of the local led to a disconnection between politics and life, representation (or antagonism) and capacity-building, burn-out, or a replacement of slowly built consistency for the quicker, wider, but also less sustainable, effects of the media.

Is the ‘global moment’ over? Yes and no. The material conditions that enabled it remain, as do the elements of awareness of global processes and (the potential for) concrete exchanges. There is no going back on this, as there is no going back on ‘globalism’, or the political consciousness of belonging to a single world. Whatever movements appear in the future will in all likelihood share these features, and they will do well to look back to those years and draw some lessons from what went right and wrong. To say that the expectations then built around the use of information technology (as almost a substitute for other forms of political action) were exaggerated does not mean that their possibilities have been exhausted, the recent Iranian protests being a good example. If anything, one would expect to see much more made of their potential for diffuse initiative and rapid dissemination; yet the question will always be, once the ‘great nights’ they can produce have passed, how to give consistency to the excess they throw up.

On the other hand, these movements would do well to disarm some false dichotomies that were strong then, such as the supposedly definitive choices between autonomy-building and antagonism (the latter requires the former to exist, the former at various junctures requires the latter to expand), or between absolute openness and capacity to act (any movement, any decision always strikes a balance between the two), or even ‘taking’ or ‘not taking’ power (recognizing the limits of what the state can deliver does not diminish the need to always push beyond them). It is far more important to develop the collective capacity to choose what mediators to have, what mediation to accept, and when. Building on these, managing to move beyond them; now that would be cause for celebration.

Notes

4. Even before the thesis of ‘socialism in only one country’ and the tactical retreat into nationalism, it was the case that proletarian universalism necessarily required the (national) communist party and trade-union movement as the initial supports and local agents of ‘world revolution’; solidarity and collaboration among revolutionary movements mirrored the bourgeois internationalism of solidarity among nation-states.
5. One example of this entrenchment is the proposal for a permanent International Day of Action every two years. Tellingly, one proponent says of this idea – where ‘one central subject, which touches everyone in the world, can be commonly put forward once every two years’ as the theme for simultaneous worldwide demonstrations – that the theme ‘could be global warming, trade, out-of-control finance, debt … I don’t even care what the theme is; it’s the principle of choosing it and of the unity that creates visibility that I think is important.’ Susan George, ‘Contribution to the Debate on the Future of the Social Forums and the Alter-globalization Movement’, 2008, www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml?&act_id=18081.
War as peace, peace as pacification

Mark Neocleous

To stress one’s own love of peace is always the close concern of those who have instigated war. But he who wants peace should speak of war. He should speak of the past one … and, above all, he should speak of the coming one.1

A remarkable consensus appears to have emerged on the Left: that in the context of the war on terror the distinction between war and peace has been destabilized. Alain Badiou suggests that the category of ‘war’ has become so obscured that ancient capitals can be bombed without serving notice to anyone of the fact that war has been declared. ‘As such, the continuity of war is slowly established, whereas in the past declaring war would, to the contrary, have expressed the present of a discontinuity. Already, this continuity has rendered war and peace indistinguishable.’ ‘In the end’, notes Badiou, ‘these American wars … are not really distinguishable from the continuity of “peace”’. Antonio Negri and Éric Alliez likewise comment that ‘peace appears to be merely the continuation of war by other means’, adding that because peace, ‘otherwise known as global war … is a permanent state of exception’, war now ‘presents itself as peace-keeping’ and has thereby reversed their classical relationship. Their reference to a concept made popular following Agamben’s State of Exception is far from unusual in this new consensus. ‘We no longer have wars in the old sense of a regulated conflict between sovereign states’, notes Žižek. Instead, what remains are either ‘struggles between groups of Homo sacer … which violate the rules of universal human rights, do not count as wars proper, and call for “humanitarian pacifist” intervention by Western powers’, or ‘direct attacks on the USA or other representatives of the new global order, in which case, again, we do not have wars proper, merely “unlawful combatants” criminally resisting the forces of universal order. Hence ‘the old Orwellian motto “War is Peace” finally becomes reality.’2

The consensus is wide. From a diverse range of recent publications, let me just cite Daniel Ross’s analysis of democratic violence in which he claims that in democracies ‘peacetime and wartime … are increasingly convergent’, Rey Chow’s suggestion that war is now the very definition of normality itself, Gopal Balakrishnan’s claim that the invasion and policing of ‘rogue states’ means that ‘a long-term epistemic shift seems to be occurring which is blurring older distinctions between war and peace’, and François Debrix’s argument that the reason the war machine permeates everyday culture is because the distinction between peace and war has broken down.3

I have no interest in challenging this account in itself; as will be seen, despite its apparent boldness it is in fact a fairly uncontroversial position to hold. What I do want to challenge, as my starting point at least, is the major historical assumption being made within it. For these accounts rely on an assumption of a ‘classical’ age in which war and peace were indeed distinguishable; they assume that the destabilization is somehow new – hence the references to wars in ‘the past’, in the ‘old sense’ and in the ‘classical’ age. The nebulous nature of some of these phrases is remarkable, given the implied radicalism of the insight being expressed. Worse, in accepting the very claim made by the USA and its allies that everything has indeed changed from the time when the distinction between war and peace was categorical and straightforward, this account also reinforces the general fetish of ‘9/11’ as the political event of our time. Perhaps there really was a time ‘in the past’ when mass killing possessed a greater conceptual clarity; but I doubt it. Felix Grob’s Relativity of War and Peace, published in 1949, offers countless examples of states engaged in mass killing but either denying or sometimes just not knowing whether or not they were at war, which explains why a wealth of categories have existed to describe a condition that
appears to be neither war nor peace or that might just be a little bit of both: reprisals, belligerency, state of hostilities, measures short of war, intermediate state, quasi-war, and so on. And more than a few international lawyers in the early- and mid-twentieth century pointed out the artificial nature of the distinction between war and peace. It really is a bad sign when supposedly key insights on the Left come half a century after the same insights are made by international lawyers.

The first aim of this article is therefore to make a historical point: that this consensus about a recent elision of the difference between war and peace is rooted in a deep historical misconception. Rather, I will aim to show that the distinction between war and peace has always been blurred. The second and more political aim is to suggest that this blurring was part and parcel of an ascendant liberalism which found an important political use for the language of peace within the context of international law. To accept the idea that there was a ‘classical age’ where the distinction between war and peace did make sense is thus to accept one of liberalism’s major myths, one which circulates widely in academic discourse as part of ‘the liberal peace’ hypothesis: that peace is the focal dynamic of civil society, that the state exists in order to realize this ‘liberal peace’ within civil society, and that international law exists to ensure peace between states. On this view, war is an exception to peace. As a myth, this has served to gloss over liberalism’s own tendency to carry out systematic violence and to call it peace; to gloss over, that is, the violence of the liberal peace. I therefore argue that it has never made sense for the Left to adopt a categorical distinction between war and peace.

This takes me to my third aim, which is to suggest that in accepting the major liberal assumptions about war and peace the Left has cut itself off from developing a concept of war outside of the disciplines of International Relations (IR) and strategic studies (within which, unsurprisingly, the idea of a ‘classical age’ is also constantly reiterated). For the liberal argument to hold, war has to be understood as a phenomenon of the international sphere: as a confrontation between militarily organized and formally opposed states. Not only does this contraction of the war concept ignore the transnational nature of a great deal of warfare, it also manages to obscure the structural and systematic violence through which liberal order has been constituted. The Left has too easily bought into the idea of war as articulated in IR and strategic studies and has thus been driven by an agenda not of the Left’s own making, replicating the idea of war as formal military engagement between states and aping IR and strategic studies in becoming little more than a series of footnotes to Clausewitz. One of the wider implications of this article, then, is to move discussion of war away from the fairly restrictive account found in liberal mythology, IR and strategic studies, and to expand it to include what is after all the most fundamental war in human history: the social war of capital.

To make this case I will begin with the birth of international law and end with some comments on the ideology of security. Why? Because the formal liberal position is that the decision about whether war exists is a legal one and that peace comes through law. ‘Law is, essentially, an order for the promotion of peace’, says Hans Kelsen in his lectures on international relations: ‘The law makes the use of force a monopoly of the community. And precisely by doing so, law ensures peace.’ Thus the proclaimed purpose of international organizations such as the United Nations is always peace, to be achieved through law and the legal regulation of war. And not just peace: it is always ‘peace and security’ that are expected to come together; a conceptual couplet performing the same ideological role internationally as ‘law and order’ performs domestically. I therefore focus on the early period in international law (or, as it was, the law of nations), since this was the period in which liberalism found in law a way to articulate its vision of peace and security. It did so in that crucible of capital’s civil war: colonialism.

**The humanity of Indians**

Although there is much debate about when international law first emerged, with many treating it as an outcome of the Peace of Westphalia, there is a wide enough agreement that prior to Westphalia there was a ‘Spanish age’ of international law, so called because the arguments developed at that point coincided with the rise of Spain as a colonial power. Spanish political thought was at this moment central to European intellectual life and it is no coincidence that it became so through its debates about war. In this context the work of Francisco de Vitoria is crucial.

Vitoria’s work is regarded as one of the first statements of a universalist and humanitarian conception of international law. He is often regarded as the first to have ‘proclaimed a “natural” community of all mankind and the universal validity of human rights’, and to have presented a ‘courageous defence of the rights of the Indians’ against the Spanish. This reading of Vitoria is rooted in his conception of ‘the whole world which is in a sense a commonwealth’ and the
idea of a law of nations which would have ‘the sanction of the whole world’. ‘Vitoria was a liberal’, notes James Brown Scott. Indeed, ‘he could not help being a liberal. He was an internationalist by inheritance. And because he was both, his international law is a liberal law of nations.’ One reason for this interpretation is that Vitoria’s ‘humanist’ tendencies meant his work was established against the more explicitly violent policies of Spanish colonialism: ‘No business shocks me or embarrasses me more than the corrupt profits and affairs of the Indies … I do not understand the justice of the war.’ A second reason is his claim that the Indians had rights of dominium. Sinners and non-believers as they might be, they are nonetheless ‘not impeded from being true masters, publicly and privately’ and so ‘could not be robbed of their property’. One of the reasons they had rights of dominium, and the third reason for the interpretation of Vitoria as one of the first statements of universal and humanitarian international law, is because they are human beings with reason: the Indians are not monkeys but ‘are men, and our neighbours’, so ‘it would be harsh to deny to them … the rights we concede to Saracens and Jews’.

In suggesting that non-Christians are somehow equal with Christians, Vitoria challenges the idea of a universal Christian order administered by the Pope within which the Indians could be characterized as heathens and their rights and duties determined accordingly. He thereby disallows religion as the basis for war against the Indians or rule over them. Yet although the Indians are like the Spanish, their social, economic and political practices, including nudity, the consumption of raw food and cannibalism, mean they diverge from universal norms in such a way as also to make them unlike the Spanish. The Indian appears to have some of the social and cultural characteristics of civilized life, yet is markedly uncivilized; the Indian shares the characteristics of a universal humanity, yet is also set clearly apart. Thus the ‘Indian problem’ became the basis of a discussion about the relations between different groups of humans within a ‘republic of all the world’. In effect, as Anthony Anghie points out, the problem for Vitoria was not one of managing order between formally equal sovereign states, but of constituting order among culturally different entities. It is this tension between the claims of natural law against behaviour that is somehow ‘unnatural’, and the necessity of understanding others within the framework of a universal humanity, which runs though Vitoria’s two 1539 lectures on the Indians and on the laws of war. And it is this tension which reveals the conjunction of violence and law running through the liberal imperialism which emerges, an imperialism in which the idea of peace becomes a key thematic.

Inspired by the dynamics of Spanish territorial possession, Vitoria places colonial domination – and thus dispossession – at the heart of international law. At the heart of this domination and dispossession are the laws of war and peace and the question of ‘free trade’. According to Vitoria, the natural rights and duties of the law of nations are society and fellowship, trade and commerce, communication, participation regarding things in common, and the freedom to travel. Because trade is essential to human communication and to the exchange and development of human knowledge, the right to maintain lines of communication through trade and exchange is a right of natural law. Hence ‘the Spaniards have the right to travel and dwell in those countries, so long as they do no harm to the barbarians’, and ‘they may lawfully trade among the barbarians, so long as they do no harm to their homeland.’ A refusal by the Indians to trade with the Spaniards constitutes a refusal to maintain ‘natural’ lines of communication, and is barbarism. Moreover, ‘if there are any things among the barbarians which are held in common both by their own people and by strangers, it is not lawful for the barbarians to prohibit the Spaniards from sharing and enjoying them.’ The reason for this is based in part on the principle of trade and in part on the idea that in natural law a thing which does not belong to anyone becomes the property of the first taker. What this means is that should the barbarians try to deny the Spaniards what is theirs by the ‘law of nations’ – that is, by natural law – then ‘they commit an offence against them’.

If Vitoria’s argument is a major contribution to some kind of emergent international law of nations, then it is equally an important contribution to an emergent discourse of political economy centred on commerce and accumulation; it is through this contribution that Vitoria helps shape natural law arguments for conquest, for the right to engage in commerce and trade is for Vitoria a natural right. As Williams points out, within the totalizing discourse of a universally obligatory natural law of nations, the profit motive occupies an extremely privileged status, in the sense that not engaging in trade is treated as contrary to the mutual self-interests shared by all humankind. And this motivation must be allowed to triumph over common property rights. Put simply: customary land use by the Indians has to be abolished and replaced by the law
of private property, and dispossession legitimized on the grounds of natural law. As is well known, it is this dispossession and replacement of common property with private property that becomes central to the colonizing project and to bourgeois political economy thereafter. It is at this point that the question of war becomes crucial, as the Spaniards have the right to defend themselves against the offences committed by the Indians by availing themselves of the other main right of the law of nations: to go to war. ‘If the barbarians … persist in their wickedness and strive to destroy the Spaniards, they may then treat them no longer as innocent enemies, but as treacherous foes against whom all rights of war can be exercised.’

In making this argument Vitoria’s lecture broke new theoretical ground for Western colonizing thought, providing a natural law source of Spain’s right – and by implication any other state’s right – to engage in war against native peoples and to rule in the New World as a means of securing the right to commerce. If the law of nations emerged to deal with war, then the war in question was one of accumulation.

As a war of accumulation this was recognized from the outset as permanent. ‘Our war against the pagans is … permanent because they can never sufficiently pay for the injuries and losses inflicted.’ Because of this ‘a prince may do everything in a just war which is necessary to secure peace and security’, including plundering the goods of the innocent, killing the innocent, and enslaving the women and children, to the point of absolute destruction:

War is waged to produce peace, but sometimes security cannot be obtained without the wholesale destruction of the enemy. This is particularly the case in wars against the infidel, from whom peace can never be hoped for on any terms; therefore the only remedy is to eliminate all of them who are capable of bearing arms, given that they are already guilty.

Vitoria’s law of nations, then, gives us two options: permanent war in search of free trade or absolute destruction of the enemies of such trade.

In this light, James Brown Scott’s description of Vitoria as a liberal is both interesting and historically important. A leading law scholar, Scott was solicitor to the US Department of State (1906–09), acted as trustee and secretary to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1910–40), served as adviser to the US delegation to the second Hague Peace Conference of 1907, was president of the American Institute of International law (1915–40), wrote several major works on international law and the various Hague Peace conferences, edited and thereby made newly available a series of translations of the ‘classics’ of international law (including Vitoria), helped establish the Permanent Court of International Justice in 1921, and served under President Woodrow Wilson. In pursuing the idea that Vitoria is a liberal Scott sought to draw a link between the liberalism of the sixteenth-century law of nations and the liberalism of early-twentieth-century US foreign policy, albeit mediated by the Catholicism which he claimed also underpinned international law. The ‘discovery’ of America, in his view, gave birth to a modern law of nations which was originally Catholic but had now become entirely laicized in liberal form. For that reason, he sought to situate Vitoria within this liberal tradition. Now, Scott’s argument has been widely challenged. Arthur Nussbaum, for example, was one of the first of many to respond to Scott by pointing out the decidedly ‘illiberal’ things Vitoria has to say or tries to justify.

Yet the argument of Nussbaum and others is founded on the rather naive assumption that liberalism could never engage in something so illiberal as systematic violence against weaker and even unarmed opponents for merely commercial reasons. But in that sense, and leaving aside some of the issues in Scott’s reading of Vitoria, it seems to me that, without meaning to, Scott gets it more or less spot on: Vitoria is a liberal. But what Scott and his challengers fail to see is that
this is the very reason Vitoria defends the practice of war against the Indians. To understand why, Vitoria really needs to be understood in terms of the tradition of liberal imperialism that was then becoming established in Europe.

**Peace, liberty, violence**

Much has been made of what J.G.A. Pocock has called ‘the Machiavellian moment’ in the history of political thought, in which a new language was forged addressing the problems associated with constituting a republic of liberty through a dialectic of virtue and fortune.\(^{22}\) Mikael Hornqvist has shown that this republican ideal of freedom was deeply implicated in the imperial project, in which acquisition becomes the touchstone of liberty. For in the century leading up to Machiavelli, as well as in the years to follow, writer after writer had stressed the importance of empire to liberty: Bruni on the right to lordship over the world; Dati on the centrality of empire to security and economic order; Palmieri on the links between civic unity and increase of empire; Savonarola on the importance of the empire to ancient Rome; the list is long and well-documented by Hornqvist. Thus when Machiavelli lays down the basic tenets of Roman and Florentine republicanism, namely that a city has two ends – one to acquire, the other to be free, he draws on and summarizes a position that had become well established over the previous century. This tradition assumes that liberty ‘entails a commitment to empire understood as a defence and a militant extension of true liberty in a hostile world’. In concrete terms, this ‘translates into a pursuit of territorial security which justifies the intervention in the political life of neighbouring states and the subjugation and annexation of foreign lands’. Far from being contrary values, notes Hornqvist, liberty and imperial acquisition are understood as together constituting the dual end of the healthy republic.\(^{23}\) The liberal and ‘humanitarian’ concept of a world of universal being presupposes an expansive polity, which, in generating a politics of acquisition, in turn produces new enemies and thus requires the exercise of violence. For there can be no empire of liberty without arms. The art of politics is the *art of war*, as Machiavelli has it in the title of the only one of his major works to be published in his lifetime (in 1521). Or as he puts it in his better-known work: the successful Prince ‘takes as his profession nothing else than war and its laws and discipline’.\(^{24}\) This art of war is in Machiavelli’s mind central to imperial politics but links back to the discipline of liberty needed for internal order. Empires of liberty are always already empires of violence.

As empires of liberty, however, this violence is carried out in the name of peace and security. ‘The aim of war is peace and security’, says Vitoria, over and again. War is waged specifically for the defence of property, for the recovery of property and in revenge for an injury, and it is waged more generally ‘to establish peace and security’.\(^{25}\) This is used to justify offensive as well as defensive war.

The purpose of war is the peace and security of the commonwealth … But there can be no security for the commonwealth unless its enemies are prevented from injustice by fear of war. It would be altogether unfair if war could only be waged by a commonwealth to repel unjust invaders from its borders, and never to carry the conflict into the enemies’ camp.

Indeed, pre-empting the idea of a ‘humanitarian war’ that would emerge centuries later, Vitoria insists that war might be carried out ‘for the good of the whole world’.\(^{26}\)

The significance of Vitoria’s idea that war is made for peace and security lies in the fact that it was being articulated as a key principle in the emerging law of nations, that the ‘permanent’ colonial wars which gave rise to this law of nations were increasingly taking on the ideological form of peace, and that this was a key moment in the development and structural transformation of the state. The prolonged cumulative effect of new weapons technology, new disciplinary provisions, fortifications, increase in the size of armies and navies, and the changes in tactics and strategy which these developments aided and abetted, including a fiscal centralization necessary to sustain these developments, meant that not only was the development of the state machine being accelerated as the monarchs and republics of Europe centralized and nationalized, most notably in the major colonizing powers of England, Spain, the Netherlands and France, it was being accelerated as a war machine. War made the state and the state made war, as Charles Tilly puts it.\(^{27}\) Concomitantly, this war machine received philosophical legitimation in a variety of forms: from the new and decidedly Machiavellian ‘military arithmetic’ found in the work of writers such as Girolamo Cataneo in Italy and Thomas Digges in England, to the most sustained commentaries on the nature of sovereignty, such as Bodin’s *Six Books of the Commonweal* (1576) and Botero’s *Della ragion di stato* (1589), both of which suggest that military discipline and training in arms are necessary for war with other nations and for disciplining one’s own subjects.
Within this ideological transformation, ‘peace’ came to be addressed as a political issue. Humanists such as Erasmus suggested that an unjust peace was better than a just war; statesmen and sovereigns came to talk about a universal peace rather than perpetual war, some of them adopting *beati pacifici* (‘blessed are the peacemakers’) as their motto or styling themselves as *rex pacificus*, and pageants lauding peace increasingly took place with a pomp and performance that would have been unthinkable just a century earlier. Catherine de Medici, for example, took on the mantle of peace-maker using symbols of peace such as the rainbow or the Juno (arranger of peace-bringing marriages), and Charles V fashioned himself as the new Augustus, the emperor of peace – the famous painting of him by Titian has him riding through a landscape conveying the peaceful calm after a raging battle, while a sculpture of him by Leone y Pampeo has him ‘dominating over fury’. The issue here is not just a monarchical jockeying for the image of ‘peacemaker’, for the question of peace resonated culturally and intellectually – it has been noted, for example, that the mid-sixteenth century saw a proliferation of peace poetry. As Ben Lowe has shown, by the sixteenth century ‘peace’ was becoming more complex and adaptable as an idea and more entrenched as a societal ethic. In personal form it was associated with charity, mercy and piety; in its religious mode it connoted tranquillity as part of a rigorous Christian ideal; in a more ‘political’ mode it meant the restoration of order and stability along with an end to lawlessness; and in becoming conjoined with a set of ideas associated with the rise of capital (‘commerce’, ‘prosperity’, ‘wealth’, ‘profit’) it connoted certain practical benefits to the nation. It was a discourse of peace outside and distinct from ‘just war’ doctrine and centred on the idea of the nation-state. As Ben Lowe has shown, by the sixteenth century ‘peace’ was becoming more complex and adaptable as an idea and more entrenched as a societal ethic. In personal form it was associated with charity, mercy and piety; in its religious mode it connoted tranquillity as part of a rigorous Christian ideal; in a more ‘political’ mode it meant the restoration of order and stability along with an end to lawlessness; and in becoming conjoined with a set of ideas associated with the rise of capital (‘commerce’, ‘prosperity’, ‘wealth’, ‘profit’) it connoted certain practical benefits to the nation. It was a discourse of peace outside and distinct from ‘just war’ doctrine and centred on the idea of the nation-state.

Thus it is fair to say that amidst the ‘military revolution’ of the sixteenth century, new ideas of peace were evolving as part of political discourse. As the nineteenth-century liberal jurist Sir Henry Maine once commented, ‘War appears to be as old as mankind, but peace is a modern invention.’ An invention, that is, that came about amidst the increasing monopolization of violence by the developing state and one which could be shaped and utilized by the state to help justify the violence under its control. The discourse of peace came to *permeate* the discourse of war in the very century in which war was being treated as an ineradicable feature of politics, as a necessity for the security of the state, and in which the ‘permanent-war machine’ was being perfected. A book such as Thomas Becon’s *New Pollicye of War* (1542, published under his pseudonym Theodore Basille) could be retitled for its second edition later that year *The True Defense of Peace* and then reissued under its old title again after Becon’s death without anyone finding anything odd in the changes. The changes are indicative of the extent to which ‘peace’, as an increasingly seductive ideal to the martial mentality of the European ruling elites, had to be subsumed under the logic of war. Hence, on the one hand, a staunch ‘pacifist’ such as Erasmus ends up accepting the right to wage war, not least for the ‘tranquillity’ and ‘stability’ of the Christian republic and to ‘punish delinquents’; that is, for dealing with internal dissent and rebellion. On the other hand, a staunch defender of the ‘art of war’ such as Machiavelli also writes of the ‘arts of peace’: to be exercised externally against one’s enemies in the hope of breaking them down (due to the fact that ‘the cause of union is fear and war’) and internally as a mechanism for internal order (his example is to have the people believe in religion), and it is clear from his discussion that the arts of peace are continuous with the arts of war. The war machine is a peace machine; the peace machine is a war machine. Permanent war normalized as peace.

This is nowhere truer than in that centrepiece of the art of war: empire. The concept *pax*, appropriated from the *Pax Romana*, was central to the articulation and development of the imperial theme in this period (and would remain so through the further growth of empires in the later *Pax Britannica* and *Pax Americana*). But in the Roman tradition from where it hails *pax* has more affinity with the word ‘dominance’ than with modern notions of ‘peace’. What is connoted by the word is not simply an absence of conflict or making of a pact, but the imposition of hegemony achieved through conquest and maintained by arms: the goddess Pax was portrayed on Trajanic coins with her right foot on the neck of a vanquished foe. *Pax* thus had unmistakable military and hegemonic overtones and was deeply embedded in military codes and practices; it was and is a victor’s peace, achieved by war and conquest. *Pax* and *imperium* went hand in hand: peace as domination. Or, we might say, domination as pacification.

**Pacification, law, security**

In his series of lectures from 1975 to 1976, the recent translation of which has made them increasingly influential, Foucault explored the ways in which we might consider war as the matrix for techniques of domination: the ways in which politics is the continuation of war by other means, rather than Clausewitz’s more famous formulation. On this view, the task of political
power lies in the perpetual inscription of relations of force through a form of unspoken warfare. Far from ending war, the ‘civil peace’ is in fact its continuation: ‘If we look beneath peace, order, wealth, and authority … will we hear and discover a sort of primitive and permanent war?’ It is not so much ‘politics’ that is the continuation of war by other means, then, but ‘peace’. That is, liberal peace, alterations in which are merely episodes, factions and displacements in war. We therefore ‘have to interpret the war that is going on beneath peace’, because ‘peace itself is a coded war’.\textsuperscript{38} Coded, we might say, as pacification.

‘Pacification’ is often thought to have been developed as a term during the America–Vietnam war, following its adoption in 1964–65 as a substitute term for ‘counterinsurgency’. In fact, the term enters political discourse in the context of the colonial wars of the sixteenth century. In July 1573 Philip II came to believe that the continued violence being meted out in the conquest of the colonies was causing a certain discontent among his own people. He therefore proclaimed that all further extensions of empire be termed ‘pacifications’ rather than ‘conquests’.

Discoveries are not to be called conquests. Since we wish them to be carried out peacefully and charitably, we do not want the use of the term ‘conquest’ to offer any excuse for the employment of force or the causing of injury to the Indians … Without displaying any greed for the possessions of the Indians, they [the ‘discoverers’, ‘conquerors’] are to establish friendship and cooperation with the lords and nobles who seem most likely to be of assistance in the pacification of the land.\textsuperscript{39}

As Tzvetan Todorov notes, the conquests themselves are not to be stopped, but the idea of ‘conquest’ is to be replaced with ‘pacification’,\textsuperscript{37} a mystification still in place centuries later.\textsuperscript{38} The violence remains unchanged, but in taking from the Roman tradition of imperial glory through military domination, in which \textit{pax} implied ‘pacification’, it was understood in terms of the verb ‘pacificate’, now obsolete but which in the seventeenth century meant ‘to make peace’. Playing on the constitution of internal order in ordinary language, ‘pacification’ quickly came to describe the enforcing of a certain kind of peace, order and security. Pacification, then, is a police action: a military act dressed up as peace. Through pacification, (colonial) war becomes (colonial) peace, a rhetorical move devised in the context of the wars of the sixteenth century and perfected over the centuries to follow: from the ‘Edicts of Pacification’ of the late sixteenth century to the treaty taken by many to be the definitive original document of international law, the Treaty of Westphalia, which several times refers to itself as a Treaty of Pacification; from the pacification of Vietnam to the streets of Baghdad in the ‘war on terror’. If peace itself is a coded war, then pacification is core to the codification.

So too is law. ‘Law is not pacification’, says Foucault. Well, no, not least because pacification is also very much about culture and ideology (‘hearts and minds’), productivity and development (‘modernization’), welfare and sexuality (from population censuses and surveys through to ‘erotic’ pamphlets), and much more, a range of activities which explain the numerous name changes undergone by specific pacifications such as the war on Vietnam: Reconstruction, Rural Construction, Revolutionary Reconstruction, Land Development, Civic Action, and so on, all expressing the ‘productive side’ of power, as Foucault might have said and President Johnson more or less did say.\textsuperscript{39} But that is not Foucault’s point. Rather, for Foucault, law is not pacification because ‘beneath the law, war continues to rage in all the mechanisms of power.’\textsuperscript{40} With this comment, Foucault’s unwillingness to deal properly with the question of law comes to the fore: looking ‘beneath’ the law is one of Foucault’s ways of implying that law is not important to questions of power–war, a point he makes on many occasions in his attempt to move beyond the ‘juridico-discursive’ concept of power. Yet to try to understand war without recourse to the question of law is a serious mistake, as Foucault himself came to acknowledge.\textsuperscript{41} It is far more the case that through the law, war continues to rage. Such a claim does require grappling with law, as it means grappling with the violence and war that take place through law but which law itself does so much to mask – not least because the violence of law is always exercised in the name of ‘peace’.\textsuperscript{42} Contra Foucault, law \textit{is} pacification. Moreover, and even more contra Foucault, this was the crowning achievement of liberal contract theory.

The story told about this tradition is that war is replaced by law; the social contract sees the natural right to use force given up to the state, which then monopolizes the means of violence and thus the war power. This is the story told about the tradition by IR and strategic studies and is also very much the story told by Foucault: ‘basically, Hobbes’s discourse is a certain “no” to war.’\textsuperscript{43} This view is reinforced in Foucault’s more substantive works where he suggests an approach which ‘takes as its model a perpetual battle rather than a contract’.\textsuperscript{44} But this is an incredibly one-dimensional reading of Hobbes and contract
theory, in that it fails to recognize the extent to which seventeenth-century contract theorists retained a notion of perpetual battle within their model of the contract and despite their attempt to say ‘no’ to war.

It is usually said that Hobbes thinks the creation of the mighty Leviathan somehow resolves the problem of war: the perpetual war of the state of nature can be overcome with the creation of a sovereign entity which monopolizes the means of violence and thus the powers of war. In so doing, wars between states come to be the ‘proper’ form of war and wars within states an ‘illegitimate’ form of violence. That is, Hobbes’s argument legalizes one type of war and interpellates another type, civil war, as illegal or criminal. Yet there is more to be said about this. For the connection between the external–foreign relation of war and the internal–domestic importance of peace is centred on the exercise of violence, not just in Hobbes’s sense that men who worship ‘peace’ at home will do so in vain if they cannot defend themselves against foreigners, but also because the control of violence is always already turned inwards: in the form of law. ‘We must understand, therefore, that particular citizens have conveyed their whole right of war and peace unto some one man or council; and that this right, which we may call the sword of war, belongs to the same man or council, to whom the sword of justice belongs.’ Two swords: the sword of war and the ancient sword of justice, held together in one and the same ‘supreme authority’. On the one hand, then, the violence monopolized by the state is expressed as war when directed against foreign powers and as law when exercised internally. The concept of order being articulated here thereby sets out its historical stall as offering peace through the restriction of war-making to the sovereign state. On the other hand, however, and this is the point missed by Foucault, the problem of civil war can not be circumvented so easily, and thus remains for Hobbes a permanent feature of social order. Why? Because for Hobbes those who remain dissatisfied with their sovereign and the contract end up ‘waging war’. One must bear in mind that despite Hobbes’s state of nature often being interpreted as an abstraction, in De Cive he relates it explicitly to the civil war which had recently been affecting his country. Indeed, even questioning the need for obedience on the part of subjects constitutes one of the ‘true forerunners of an approaching war’. In Leviathan this becomes clearer still: the challenge to authority is ‘a relapse into the condition of warre, commonly called Rebellion … for Rebellion, is but warre renewed’.45

Thus despite Hobbes’s attempt to ‘annex’ war to the state, he cannot give up the idea that the multitude is always already on the verge of rebellion, the people always already on the verge of revolution and thus civil society always already on the verge of chaos. To grasp this Hobbes has to invoke once more the category war, and he does so not for relations between states but for the social order constituted by the contract. For all the talk about the ‘peace and security’ of the juridical order generated by the Leviathan, then, in Hobbesian terms what one should really speak about is the pacification of an otherwise permanent civil war.

The same logic of pacification is found in other writers in the social contract tradition which supposedly sought to say ‘no’ to war, such as Locke. It appears in Locke’s acceptance of slavery, which is ‘nothing else, but the State of war continued’ and which is then reincorporated into civil society through the place of the slave within the domestic situation. But it is most explicit in Locke’s theory of punishment, which stems from the idea that those who commit crimes against us or even show enmity towards us have ‘declared War against all Mankind’. This argument about punishment in Chapter II of the Second Treatise runs straight into the argument about war in Chapter III, where it is suggested that ‘Force without Right, upon a man’s Person, makes a State of War.’ This appears initially to concern the state of nature: ‘force … where there is no common Superior on Earth to appeal to for relief, is the State of War’. Yet within a few lines Locke adds that force without right makes a state of war ‘both where there is, and is not, a common Judge’. This is war saturating the social body following the creation of political society; indeed, war as a constitutive feature of political society. One might note that despite Locke twice suggesting that this account of punishment will seem to many a ‘strange doctrine’, it is actually not far from the doctrine of punishment held by Vitoria, and, moreover, when Locke comes to flesh out the theory of punishment he does so in the context of colonialism and the right of war against the Indians.46 The introduction of government in Locke’s argument, then, often understood through the lens of the liberal search for peace, is in fact comprehensible only through the logic of war, exercised in a permanent fashion against rebellious slaves, antagonistic Indians, wayward workers, and criminals with something unsocial in mind: a liberal war masquerading as liberal peace.

In other words, the civil society created by the contract in the name of peace and security remains for
liberalism a space of war. Regardless of its desire to restrict war to the international realm, civil society is always already at war. On the one hand, and pace the myth of peace and commerce as congenital twins, there is the permanent war of capital (spelt out by Marx in his treatise on this war, namely Volume 1 of Capital). On the other hand, there are the manifold permanent or semi-permanent wars against the various ‘enemies within’: war on crime, war on drugs, war on poverty, war on unemployment, war on scroungers, and on it goes until the war that has been articulated as the one that will probably never end: the war on terror. All are code for the permanent pacification required in/of the bourgeois polity and all are a product in one way or another of the supreme concept of bourgeois society: security. ‘Fundamental to pacification is its security’, commented someone with more than a little first-hand experience. The demand for peace and security, then, is a demand for pacification.

Beyond peace

In an essay on ‘African Grammar’, Roland Barthes once highlighted the ways in which official French reports on African affairs functioned not as communication but as intimidation, often employing that standard tactic of bourgeois ideology: giving something the name of its contrary.

GUERRE/WAR. – The goal is to deny the thing. For this, two means are available: either to name it as little as possible (most frequent procedure); or else to give it the meaning of its contrary (more cunning procedure, which is at the basis of almost all the mystifications of bourgeois discourse). War is then used in the sense of peace, and pacification in the sense of war.

Barthes’s insight is clearly gleaned from French colonialism, but his point is a general one about one of the most important mystifications which has accompanied bourgeois power since its inception. As I have suggested here, this mystification concerning war and peace is far from being a product of the global war on terror; rather, it is a long-standing ideological feature of the global war of capital.

Recognizing this is but one move towards more creative thinking about war; thinking has to be done outside and against the mystifications found in liberalism, IR and strategic studies. It is also thinking that has to be done outside of the discourse of peace and security. As noted by Retort in what is by far the best analysis of the war in Iraq, the reality of a permanent war on terror ‘renders inadequate the notion of “peace” as an oppositional frame or strategy’. As much as this is true of the ‘war on terror’ so it has been true of the permanent social war of capital. Creative thinking about war therefore also requires jettisoning naive ideas about peace.

Notes

9. Julius Stone, Human Law and Human Justice, Maitland
A curious set of metaphors marks the jargon of postcommunist transition: *education for democracy*, *classrooms of democracy*, *democratic exams*, *democracy that is growing and maturing*, but which *might still be in diapers or making its first steps or, of course, suffering from children’s illnesses.*! This language of postcommunism discloses a paradox that points at what is probably the greatest scandal of recent history: those who proved their political maturity in the so-called ‘democratic revolutions’ of 1989–90 have become thereafter, overnight, children! Only yesterday, they succeeded in toppling totalitarian regimes in whose persistency and steadfastness the whole so-called ‘free’ and ‘democratic’ world had firmly believed, until the very last moment, and whose power it had feared as an other-worldly monster. In the struggle against the communist threat, that world had mobilized all its political, ideological and military forces, its greatest statesmen and generals, philosophers and scientists, propagandists and spies, without ever really frightening the totalitarian beast. Yet, despite that, it calls those who chased it away with their bare hands ‘children’. Only yesterday, those people got world history going again, after it had been lying on its deathbed, and helped it to walk upright again, after so long. Yet today, they themselves must learn their first steps. Only yesterday, they taught the world a history lesson in courage, political autonomy and historical maturity, yet today they must assert themselves before their new self-declared masters as their obedient pupils. Only yesterday, they were the saving remedy for fatally ill societies; today, they themselves suffer from children’s illnesses, which they must survive in order to become capable of living. What miracle happened overnight? What wizard turned these people into children?

Of course, it was politics. The child that was suddenly recognized in these mature people is defined neither by an early stage of psychological development that was never really abandoned, nor as a result of the psychopathological phenomenon of infantile regression, but as a political being, a *zoon politicon* par excellence.

### An ideology called ‘transitology’

The human being as a political child offers itself as the almost perfect subject of a democratic restart. Untroubled by the past and geared totally to the future, it is full of energy and imagination, compliant and teachable. It emanates freedom as though its pure embodiment, but actually it is not free at all. A child is dependent; it must be guided and patronized by adults. However, this only makes it all the more suitable for serving society, as the perfect ground for a new beginning. It neutralizes all the contradictions that the sudden irruption of freedom lays bare in society, above all between those who rule and the ruled. There is no relation of domination that seems so natural and self-evident as the one between a child and its guardian, no mastery so innocent and justifiable as that over children. One does not take their freedom away, but suspends it temporarily, postpones it, so to speak, for the time being. A patronized child as political being enjoys a sort of delayed freedom. And in case one day the promise of freedom turns out to be a delusion, one can always say that it was just a children’s fairy tale.

The repressive infantilization of the societies that have recently liberated themselves from communism is the key feature of the so-called postcommunist condition. It comes to light in the ideology of the postcommunist transition, a peculiar theory that addresses itself to the task of understanding and explaining the postcommunist transition to democracy. Here, cynicism becomes (political) science. From the perspective of this political science, postcommunism is understood above all as a phase of transition – that is, as a process of transformation of an ‘actually socialist’ (*realsocialistisch*) society into a capitalist democratic one.² Political science finds no reason to understand this transition in terms of a specific historical epoch. It lacks basic identity features: a specific postcommunist political subject or system, for instance, and a specific postcommunist mode of production, or form of property. In fact, political science does not need the concept of postcommunism at all. It prefers instead the aforementioned concept of ‘transition to democracy’
and it even develops within this framework a special discipline with the task of studying this process: ‘transitology’. It is based on the cynical idea that people who won freedom through their own struggle must now learn how to enjoy it properly. The meaning of this paradox goes far beyond the historical situation in which the postcommunist societies in Eastern Europe found themselves after 1989.

The concept of transition was introduced by orthodox political scientists in the late 1960s and early 1970s to explain various cases of regime change, principally in South America and Southern Europe. Transition originally meant nothing more than ‘an interval between two different political regimes’, as a minimalistic definition from 1984 put it. This transition was always a ‘transition from’: ‘from authoritarian rule’, for instance, in the title of the book by O'Donnell, Whitehead and Schmitter. Basically, at that time, political science always reflected on the phenomenon of regime change retrospectively. It tried to draw lessons from historical experience ex post. It was not so interested in the future because the outcome of this sort of transition was more or less open. It did not necessarily end in a democracy; an authoritarian regime could be transformed into another form of authoritarian rule. At that time, it was still conceivable that a military dictatorship in South America might be replaced by a Marxist or even a Maoist dictatorship. The Chilean people, for example, democratically decided to embark with Allende on a form of ‘socialist democracy’, but the military junta turned them in a completely different direction.

In those days, for political science, the world was still quite complex: there were not just two competing ideological–political systems and military blocs, but also a series of anti-colonial movements in the ‘Third World’, providing for a certain contingency of the political. At that time, it still seemed as though there was a choice, as though history had an open end. By the end of the 1980s something had changed, and transitology began to understand its topic differently. The process of political transformation was now to be determined in advance. Its goal is always already known – incorporation into the global capitalist system of Western liberal democracy. From that point on, the concept of transition has been almost exclusively applied to the so-called postcommunist societies and denotes a transition to democracy that began with the historical turn of 1989–90 and continues, more or less successfully, mostly in Eastern Europe. This condition is familiar to the ‘children of communism’. They grew up with the logic of historical determinism. However, it was the moving force of class struggle that was manoeuvring society into a better, classless future then. To be free meant, at that time, to recognize the iron laws of history and to yield to them. The trail to a better communist future was not only clearly blazed but also unavoidable.

Nowadays, they are told, they must have a similar experience; only this time, it is the General Law of History they have to obey unconditionally. The goal is clearly and distinctively set and its final attainment is guaranteed in advance. According to the new ideology of transition, there are no major obstacles on the way to democracy, so long as one strictly adjusts to the objective, external factors – economic, cultural, institutional, and so on. Sometimes a geographical position will suffice. ‘Geography is indeed the single reason to hope that East European countries will follow the path to democracy and prosperity’, writes one of the transitologists, who understands politics only as a struggle for control over external factors: ‘if we really control economic growth and the institutional setting, it is very likely that democracy will occur.’

Others go a step further. Our way to democracy is determined by nature itself. It is ‘a natural tendency and therefore not difficult to achieve’. Even the very idea of politics is based in Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection. The author of this Darwinist theory of democracy, Tutu Vanhanen, also believes that democracy is universally measurable. So he introduced the so-called Index of Democratization (ID) that shows us on which level of democratization a society is situated. Accordingly, he constructed also a ranking of democratic societies. In this list, which he created shortly before the collapse of communism, he classified 61 countries as democracies, 5 as so-called ‘semi-democracies’ and 81 as ‘non-democracies’. Only countries that earned more than 5 ID points were classified as truly democratic. Those under that level were authoritarian. The two poles ‘authoritarian rule’ and ‘really existing freedom’ (i.e. liberal democracy) define a clear line of historical development: from authoritarianism to democracy. The transition is now teleologically determined – that is, designed from the perspective of its intended result – and consists of climbing up the scale of democratization to the top, the condition of realized freedom in the system of liberal democracy. One only has to follow the law of nature.

Authority on one side and freedom (i.e. autonomy) on the other – these two poles also determine the ideal of an enlightened, modern education: the development of an immature child, still dependent on an authority, into an autonomous, mature citizen of a free society.
According to Vanhanen, the most important factors that affect his Index of Democratization are competition and participation. His formula is simple: the more democratic the system, the higher the level of participation and competition. The latter stands for the openness of political possibilities, for a pluralism of interests – that is, of political and ideological options. Under ‘participation’ we should understand voluntary involvement of citizens in political life and in making political decisions. A fully mature democracy requires mature democrats capable of autonomous thinking and acting.

Under these conceptual premisses, the process of postcommunist transition appears as an educational process following the ideal of education for maturity and responsibility. However, it also reflects all the contradictions of this old Enlightenment concept.

**Education for immaturity and irresponsibility**

The analogy between the historical development of humanity and the growing up of a child (its consciously controlled education) is, as is well known, an invention of the Enlightenment. Indeed, enlightenment is nothing but a transition from immaturity to maturity, or, as we read in the first sentence of Kant’s famous essay from 1784, ‘man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity’, which he defines as ‘inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction’. In the same sense that the immaturity is ‘self-imposed’, the maturity too should be achieved as a result of one’s own action. One cannot be simply declared mature – that is, released from a tutelage, be it nature, God or some master, which is the original meaning of the idea of emancipation as an acquittal, a release from paternal care, being freed from bondage. The Enlightenment idea of a transition to maturity has more of a reflexive sense, a self-emancipation. Of course, this transition should never be mistaken for a revolution. Kant’s concept of Enlightenment implies an emancipation that does not take place through a revolutionary leap, but rather as a reform in the manner of thinking (Denkungsart), as a continuous progression which alone is capable of securing the identity of its subject, as the subject of Enlightenment.

In historical developments after Kant, the Enlightenment ideal of maturity – and with it the perception of emancipation as a long-term process with an open end – was pushed more and more into the background. Another idea of emancipation took its place. Emancipation was understood now as an act of liberation from an unjustly imposed domination. The goal of emancipation is not any more a mature man but rather a society free of domination. With this move ‘maturity’ has lost the emphatic meaning of emancipation.

Curiously it was not until 1945 that interest in the concept recurred. Of course, this was the time of a historic transition: from fascist dictatorship to
democracy. The traumatic historical experience of the masses, which had blindly followed their Führers into the catastrophe, made the idea of autonomous, mature and responsible men and women attractive again. ‘Maturity’ was now recognized as a precondition for democracy. After a long historical separation ‘maturity’ and ‘emancipation’ met again. This also influenced postwar philosophical reflection. Habermas, for instance, attached the emancipatory knowledge-interest to an interest in maturity. At the same time, pedagogy discovered the concept of ‘maturity’; it became the goal of education, the very principle of an emancipatory educational science. The post-fascist transition envisioned the ideal of mature and responsible citizens as the final cause of the construction of a new, democratic society. It is no wonder that the process of postcommunist transition finds itself committed to the same ideal. Finally, the new condition understands itself as post-totalitarian – liberating itself ideologically and historically from both ‘totalitarianisms’, fascist and communist: the so-called ‘double occupation’ – a retroactive equalization of two ideologies and political movements that in historical reality fought each other mercilessly.

The postcommunist ideal of mature and responsible citizenship has been nowhere so clearly employed as in the development of so-called ‘civil society’, which, it is believed, is the true subject of democratic life, the social substratum of all democratic values, justice, and well-functioning public and human rights. This civil society is supposed to be very weak in the East European societies liberated from communism. It is still ‘in diapers’, one might say, which is the reason it has to be first educated, trained, developed, got going. Surprisingly, nobody at the time asked the question: who, if not the civil societies of Eastern Europe brought the ancien régime to collapse? What was Solidarity in Poland if not the paradigmatic institution of – a resisting, struggling and radically world-changing – civil society par excellence? How has it suddenly become so weak if yesterday it had been able to overthrow communism? Who has put the Polish workers in diapers, all those brave men and women who initiated the democratic revolution, withstood the brutal repression of the counter-revolution and carried the struggle for democracy on their shoulders until the final victory? Who – and in whose interest – has put them thereafter in children’s shoes, diagnosed their children’s illnesses, sent them to school and to exams?

These were the cynical ideologues of transition, the masterminds of the postcommunist transformation, as we can call them. However, their cynicism has followed a logic, the logic of domination. If ‘education for maturity and responsibility’ is propagated in the interest of domination and thereby turns into an endless process about whose possible conclusion the educators alone decide, then the call for ‘maturity and responsibility’ no longer serves, as Robert Spaemann writes, ‘to enlarge the circle of the mature, but rather the circle of those who are for now declared immature’. Thus the child metaphors that are so typical of the jargon of postcommunist transition turn out to be a symptom of a new power relationship. They point clearly to a repressive incapacitation or putting under tutelage of the true subject of the ‘democratic turn’ and to its retroactive desubjectivation. We are talking about a constellation for which those words of Adorno, from his radio talk on ‘Education for Maturity and Responsibility’, still hold true, namely that ‘in a world as it is today the plea for maturity and responsibility could turn out to be something like a camouflage for an overall keeping-people-immature’.

Again, in whose interest does it happen? Who puts the protagonists of the historical change under tutelage, who robs them of their subject-status? The question is as old as the Enlightenment concept of maturity. Hamann put it directly to Kant: ‘Who is … the vexed guardian [der leidige Vormund]?’ He saw him in Kant himself, or, more precisely, in the gestalt of the Enlightener. Today, these are the Western onlookers who didn’t take part in the democratic revolutions of 1989–90. Far from meeting the deeds of the protagonists of the Eastern European democratic revolutions with the ‘wishful participation which borders on enthusiasm’ with which Kant’s passive spectators once welcomed the French Revolution, they reacted to the overthrow of communism with a cynical ‘participation’ that reveals the wish for power and domination. In fact, they recognized in that historical event, likewise Kant’s spectators of the downfall of the feudal absolutism of 1789, a ‘progress in perfection’ in terms of a ‘tendency within the human race as a whole’, but at the same time regarded this same tendency as having been long ago fulfilled in their own reality and therefore, speaking Hegelian, already historically sublated. ‘You want a better world, but the better world are we’ was the answer of the Western spectators to the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe. In this sense, they are completely different from those who in 1789 so enthusiastically welcomed the news from Paris. While the latter caught sight of their own dream in the revolutionary reality of others, the former recognized in the revolutionary dream of the other nothing but their own reality.
The consequences of this difference could not be more radical. Those who finally crowned their struggle for freedom with victory in Eastern Europe have become, almost overnight, losers. This was not the effect of black magic but rather of hegemony. It is hegemony that made true winners out of the Western spectators, not only over communism but at the same time also over the protagonists of the revolution that brought down communism. Let us hear the declaration of victory in the words of this hegemony itself:

The armies of the winners did not, it is true, occupy the territory of the losers. Still, given the nature of the conflict and the way it ended, it was logical for the losers to adopt the institutions and beliefs of the winners. It was logical in particular because the outcome represented a victory of the West’s methods of political and economic organization rather than a triumph of its arms.\(^\text{15}\)

It is not a coincidence that Michel Mandelbaum, the author of these words, and his colleague, political scientist John Mueller, speak explicitly of imitation as being the best way to democracy.\(^\text{16}\)

It could not be worse: not only are the protagonists of the democratic revolutions robbed of their victory and made losers; at the same time, they have been put under tutelage and doomed blindly to imitate their guardians in the silly belief that this will educate them for autonomy. It is not only the arbitrariness of the new rulers, but above all the logic of their rule, that reveals itself here.

**Education for stupidity**

The notion ‘children of communism’ is therefore not a metaphor. Rather it denotes the figure of submission to the new form of ‘historical necessity’ that initiates and controls the process of the postcommunist transition. On these premisses, the transition to democracy starts as a radical reconstruction out of nothing. Accordingly, Eastern Europe after 1989 resembles a landscape of historical ruins that is inhabited only by children, immature people unable to organize their lives democratically without guidance from another. They see themselves neither as subjects nor as authors of a democracy that they actually won through struggle and created by themselves. It has been expropriated from them through the idea and practice of the postcommunist transition, only to return now from the outside as a foreign object that they must appropriate in a long, hard and painful process. In the strange world of postcommunism, democracy appears at once as a goal to be reached and a lost object. Thus for the ‘children of communism’ the prospect of a better future opens up only from a melancholic perspective. No wonder, since their postcommunist present so remarkably resembles their communist past. It doesn’t give them free choice. The ‘children of communism’ remain what they once already were, namely marionettes in a historical process that takes place independently of their will and drags them with it to a better future. So they are very familiar with this strange form of social life we call ‘transition’. As is well known, so-called actually existing socialism was, according to its ideological premisses, nothing but a sort of transition-society from capitalism to communism. Thus, one form of transition has replaced another. However, both the absolute certainty and the pre-given necessity of the historical development have remained the constant of the transition.

As a result, the question of the future in postcommunism is considered as already answered, and the question of the past does not make sense. One does not expect the children of communism to have a critically reflected memory of the communist past. It is precisely for this reason that they have been made into children, namely in order not to remember this past. As children, they don’t have one. Paradoxically, it is only in postcommunism that one gets a dubious impression that communism actually never existed. Already, in 1991, Jean-Luc Nancy spoke about the anger one is overwhelmed with when hearing all this empty talk about ‘the end of communism’.\(^\text{17}\) The belief that history is now finally finished with Marxism and communism, and simply so, he found ridiculous:

As history, our history, could be so inconsistent, so phantasmic, so flaky \([\text{floconneuse}]\) to have carried us along for one hundred and fifty years on clouds that dissipate in a moment. As if error, pure, simple, and stupid error could be thus corrected, regulated, mobilized. As if thousands of so-called ‘intellectuals’ were simply fools, and especially as if millions of others were even more stupid as to have been caught in the delirium of the first.\(^\text{18}\)

It is not so much the suppression of communism as a historical fact, the erasure of the communist past with all its intellectual and political complexity from the historical consciousness of postcommunism, that evokes Nancy’s indignation and concern, but rather the immense ignorance with which the postcommunist world refuses to wonder about this past and its afterlife, or to ask: ‘Why did this all happen?’ Nancy sees in this the true, almost epochal stupidity of the postcommunist turn.

Of course, children are not stupid. However, one can make them stupid, or, more precisely, one can educate
them for stupidity. In this respect, a hundred years ago, Freud wrote of intellectual inhibitions that culture implants in its pupils through education to make them more obedient and compliant. He differentiated three types of such thought-blockage – the authoritarian, the sexual and the religious – to which correspond three ‘products of education’, namely the good subjects, the sexually inhibited and religious people. He understood these forms of intellectual atrophy (Verkümmerung), as he also called it, as effects of Denkverbot, a ban imposed on men and women in their childhood, a ban on thinking about what was most interesting to them. In Freud’s time, it was above all the suppression of sexuality that had become the self-evident task of education. Once the Denkverbot was successfully implemented in the realm of sexuality, it was extended to another spheres of life, becoming in this way the most important character trait of the whole personality.

What was at that time sexuality has become in the world of postcommunism politics. While the children of communism are virtually encouraged by their educators to liberate themselves sexually and to come out, as loudly as possible, with their hitherto suppressed sexual identities, to embrace unconditionally all secular values, and to become (instead of good subjects of the totalitarian state) self-conscious, free acting members of a democratic civil society, their liberated intellect seems to have no business being in the realm of the political. It is as though there is nothing there it can wonder about. As though all political questions have been correctly answered long ago; as though the only thing left to think about is how properly to implement them, how to imitate, as truly as possible, the pre-given role models and how to obediently follow the wise word of the guardian. It seems that the well-known dialectic of enlightenment, now from its political side, has caught up with the world of postcommunism. From being an education for maturity and responsibility that had been implemented to serve the new power, it has become an education for political stupidity. It has turned Kant’s ideal upside down and puts its trust in precisely those people who are not able to use their intellect without guidance from another. Thus, the stupidity that Nancy ascribes to the postcommunist turn is actually an effect of this Denkverbot that has been imposed on the political ratio of postcommunism. It is above all in a political sense that people in postcommunism have been put under tutelage, made into children, and finally made into political fools.

This insight does not have to be taken as a reason for indignation but should rather motivate maturity. The ‘child’ as the leading political figure of postcommunism is much more than simply an instrument of the new hegemony. It is of structural importance for the fantasy
of a new social beginning that shapes the world of postcommunism so decisively. As a sort of biopolitical abstraction of the transitional society, it takes over the role of a subject that is freed from all the crimes of the communist past, so that it can enter any new social relation (including that of domination) morally clean. Moreover, as ‘child’ it does not have to take responsibility for the crimes of postcommunism itself: for the criminal privatization in which the wealth of whole nations has become the property of the few, almost overnight; for the new, postcommunist pauperization of the masses with all its social and individual consequences; for historical regressions that in some places have thrown social innocence thanks to which it becomes possible to integrate everything that happens, including ‘the inadmissible, the intolerable’ (Nancy) into a new heroic Robinsonade; and to retell it as a universally comprehensible narrative about an innocent restart. In the ideological figure of the innocent child, liberal democratic capitalist society enters the age of its unconditional ideological reproducibility. Even the most distant island can become for a time its cradle, no matter what the cost. Finally, infantile innocence has a constitutive effect for the whole horizon of individualistic (juridical) bourgeois ideology in the era of its globalization. It helps to reduce the antagonistic,

the postcommunist societies, economically, culturally and morally, back below the levels that had already been reached under communism; and, finally, for all the nationalisms, racisms, fascism, bloody civil wars, and even genocides. All these phenomena appear today as unavoidable childhood illnesses, or, to put it bluntly, as unpleasant but harmless dirt on the diapers of the newborn liberal democratic society.

Do not forget: contradiction and resistance

The ‘child’ in postcommunism is a sort of ground zero of society on which every catastrophe, the one inherited from the past as well as the new, self-created one, can be recompensed. It is an instance of a primal political truth of human history to a relation that is structured according to the juridical pattern, the relation between perpetrators and innocent victims. One looks into history only with a sort of forensic interest, as into a corpse that can provide useful information for the court proceedings.

Hegel knew that only a stone, as metaphor of ‘non-action’ (‘not even … a child’) is innocent.39 In this sense the fantasy of the innocent new beginning of postcommunist society is possible only from the perspective of a historical development that has been brought to a standstill and has frozen in the figure of a child as its political subject. Here, in the moment of historical transition, non-freedom is being replaced by a freedom that needs children, but only to deny itself to them.
It is therefore no wonder that, as Nancy emphasizes, one reacts to the cynicism of the time with anger. In the anger that postcommunist triumphalism provokes he saw the political sentiment par excellence, concretely, a reaction to ‘the inadmissible, the intolerable’. It is the expression of a refusal, of a resistance that goes far beyond what is reasonable. The anger Nancy talks about is political because it is enraged over the reduction of the political to an ‘accommodation and influence peddling’ that in postcommunism determines the frame of the historically possible. The anger opens a dimension of the political that unfolds only in breaking out of that frame. It is therefore the true messenger of a maturity to come that alone can put paid to the postcommunist tutelage.

It is in an ‘education for protest and for resistance’ that, according to Adorno, the ‘only real concretization of maturity’ lies. He ended his talk on education with a warning – which remained literally his last public words, since he died few weeks later – a warning that can serve as a postscript to the ideology and practice of the postcommunist transition. It is precisely in the eagerness of our will to change, Adorno argued, which we all too easily suppress, that the attempts to actively change our world are immediately exposed to the overwhelming force of the existing and doomed to powerlessness. Thus ‘Anyone who wishes to bring about change can probably only do so at all by turning that very impotence, and their own impotence, into an active ingredient in their own thinking and maybe in their own actions too.’

The repressively infantilized child in us is nothing but a pure embodiment of our political and historical powerlessness in the ideal world of postcommunism, which, in a seizure of an epochal megalomania mistakes itself for the realization of all dreams about freedom. The only possible exit from this self-inflicted immaturity is to protest against it and to resist.

Notes


2. Here I draw again on Dejan Jović’s lecture. I thank the author for providing me with its full text.


9. Ibid., p. 130 ff.

10. Those democratic activists in Eastern Europe who tried during the 1990s to get financial support from the West for their projects simply could not avoid the phrase ‘development of civil society’ in their applications. It was as though this phrase was a sort of universal key for opening the cash boxes of the ‘free and democratic world’.


18. Ibid., p. 376.

19. ‘[I]nocence, therefore, is merely non-action, like the mere being of a stone, not even that of a child’, G.W.F. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 282. If this warning doesn’t suffice, one should remember Roberto Rossellini’s 1948 Germany Year Zero.


22. Ibid., p. 32.
Towards a critical theory of postcommunism?

Beyond anticommunism in Romania

Ovidiu Țichindeleanu

In Eastern Europe, 1989–2009 has been a time of fundamental changes in the meaning of social and political concepts, accompanied at different speeds by the radical transformation of society. I consider transition the fundamental thematic concept of this historical shift, its operative terms being integration and accession. Of course, transition had been also the fundamental concept of East European regimes before 1989, then defined as the gradual passage from feudal agrarian societies to socialism, on the way to communism. Transition used to be the total idea that subjected debates, theories and statistics in state-socialist countries, with rhythms punctuated in the daily life by party congresses, quintennial and yearly plans, as well as organized waiting times for the acquisition of apartments and consumer goods. In the framework of dialectical materialism, the strategic aspects of transition had been stated in Chapter 22 (from capitalism to socialism) and the long-anticipated Chapter 40 (from socialism to communism) of Polecon, the cult textbook of Political Economy published for the first time in 1954 by the Institute of Economy of the Soviet Union. However, in the political expressions of actually existing socialism, the main subject of transition had not been the (socialist) world, but the national state.

Postcommunism has reaffirmed transition, but in a completely different framework of meaning. While the end of the transition to communism was an open-ended idea, an actual fantasy, the meaning of the end of post-communist transition is delineated through closures, and by a determined fantasy: technocratic pragmatism eradicating the role of ideology in politics. The end of state-communism did not bring the radical opening of the Iron Curtain. Rather, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the domino-like series of 1989 revolutions naturalized the sense of the end of a world previously defined by division, and now imagined as progressing, from West to East, towards self-transparency.

At the level of the governmental organization of power, the postcommunist transition is also of the order of closure: the progressive integration of the former Eastern Bloc into Western structures of power. The political meaning of transition/integration/accession is therefore the top-to-bottom alignment of East European governmentality in the order of Western governmentality, and of local economies into the world system of capitalism. As an integration of the former Second World into the global periphery or semi-periphery, this alignment comes is out of sync with the Free World: the postcommunist durée of transition is inseparable from the generalization of an allochronic regime of perception that converts space into time, to the effect of undermining local histories of autonomy. Due to the ‘deviation of communism’ from the progressive order of Western modernity, the local Eastern time is ontologically in delay from the Western hour and there is no alternative but to try and catch up with the standards of development, accepting the necessary sacrifices of the population. The post-communist transition develops its system of closures by way of a series of temporal distinctions that frame its differential space, providing the significations of what has been called postcommunist history: from past to future, from behind the Iron Curtain to the Free World, from communism to capitalism, from totalitarianism to democracy, from tyranny to freedom, from madness to normalcy, from backwardness to civilization, from East to West.

In spite of their difference, both transitions, pre- and post-1989, be it under the ideology of Polecon or that of ‘shock therapy’ and ‘structural reforms’, channelled their promises through the vision of an elite (political or technocratic) that leads the population, in spite of sacrifices, towards the fulfilment of modernity. Both transitions gave a central role to technocentrism and to apparatuses that are delegitimizing leftist criti-
cal thought, emancipative reason and the possibility of political change by claiming the sovereignty of the people. In the conditions in which the dominant phenomena of transition have been global capitalism and colonization, the postcommunist mainstream culture industry has lacked any critical assessment of capitalism or of the coloniality of power for two decades (nonetheless, a different picture appears on the independent scenes). The ‘non-existence’ of capital-centrism and Eurocentrism could have never been blown to such ideological proportions without the establishment of anticommunism. This is why the recent debates on the genealogy of postcommunism in Romania are important on a larger scale, and even more so in times of crisis, because what is at stake is the struggle to hold in place communism as a critique of capitalism, and an assessment of ‘actually existing socialism’. For what point is there in a discussion about East European debates on communism if not to look there for a renewal of the left theoretical tradition?

The anticommunist establishment

The first decade after 1989 recorded the most dramatic decline of the Romanian economy in its history and an equally unprecedented explosion of printed publications. The discourse of transition/integration replicating Western models passed seamlessly from the practices of mass media, whose freedom and ‘professional development’ were generally seen as ‘preconditions of democracy’, to the whole society itself. Unsurprisingly, a significant number of works that appeared in the early 1990s pondered on the end of actually existing socialism and/or communism. One recurring formula was the ‘bankruptcy of communism’, itself a syntagm articulated from the perspective of profit. Even leftist thinkers adopted a similar formula, the ‘failure of the Left’. The most visible moment of this movement was the publication in French in 1997 of the Black Book of Communism, edited by Stéphane Courtois, an authoritative source that introduced in the scholarly world the canon of a grand narrative identifying communism as a lineage passing from Marx to Lenin, Stalin and the Gulag; the genre of direct comparisons between fascism and communism; and a certain mode of thought in relation to communism that I would like to call ‘tribunal-thought’ – that is, the prosecutorial stance raised to being commanding principle of thought itself, and a mode of generalizing speech-acts in the name of the victim.

The market was ready to welcome the book: one year after its publication, this massive book of 846 pages, priced at 189 francs (around €27) sold over 200,000 copies. A year later, twenty-six translations in different languages had been either made or were in process. In Romania, the book was translated and published in 1998 by Humanitas, the publishing house of the postcommunist–anticommunist intellectual elite. As influential as it may have been, the Black Book of Communism is but one drop in the ocean of the new local culture industry. Here, the authoritative voices articulating the discourse on communism belonged to a number of former anticommunist dissidents who, after 1989, had successfully converted their symbolic capital into political and/or economic capital.

The great dissidents were perhaps too ready in the early 1990s to pass final judgement on communism and mistook the superpower/empire left standing with the realm of absolute freedom. This is especially the case in Romania, where the intellectual dissidents could not claim a history of organized resistance to totalitarianism. Instead, Gabriel Liiceanu, translator of Heidegger and director of Humanitas from 1990, coined the formula ‘resistance through culture’ to redefine Romanian dissidence. This meant the study of forbidden authors (by communist censorship) in secluded, private, confidential communities. If the whole of society was going downhill, at least a few people were keeping the cultural flag flying high. The Heideggerian theme of falling everydayness and unwavering authenticity comes in almost naturally, as well as Heidegger’s negative position towards praxis and intersubjectivity.

One can argue that since 1989 this line of thought has become a programme that reestablishes the validity of the hierarchical distinction between elite and mass culture, and facilitates ideological conversion. Even though the end of communism was often interpreted in the works of dissidents as the ultimate disenchantment (the end of Ideology), the postcommunist culture industries excelled in the fetishistic production of accursed symbols linked with communism, left thought, and the common man, and the converse import of works and figures of the masters of thought from the right side of the political spectrum, a cultural tradition forbidden and censored by communism. In the cultural history of postcommunism, anticommunist dissidence cannot be associated anymore with a history of resistance, neither with forms of independent culture, but rather with cohabitation with and/or direct participation in governmental and capitalist power, and with the local colonization of dominant ideologies, including the political ideologies of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. As of recent times, this is no secret either: in a glowing eulogy to neoconservative figure Irving
Kristol, Vladimir Tismăneanu openly acknowledged that ‘I owe and we owe to the neoconservatives the unmasked image of communist totalitarianism.’

Such transparent statements appeared only with the institutionalization of anticommunism. Even though anticommunism has been from the early 1990s a word of order of the postcommunist public sphere, the actual race to rewrite history and establish the symbolic fate of communism took a fresh as the general elections of 2004 were won by the ‘democratic’, anti-communist alliance Truth and Justice, which was to embrace an aggressive neoliberal and neocommunist agenda. The incumbent regime established the Institute of the Romanian Revolution from 1989 by Law 556 of 7 December 2004, barely before the inauguration of new President Traian Băsescu on 20 December 2004. The new political powers followed suit, establishing first at the end of 2005, by way of governmental order, the Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism (IICC), then setting up in April 2006 the Presidential Committee for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (CPADCR). In spite of this apparent rush to set up institutions, the epistemic field was not exactly empty, as the problem of the crimes of communism had also been the object of the National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism, under the aegis of the Romanian Academy; the Foundation Memoria, under the aegis of the Writers’ Union; the Romanian Institute for Recent History; the Committee for the Representation of the Victims of Communism; the National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives; the Association of Political Prisoners, and many others. However, IICC and CPADCR were the respective brainchildren of the presidency and the government, now in direct competition for the symbolic heritage of anticommunism. The common purpose of these institutions was to bring the academic evidence necessary finally to answer the appeal made by Stéphane Courtois in 1997: to hold the ‘trial of communism’ (procesul comunismului), analogous to the Nuremberg Trials, whose finality was already announced as the final ‘condemnation of communism’ (condamnarea comunismului). In other words, to be done once and for all with communism as a political idea, to identify with rigour the crimes of communism, and to make possible the ‘de-communization’ (coined after denazification) of Romanian society, the ‘hygienization’ of political life by way of ‘lustration’ – that is, the elimination of former communist cadres from public life.

In this context, the newly elected president appointed the political scientist Vladimir Tismăneanu to head a Presidential Committee meant to bring together the local elite of anticommunist intellectuals and former dissidents in order to pronounce the final word on communism. The Committee completed its work in a remarkably short time, publishing on 18 December 2006 the now famous document entitled Final Report. The Final Report in hand, President Traian Băsescu then pronounced the official ‘condemnation’ of the communist regime before the general assembly of the Romanian parliament.

The Final Report is a highly heterogeneous, unbalanced and at times contradictory document, but carries a very clear final judgement: ‘the communist regime of Romania was illegitimate and criminal.’ Other statements asserted that ‘at the beginning of 1939, Romania was leaving a relatively happy period of its history which lasted only twenty years’, and ‘the Romanian state was confiscated for four decades and a half by a political group foreign to the interests and aspirations of the Romanian people.’ The philosophical-historical thesis of the Report is that the communist regime was forcefully imposed on Romanians by the Soviet Union, and it was destined to fail as it carried from the beginning the seeds of its own destruction: communism was a pathological abomination, ‘an aberrant political beast’. The problem with communism is therefore not its exacerbated nationalism, nor the coloniality of power, but the fact that it was the wrong colonialism, coming from the ‘savage East’, and not from the civilized West (which had provided the German monarchic family that ruled Romania in the ‘happy’ pre-communist age).

If in his own book, Stalinism for all Seasons, Vladimir Tismăneanu argued that the history of the Romanian Communist Party is one of personalist dictatorship based on nationalist ideology, combined with residual and even perfunctory elements of Marxism, The Final Report shifts to a much harder line, condemning in broad strokes the ‘communist ideology’, ‘Marxist conception’, and ‘Marxist-Leninist dogmas’, for having been ‘the pendant of terror’. None of these concepts is defined or analysed. Communism in general and the Romanian Communist Party in particular are blamed for genocide, but the concept is very loosely defined (by assuming the intentionality of crime) and sometimes even used metaphorically – recalling the unfortunate way it was used in the trial of Ceauşescu. To make things worse, a round number of the victims of communism is produced by way of an amateurish calculus that raised the anger of some of the most sympathetic commentators. The Report produces thus a perspective on communism as if from the point of view of the national state, whose
essence appears to have been temporarily corrupted by ‘foreign’ interests, a state which is now returning to its objective true values, articulated by way of an allochronic programme of restoration.

The Report carries another significant message. Although it tends to overemphasize the role of intellectuals, it also confirms, rather inadvertently, that dissident intellectuals did not provide organized resistance against communism and generally have not been interested in phenomena of resistance coming from lesser social strata. In contrast to the insistence on the fate of intellectuals under communism, there is an obvious dissymmetry regarding the life of workers. In spite of this consistent bias, one is able to discover, however, that there has been a rather consistent history of resistance related directly to workers: the coal miners’ strike in Valea Jiului in 1977, the movement of the Free Workers Union of 1979, the powerful workers’ strikes of 1980–81 and 1983, then again in 1986–87, culminating with the great workers’ rebellion in Braşov, on 15 November 1987. One should also add here that, following official reports, the main revolutionary force in December 1989 was constituted by workers. Thus, from the massive labour force of the eight factories of Timişoara and the large heavy-industry plants IMGB Bucharest and CUG Cluj, to smaller industrial factories such as Metalotehnica Târgu Mureş, the Mechanical Factory in Cugir and even the Carpet Factory in the small city of Cisnădie – the cities where there were victims and where the political and military leadership was pushed beyond legitimacy have all been centres in which the workers took to the streets. In spite of such evidence, the authors of the Report clearly state that the workers’ protests ‘had no political content’, pursuing thus what has been an essential element of postcommunist cultural politics: the elimination from the public sphere of the worker in particular and of the common man in general. During transition, the decisive moments of the reaffirmation of this strategic alliance and the cultural production of inferior classes as forms of non-existence were the series of mineriads, notably the coal miners’ violent invasion of Bucharest in September 1991.

The Final Report is a document focused on past realities, but one that extends by definition past its own textual object, justifying a number of interventions in the Romanian public sphere. The existence of the Report itself is justified by way of alluding to the fact that communism did not really die with Ceauşescu in 1989, but survived apparently in the form of covert structures and pathologically corrupt people who are to blame for the delay and mishaps of postcommunist transition. The authors of the Report point to an equally troubling sign from the present: the observation that the popular masses do not seem to pay heed to the postcommunist work of the cultural elite, harbouring instead positive feelings and nostalgia for the communist past. The Final Report ends with a set of forward-looking gestures, proposing an interdiction on the public display of communist symbols, a ban on publishing communist propaganda materials (except in ‘an educative anti-totalitarian context’), and, most worryingly, the publication of a list of names, apparently ready for ‘illustration’ purposes. In the subsequent media avalanche of interviews, articles and television appearances, the broad brushstrokes regarding the ideology of communism have become even broader, devoid of footnoted restrictions: several authors and promoters of the Report made it clear that the grand philosophical implication of this work and of the presidential ‘condemnation of communism’ is the elimination of the left altogether from the political spectrum. An informal but no less systematic system of censorship takes shape by way of essentialization, cultural production in the form of detestable symbols, and the generalization of metonymic reason. Any present-day leftist thought – including Žižek and Badiou, as Tismăneanu himself repeatedly mentioned – should be seen as a surviving derivation of communism; at best, leftist thought is ‘anachronistic’ and ‘irresponsible’, at worst it carries the seeds of criminality. Moreover, the communist past is to blame even for the corruption, poverty and crimes of present-day capitalism, namely for the failure to develop a ‘civilized capitalism’ during transition. As a general phenomenon, beyond the actual content of the text of the Report, the performance of the condemnation of communism assumed the function of delegitimizing and limiting the possibilities of critical thinking. Freud’s note that ‘condemnation is the intellectual substitute of denial’ certainly applies here fully. It needs only the qualification in this context: at stake is the denial of the modernity of communism.

New critical spaces

The Final Report may represent the quintessence of the anticomunist establishment, but it failed to produce the desired final word on communism, and to bring communism before the law. However, the Report as a general phenomenon (i.e. considering the text together with the performance of its promoters in the culture industry and formal political sphere) arguably succeeded in further disseminating anticommunism as the proto-political principle of the post-1989 public sphere. One can also argue that the Report contributed to the
propagation of tribunal-thought as a generalized mode of thinking and speaking in the name of the victim. Through the trial of communism, tribunal-thought postulates nothing less than a universal ‘right by nature’ to defend ‘an objective moral order’. The anticommunist dissidents embody this moral order, which then enables the legitimation of intolerance.

The Final Report was contested and criticized in the local cultural sphere from multiple angles, both with regard to its internal inconsistencies and in relation to the external factors that made it possible: compliance with the existing frameworks of power; a critique of state totalitarianism produced at the request of the supreme authority of the state; and a conjectural effect of the internal competition between two ruling parties. Recently, three important collective publications have addressed critically the problems of communism and postcommunism in Romania: The Anticommunist Illusion, Genealogies of Postcommunism and The Televised Romanian Revolution.18

The Anticommunist Illusion puts together critical receptions of the Report, opening up indirectly the problem of thinking critically the communist past. The history of this book’s publication is itself significant. Major Romanian publishing houses simply refused to take on the book, which appeared eventually under the imprint of Cartier, a publishing house from across the Eastern border, in the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, the book was subject to attack even before its publication. In this sense, The Final Report had a positive effect: the diffuse, informal censorship of critical thought that characterized the cultural history of transition has become visible and explicit. The condemnation of communism was countered thus by a collective movement, which made the passage from writing a critique of the Report to creating the context in which it was possible to articulate such a critique. What emerged out of this heterogeneous set of critiques was that recent anticommunism has not been a discourse of emancipation and resistance, but the dominant discourse of transition and an instrument of power. The idea that anticommunism is a universal ‘moral obligation’ was an ideological principle put in the service of a particular group of interests.19 The Final Report is not an act of reconciliation, or even clarification, but is the tentative official establishment of a diffuse dominant ideology, and an attempt to rewrite national history. Since the book’s contributors belong to very different academic backgrounds and political orientations, the chapters bring striking evidence of the formation of a monolithic interpretation of past history that has come to dominate the present.

While Adrian-Paul Iliescu argues that the ‘missionaries of anticommunism’ are attacking in the name of freedom the liberal principle of plurality in thought, Andrei State documents the conflation of affirmation and analysis, and the fact that the communist period is considered altogether irrational, a demarcation which makes possible the denial of communism as a factor of modernization, and the profiling of monological reason. The Report’s principle of enunciation is ‘nothing bad about pre-communist Romania, nothing good about communist Romania’.20 Alex Cistelecan and Ciprian Şiulea both argue that the failures of the Report only emphasize the relation between the poverty of the dominant thinking on communism and theemptiness of the anticommunist vision of present and future – a technocratic republic taken care of by an elite of experts, draped as a Leo Straussian-inspired Platonic city of wisdom and science.

If The Anticommunist Illusion makes clear the contemporary necessity to reflect on the experience of communism, Genealogies of Postcommunism (2009), offers a timely assemblage of texts on the modernity of communism and its heritage, with contributions spanning philosophy, the visual arts, and the social theory of urban space and economy. Genealogies of Postcommunism emerged initially also as a reaction, albeit to a provocation coming from the curators of Documenta 12: ‘Is modernity our antiquity?’ The leitmotif of Documenta 12 resonate with the problem of the posterity of communism, which had been a constant theoretical preoccupation of the journal IDEA arts + society. The red thread of most contributions to Genealogies is the attempt, first, to find the conceptual means to grasp the relations between the experience of actually existing socialism and Western modernity, and, second, to identify the meanings of postcommunism. Against the main tenet of anticommunism, G.M. Tamás argues that communism has been the main local factor of modernization. State communism followed a road analogous to that of liberal Western modernity, attempting first to purge East European societies from a feudalism that was still dominant between the world wars; during postcommunism, the ‘second echelon’ of the same Party purged even socialist residues, producing a society built on the pure principles of capital. In short, the shift was from state capitalism to ‘capitalism pure and simple.’ Aurel Codoban notes that the barriers against the critical thinking of postcommunism are anticommunism, in the sense of the assumption that communism expelled Romania from ‘modernity’, and the identification between the factual integration of Romania into the European
He argues that Romanian ‘real socialism’ belongs to (Western) modernity as a technocentric attempt to dismantle traditional communities, driven by the belief in progress, urbanization and universal literacy. Using different means, ‘real socialism’ produced the same result as modern capitalism: the mass-cultural society. The main difference is that of cultural materialities: the Cold War was also a war between the model of a mass culture attached to the cold medium of print, and one preferring the hot media of radio and television. Generalizing this similarity, real socialism can be understood as a ‘postmodern simulacrum of capitalist modernity’: a communitarian lifestyle animated by a gift economy, somehow stitched on an industrial background.

Postcommunism gave up even socialism’s productive nostalgia for the principle of community, leaving literally everything to the domination of exchange value, completely unattached from any use value. Cornel Ban adopts the formula of ‘national Stalinism’ to designate Romania’s experience, arguing in much the same vein that this was a form of ‘modernity’ almost in the same measure as it was a form of political and cultural regression. Ban brings a much-needed comparative view between Romania’s development and that of capitalist countries like Greece and Portugal that started in 1948 at similar levels of development. While Romanian Stalinism alienated the values of humanist socialism, by sacrificing people, keeping labour subordinated to (state) capital, and enforcing a strictly conservative morality (closer to a Catholic theocracy than to the emancipative spirit of the October Revolution), state interventionism ensured very high levels of efficiency until at least 1974, and the radical and rapid modernization of society through industrialization and urbanization. Ironically, it would appear that ‘real socialism’ failed to deal with success; apparently there was no need for internal purifications, labour camps and violent repression of workers, or other actualizations of Stalin’s tenet on the accentuation of class struggle in the process of development. More intriguingly, the decline seems to coincide with the process of co-optation of intellectuals, who brought into the Communist Party the rhetoric of ‘national values’, which was preserved in postcommunism, becoming the main principle of anticommunist restoration: the ‘objective return to true values’. For my part, I argue that our understanding of communism and its ‘posts’ depends on the effort to de-essentialize and develop a plural sense of ‘modernity’. I plead for the critical task of making connections between reason and emancipation, the deconstruction of the frame of anticommunism, Eurocentrism and capitalocentrism, and an epistemic turn towards a decolonial understanding of power. This includes revision of the philosophical vocabulary, which has to be adapted to the discursive situation in which one already finds oneself. For instance, the fact that the rhetoric of national values kept its central role beyond the radical change of socio-political paradigms, and the actuality of the narcissism of minor difference and radical Eurocentrism, mean that the critical theory of postcommunism cannot separate the critique of capitalism from critical race theory (or reserve a ‘secondary’ or ‘strategic’ role to the latter).

Finally, The Televised Romanian Revolution (2009) is a conceptual book that attempts to open a new critical space for reflection on the decisive moment linking communism and postcommunism. The editors consider the 1989 Revolution both as a global event and as the formative moment of the postcommunist culture industry and political sphere, tracing the shift in the meaning of postcommunism from the ‘Revolution of 1989’ to the ‘end of the Cold War’. To consider the Revolution as a media phenomenon is an attempt to situate events in a problematic field (as opposed to a disciplinary frame of meaning), and to offer an alternative to the dominant interpretations of the ‘stolen revolution’, and of 1989 as the ‘end of all revolutions’ (and consequent beginning of direct politics without any mediation). By looking at materialities of culture – such as the historical coincidence between the political transition of Eastern Europe and the technological transition of satellite and cable television, the televised revolution is situated in a field of immanence that allows a novel grasp on the global and local relations between mass media, capitalism and power.

Thanks to these and to other works, especially from the visual arts, the study of postcommunism has the chance of developing into an original field of critical theory, by necessity archeological and praxical. A guiding principle of the critical theory of postcommunism could be that any theoretical disenchantment is a function of the historical conditions that made it possible. For instance, the study of postcommunism brings to light a series of coincidences between neoconservative and certain leftist positions: the adoption of formulas such as ‘the failure of the Left’, the rebuttal of feminism and multiculturalism, disdain for the ‘American university Left’, a certain view on the decadence of true values, the rejection of analytical Marxism, the monologic discourse on ‘modernity’, a resistance to plural ontologies and alternative epistemologies, and last but not least, a
devaluation of the role of activism and/or militantism for theory itself. Equally troubling is the emerging opposition between ‘civilized capitalism’ (Western, born out of Protestant ethics), and ‘Balkanic capitalism’, and the establishment of purely Eurocentric and intellectualist conceptions of ‘philosophy’. As the postcommunist horizon of meaning teems with the ‘old’ ideas of solidarity, disenchantment, resistance, liberation and justice, there is a lesson to learn about the relations between liberal and fascist anticommunism, Eurocentrism and the coloniality of power, the geopolitics of knowledge, the closures of transition and the elimination of the worker as a political subject, about capitalism and the public sphere. There is also a lesson to learn about the political uses of transition, messianism and teleology. As opposed to messianic time, transition time is essentially comparative. Transition time can also be defined as the time that remains between time and its end, but provides a specific framework in which the category of nation-state population is given epistemic prominence. If comparative philology compares languages without passing through the middle ground of representation, transition time allows the comparison of populations (of actual existing socialist states) without having to pass through any kind of middle ground, which undermines the foundations of socialist politics. My perception is that in the last decades of state communism what surged forward towards ‘postcommunism’ was precisely opposition or resistance to transition time, in the form of various concepts of self-government and autonomy, and of critiques of DiaMat and developmental Marxism. These different movements, not necessarily programmatic, were unfortunately overdetermined by state apparatuses, before and after 1989, in the form of ethnic nationalism and consumerist individualism. What stands out two decades after the fall of the Eastern Bloc is the actuality of communism as horizon of thought: not as an abstract idea, but as an epistemic standpoint that allows the intersection not integration of subjects and discourses. Beyond condemnations, critiques and nostalgia, actually existing socialism seems actually to provide the form of what Derrida once called ‘the experience of the impossible.’ More precisely, as it unfolds its own field of immanence, the study of postcommunism vacillates between the impossibility of pronouncing communism dead and the impossibility of its return.

Notes
2. The most visible integrations or accessions can be identified as: Council of Europe (Hungary to Romania 1990–93), NATO (Czech Republic to Romania 1997–2004), European Union (Poland to Romania 2004–07), as well as: the World Bank and the IMF (restitution of relations and/or loans as early as 1991 for Poland), the WTO (memberships accorded in 1995), etc.
4. Most dissidents gladly answered the presidential interpellation; Paul Goma notably refused to be part of the Committee.
10. This phenomenon was also noticed by Dennis Deletant: ‘What was even more striking, perhaps, about the Brasov protests, was the failure of Romanian intellectuals to react to the events. This lack of solidarity between workers and intellectuals characterized the forms of opposition to the Romanian regime and distinguished Romania from Poland and Hungary.’ Dennis Deletant, ‘Romania 1945–1989: Resistance, Protest and Dissent’, in K. McDermott and M. Stibbe, eds, *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe*, Berg, Oxford, 2006, pp. 81–99.
13. However violent the miners’ revolt was, it was a direct result of the newly implemented shock therapy, then supported by anticommunist intellectuals.
15. Under the new leadership of an important anticommunist author (who, like Vladimir Tismaneanu, was appointed by the president), the Romanian Cultural Institute organized on 20 October 2006 a round table featuring only right-wing intellectuals, and dedicated to solving the following problem: ‘Why are intellectuals still attracted to socialist ideas?’
There is a place in northern Moscow that represents, in a very focused and concentrated way, the tremendous change that has taken place in Russia since the start of market transition. This is VDNKh, the Exhibition of the Achievements of the National Economy. Its current name is different, but everybody stills knows it by its Soviet acronym, which also adorns the nearest Metro station.

Built in 1934–39, the exhibition was intended to symbolize the promise of the new socialist regime. Its numerous halls displayed the best agricultural and industrial produce resulting from the labours of Soviet citizens. Its golden fountains and beautiful pavilions symbolized the splendour and abundance that was to come in a future life under communism. This dream landscape was of course built in a country where the daily reality for most people was characterized by poverty, queues for scarce goods and, at the height of Stalin’s terror, fear of arrest. Nevertheless, the exhibition was an extremely popular place. People from all over the Soviet Union came there to marvel at this vision of an ideal city, a paradise of beauty and plenty.

From 1966 onwards, the centrepiece of the exhibition was the Kosmos (Space) Pavilion. With a huge Vostok space rocket (which replaced the statue of Stalin that originally stood there) guarding the doors, its exhibits included the first spaceships, models of Sputnik satellites, the Lunokhod robot sent to explore the moon, models of the Soviet Soyuz and American Apollo space stations that famously docked in space, and other paraphernalia of the Soviet space programme. Every schoolchild brought to see this pavilion (the authors included) would remember for the
rest of their life the awesome sight of the achievements of the human mind and the sense of wonder at what was yet to come.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, along with the rest of the country VDNKh experienced a rapid market transformation. The Soviet exhibits were disposed of, and the pavilions were eagerly colonized by a myriad small businesses and traders, selling everything from cheap Chinese electronics to Turkish leather bags and bootleg CDs. The ‘market’ thrives to this day. VDNKh’s squares and wide pedestrian paths are now occupied by kebab stalls and kiosks with cheap souvenirs. The Soviet Tupolev TU-154 airliner which used to be the centrepiece of one of the squares was first turned into an electronics shop, and eventually, as the profanation of this erstwhile object of a nation’s pride began to grate with the visitors, removed from view entirely. A sculpture of Lenin still stands on another square, but now it seems that even Vladimir Ilich, in his characteristic gesture pulling on the lapels of his jacket, is in fact pointing at his inner pocket – ‘I have money too’.

The Space Pavilion is a ruin. The high glass ceiling is leaking. The walls – left unrepaired since the 1980s – are crumbling. Ransacked of its glorious artefacts, the pavilion has literally been brought down to earth. In a bizarre twist of fate, it has been turned into a market for gardening appliances and seeds. The agricultural cycle has replaced the modernist project. Mankind’s dream of transcendence, its aspirations to build a better collective future, have been overtaken by the eternal drudgery of petty accumulation, consumption and waste. Churchill’s assertion that Stalin ‘came to Russia with a wooden plough and left it in possession of atomic weapons’ does not ring true at the Space Pavilion, where history has been reversed and it’s back to the plough. While the Moscow authorities keep promising to restore the Space Pavilion and rebuild the exhibition, nobody is willing to invest the necessary money, and there is a glaring absence of the political will needed to break the dense web of corrupt contracts and agreements that allow market traders to continue operating. With moneyed interests given free rein, civilization with its collective dreams and aesthetic excesses is in retreat. It cannot support itself. Left on its own, it collapses, and life reverts to its most elementary forms.

But while the Soviet pavilions are on their last legs, one highly popular new exhibition is thriving. It occupies what was once VDNKh’s flagship central pavilion, a majestic 100-metre-high Stalinist building, whose spire is topped by a golden star and sheaths of wheat. But there is nothing Stalinist about this exhibition. This is the museum of gifts to Leonid Yakubovich, the presenter of a highly popular television programme, The Field of Fortune, the format of which is more or less a straight copy of Wheel of Fortune. This programme, however, has its own very Russian slant. Participants often bring gifts for Yakubovich, which they give him before they start playing the game. Some of these
gifts are later transferred to the VDNKh museum. They include homemade souvenirs: amateur paintings, models of cars and boats, hunting trophies, and so on. But most gifts represent Yakubovich himself. Bottles of vodka, little wooden figurines, portraits and souvenir plates all carry his image. The pavilion has been transformed into a place of pagan worship, a shrine to the new god of money – money that is not earned, but magically delivered by this deity, inhabiting the new Olympian heights of television.

As VDNKh went to seed, many visitors (particularly those from the older generation) lamented the leaving of this dream of a better future. Not, however, the new Russian liberal elite. It always considered the place too vulgar and populist, too implicated in Soviet ideology. Many thought that Soviet civilization deserved to collapse, and simply had to give way to a new liberal future. Now at VDNKh we can see what this future has brought – a run-of-the-mill marketplace and naive popular magic. The end of Utopia has meant a rude return to drab earthly concerns.

Twenty years ago, when the ideas of market liberalism first started to take hold in Russia, they did seem to bear the promise of a better society and a better future. Capitalism would unleash huge energies, rejuvenate the stagnant socialist society through economic vitality and individual enterprise. Liberal ideologists forecast that capitalist dynamism, founded on freedom, individualism and hard work, would create wealth and overcome economic and social problems. The prescription was flawless. The only obstacle for the adepts of liberal ideology was the people, with their cultural patterns of behaviour, beliefs and values inherited from the Soviet times. But eventually people would change – if not through the reform of minds, then through demographic replacement. As the 1990s began, a minister of labour confidently and publicly predicted that, with the passing of time, the older generation, stuck in their old ways and waiting for the state to feed them instead of developing their own initiative, would die out and the country would start to flourish.

Millions of people duly did die (in the 1990s Russia experienced a mortality crisis unprecedented in peacetime). It emerged, however, that the new political regime did not really need the remaining population to engage in mass entrepreneurial activities. As predatory new networks positioned themselves neatly to extract resources from the state, the emphasis shifted from support for free enterprise towards the need to strengthen state institutions. In fact, much of the population, entrepreneurial or not, turned out to be of no economic utility whatsoever to the new rulers. As the Russian political commentator Stanislav Belkovsky has pointed out, what the ruling elite needs are people who service the oil and gas sectors (which, until recently, were the basis of the state’s – and its managers’ – profits) and banks to transfer money abroad. The rest are redundant. They should be occupied by consumption, television, and, in the absence of any real alternatives to the current regime, ritualistic voting. Individuals ‘liberated’ from communist constraints by the free market have become apathetic consumers.

Mainstream politicians have long since desisted from serious public discussion of the country’s future. The sense of a future has been privatized by the elite. It is they who are involved in the accumulation of resources. It is they who are busy constructing themselves as the new aristocracy, inventing family ‘tradition’ and preparing their children to be the future masters of the country. Aristocratic societies are booming, genealogies showing noble lineage going back centuries are drawn, lavish charity balls are given, and the kids are shipped off to the best Western schools and universities.
At the same time, the lives of the masses have been detemporalized. They are now supposed to live in a circular time, where there is little change and progress. According to the official line, everyone in Russia’s past – the tsars and the Bolsheviks, Ivan the Terrible, Lenin and Stalin – strove to make Russia ‘a great country’, and we should in turn be proud of all these new state-builders (according to Medvedev’s recent directive, any historian who says differently is falsifying Russian history and must be held to account). The present, despite the recent economic crisis (which, as the loyal mass media have explained, is imported from the West), is glorious as well. Little mention is made of the future, other than in the context of the present – assurances that all will remain as it is now. Opinion polls show that over twenty years of market reforms people have lost the idea of the future. People are stuck in a recursive reality in which, as prophesied in the Bible, ‘the Earth stands still’.

Opinion polls reveal an apathetic public, alienated from political life, but also demonstrating general contentment with ‘stability’. The current financial crisis did produce significant anxiety, and trust in the country’s political institutions decreased for a time. But Putin remains a hugely popular leader, and representatives of democratic opposition remain unable to break out from their political ghetto. As elsewhere, a consolidated mass media promote the cult of wealth and omnipresent consumerism, depoliticizing the electorate. Stuck in front of televisions and PCs, or engaging in individualized consumption, consumers, like peasants, are – to paraphrase Marx – isolated from one another instead of coming together in mutual intercourse, and are incapable of truly representing their own class interests. Like Marx’s peasants, these masses are not to be the agents of their own future.

Meanwhile, the political project is tightly locked into a seemingly perennial succession of Putin–Medvedev–Putin (Putin has announced recently that he sees no obstacle to becoming president again). In publicity photos this summer, Putin again demonstrated to the country and the world his muscular torso – a promise of the leader’s physical potency for many years ahead. Who needs platforms and ideas, when the leader’s legitimacy is based on being fitter, stronger, quicker to act than any potential challengers? With this direct physicality, Putin is the perfect embodiment of the down-to-earth nature of liberal capitalism’s instrumentalism. No need for ‘superstructures’, complex ideas or reflections. His manner is brutal and forthright – perhaps best exemplified by his reply to a foreign journalist’s question about the Kursk disaster: ‘What happened to the submarine? It sank.’ This no-nonsense pragmatism is characteristic of the new Russian elite. Putin and his clan
are taking what they can of Russia’s resources here and now. Oil, gas and land are the highest prizes. The nation’s intellectual capital is largely ignored. The Russian Academy of Sciences is treated as a useless relic of the Soviet cultural project. Scientists in the country widely believe that constant attempts to deprive the Academy of its freedoms are motivated not so much by the idea of establishing government control, but by the desire of state officials to privatize the prime real estate that the Academy owns.

In the struggles for land, natural resources and real estate, enormous energies are unleashed, from the top to the bottom of Russian society. A huge ‘land grab’ is going on everywhere. Going to a Moscow cemetery to visit a parental grave, one of the authors noticed that the fence around the grave was broken, and that the neighbouring grave had been ‘expanded’ into its territory by the construction of a massive new fence of its own. Friends explained that this is not an unusual practice, and the fight for additional square centimetres of land goes on in cemeteries everywhere. Her co-author woke up one morning to the sight and sound of construction machinery digging the ground ten metres away from her windows. The Moscow authorities were turning a blind eye to the construction of a new block of flats in blatant violation of all building regulations. With land in the city centre so expensive, residents are often powerless to prevent such building works. Private interests need to prevail immediately, here and now, with the public sphere constantly under siege.

So who can formulate a vision of a better collective future? In Russia this role has traditionally fallen to the intelligentsia. However, we are also seeing a decline of the radical intelligentsia. By and large it has accepted the inevitability of liberal capitalism – either because any alternative leftist ideology is still firmly associated with the failed Soviet project, or for more pragmatic reasons, as intellectuals, many of whom now manage to carve out a decent living out of the market for their ‘expert services’, do not want to undermine their acceptance by the political elite. As is evident elsewhere in Eastern Europe, people who question the path of liberal reforms or discuss their social costs are not taken seriously and are dismissed either as communists – and thereby aligned to what is now very unneeded by global capitalism, or for more pragmatic reasons, as intellectuals, many of whom now manage to carve out a decent living out of the market for their ‘expert services’, do not want to undermine their acceptance by the political elite. As is evident elsewhere in Eastern Europe, people who question the path of liberal reforms or discuss their social costs are not taken seriously and are dismissed either as communists – and thereby aligned to what is now very much a spent force – or as nationalists.

The eternal sunshine of liberal capitalism casts its shadows, where people do not like to look. In these shadows lurk ‘the others’ – the poor, the unemployable and the homeless. The last group perhaps best exemplifies the inherent faults of the system. A haunting reminder of the unresolved contradictions in the collective order, homeless people are a reality that must be suppressed. Even with the ranks of the homeless approaching (by some estimates) 3 million people, public discussion of homelessness is all but absent. To members of the public, they are the messengers of some unspoken disaster. As Merleau-Ponty argued, the terror of the reality that has no means of being understood is resolved only in silences and half-truths. People are sorry for the homeless, yet see them as responsible for their own misfortunes. Confused about the social reality that confronts them in the guise of the homeless, they prefer to look away. Interviews show that people find it difficult to make sense of the social forces that have led to this visible catastrophe. At the same time the ‘experts’ – academics and social workers – are always ready to present them as pathological individuals. They are assigned physical and mental characteristics that render them unable to function in society. They cannot be credited with full rationality and their behaviour is often explained through a combination of unconscious urges and psychological predispositions. Alternatively, their actions may serve some malicious purpose – to exploit other people; to sponge off the decent public. No system of social re-integration and permanent rehousing exists for them. They are warehoused in dilapidated shelters (normally situated out of sight, at the outskirts of the cities), or dispersed from the streets in periodic ‘cleansing’ operations, conducted by the police.

Other social problems are not resolved but simply stored up. These include the emergence of new slums in the Russian backwaters where the people, unneeded by global capitalism, are leading a pitiful existence. There is growing racism and xenophobia, exemplified by growing conflicts in schools and on the streets between Russian-speaking young people and the ‘blacks’ – children of labour migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus. Like others before him, Slavoj Žižek has recently argued that liberal capitalism allows no universality, just private concerns. It pits the included against the excluded, destroys the ‘commons’ of a collective intellectual capital and ecological environment. It does not offer a vision of a better collective future. We would add that it also profanes mankind’s dreams of transcendence, which end up in naive magic conjured up by market sellers and the high priest of television.

Is there an organizing force that can get Russia off the ground, draw the country out of the new Dark Age with its social fragmentation, predatory individualism, privatization of public goods, and false gods? Twenty years after the end of communism, the question is open.
Sovereign democracy
Dictatorship over capitalism in contemporary Russia

Julia Svetlichnaja with James Heartfield

Economists tell us that Russia is on its way to completing the transition to capitalism. The only problem remaining now is a political one – the paradise of a fully fledged ‘free-market’ economy is suspended by the lack of liberal democracy, while, conversely, the lack of a free market stops the development of liberal democracy. A recent paper by Daniel Kimmage, presented at Freedom House in London in June 2009, summarizes a typically liberal view of the relationship between capitalism and politics in contemporary Russia:

A transition [to capitalism] did take place, but it was not to be the hoped-for liberal democracy grounded in a free-market economy and the rule of law. Instead, it was a shift … to a flashier, more footloose authoritarianism that rests on selectively capitalist kleptocracy, the dominance of informal influence groups, a decorative democracy that is often described as ‘managed’ and officially encouraged attempts to create a new profoundly illiberal ideology with mass appeal.'

For Kimmage and other liberal commentators, the Russian state operates today as a form of police state, allowing no challenges from an independent business sector, oppressed populace or free media. Without guarantees of stable property rights, it is the state that controls the market. Yet in fact during the preceding ‘kleptocracy’ years of the Yeltsin era between 1991 and 1999, it was precisely due to the state’s weakness that property rights themselves had no real meaning, since they simply did not exist – a few kleptocrats owned everything (as Robinson Crusoe alone owned his island). In this sense, at least in the immediate transition to capitalism, the absence of secure property rights had, contra Kimmage, little connection with state power. Of course, the more profound point today concerns the Russian state’s supposed desire to substitute democratic politics with a Soviet-styled artificial and illiberal politics of what is termed ‘sovereign democracy’. The Russian ‘conception of “national greatness”’, Kimmage writes, ‘is not an aggregate expression of citizens’ social and economic well-being, but rather a metaphysical abstraction in which individual citizens dissolve into the faceless entity of “the people”’. The coinage ‘sovereign democracy’ implies merely that Russia ‘has the right to define the term [democracy] as it pleases and deviate – by virtue of national sovereignty and tradition – from basic democratic standards and practices’.?

It is true that in Russia’s transition to capitalism, after a brief period of self-loathing over illegal privatization and the general chaos of Yeltsin’s drunken years, the state played a decisive role. Yukos, for example, the biggest Russian oil company at the time of Yeltsin’s regime, was the showcase of Russian capitalism. Its sublime headquarters, the pearl-tinged tower, was insured against police raids, robbery, earthquakes, storms, floods, but not against political change. Most Yukos assets have now ended up with state-controlled Rosneft, Russia’s largest oil company, run by the Kremlin. All that remains of Yukos is a number of lawsuits timidly demanding some compensation from the Russian state. More generally, one might say that Russia today has capitalism but few capitalists. According to EBRD’s transition report (2008), the state’s share in Russia’s GDP, once stabilized at the level of 30 per cent in the late 1990s, began to rise with the Yukos affair in 2004 up to 40 per cent (though, to put that in context, UK spending is 42 per cent of GDP). The state’s share in the Russian stock market also jumped from 24 per cent in 2003 to around 40 per cent in 2007, while the private share decreased by almost 20 per cent between 2004 and 2008. These figures certainly demonstrate a growing state expansion in the Russian economy, whether via renationalization of strategic economic assets (as in the case of Yukos), establishment of state corporations (Rossiyskiye Technology, Rosnanotekh, OAK, OSK, and...
so on), or the appointment of Putin’s and Medvedev’s closest aides to key posts in strategic companies not directly or formally under state ownership. As this state intervention grows, so, too, does then the worry among Western commentators about how a transition to ‘real democracy’ grounded in a market-based form of economics can occur. Current hopes are pinned to the pressures of globalization and to Russia’s found and lost opposition.

Yet, in fact, Medvedev’s Russia is not a totalitarian state, just as, for better or worse, it is neither a liberal nor a ‘managed’ democracy’. Such classifications are unable to grasp that the current situation concerns political ambition rather than the preservation of power. What is lacking is an insight into the imagination of Russia’s new ideologists themselves. Indeed, such new ideology is founded precisely upon the uniqueness of its concept of a ‘sovereign democracy’. Such an ideology is certainly illiberal, but it is not anti-democratic per se, since precisely it has, as Kimmage acknowledges, a ‘mass appeal’. Indeed, unlike for example the EU project, which has to cope with the jaded disaffection of West Europeans towards most authority, national or continental, the Russian project is noticeably popular at home.

Capitalism as a politics of the state

A recent volume of collected articles and speeches by Russian academics and politicians, Sovereignty, is indicative of what is at stake in this, to the extent that it attempts not to explain some Russian version of liberal democracy but to challenge the very meaning of the term ‘democracy’ itself. Rooted, theoretically, in François Guizot’s political rationalism and Carl Schmitt’s ‘decisionism’, Sovereignty endorses their contempt towards key concepts of the liberal ‘democratic’ age – specifically, the idea of popular sovereignty, which defines democracy as the rule of the popular will, and the idea of representation as the expression of the pluralist nature of modern social order. Following Schmitt, the new Russian theorists of sovereign democracy prefer instead to understand democracy as an ‘identity of the governors and the governed’. And, taking their lead from Guizot, this identity corresponds not to a notion of rights but to a particular capacity in a particular situation. The sovereign is not the people or voters but the reason embodied in the unity of the responsible in power. Thus, directly inspired by Schmitt, Nikita Garadza, for example, states that the ‘desire to achieve sovereignty by transforming it into a legal notion or a framework based on a “right” destroys relations of power’, making, he argues, any political process ultimately meaningless. According to Schmitt’s anti-liberalism, elections are, for Garadza, not the expression of different and often contradictory interests and identities but merely a demonstration of the boundaries between the ‘ruling class’ and ‘the people’. Elections are there to show the rules to ‘the people’, not to represent them as such, since any political order, above all, constructs identities and interests rather than, so Gradza argues, simply reflecting or representing them.

Schmitt’s understanding of the sovereign as ‘he who decides on the state of exception’ clearly fits the metaphysical role assumed by the president’s Russian mise en scène, as it does the Kremlin’s current view of the relationship between capitalism and political identities. The problem is that liberal thinking in the West, which circulates between ethics and economics, tends necessarily to miss the precisely political dimension at stake here, since state and politics disappear in it as fish in water. From a Schmittian perspective, both the moralization and the marketization of society play a depoliticizing role. What is more, if the economy is to be understood in terms of its own laws and identities, then political interventions in this realm have to be limited. Russia’s current ideologists, however, understand the economy as a process embedded in social and historical construction. Indeed, in addressing the so-called ‘anti-democratic’ nature of renationalization, and of the Kremlin’s punishment of kleptocrats, the authors of Sovereignty point once again to Schmitt, who, in his Nomos of the Earth, famously argues that the beginnings of capitalism proper are to be found in seventeenth-century England when pirates and bandits, or ‘corsair capitalists’, were sponsored by the Royal House. (As he puts it, the state itself took over the activity of the pirate.) As such, any argument that it was actually liberal free trade which provided the original source of that capital necessary to kick off capitalism as such is ultimately groundless. There was nothing free or liberal in early privatization, which always depended on the intervention of the state. Markets are socially constructed institutions and cannot be understood separately from links between a territory and political community. Even in the age of globally networked capitalism, Russia’s new ideologists might well point out, nation-states matter, as the 2008 American and British state bailout of the banks shows.

In this sense, contemporary Russian state ideology might be best understood as trying to reverse the dynamics between capitalism and politics itself. Hence, Vladislav Surkov, a first deputy chief of staff
and the leading Kremlin ideologist, aims, for instance, to dislodge the metaphysical fiction of ‘natural rights’ written into post-Fordist capitalism because, he argues, it can only lead to political paralysis. Instead he wants to return to what Guizot terms ‘realist economies’ based on the metaphysical dimension of the nation-state. That is, Russia’s ideologists want to create the conditions where capitalism would discover itself as a political project under the state’s control and in which capitalism would serve as politics in some new type of super-state. Just as Schmitt’s conception of democracy in terms of identity rather than representation does not allow, then, for a distinction between democracy and dictatorship, so the new state capitalism would not, for Surkov, distinguish between capitalism and state. For the likes of Surkov, what is thus at stake here is presented in terms of the ambition to construct a new type of society not outside of the capitalist system, but, so to speak, ‘inside’ a post-socialist capitalism represented by the state itself. The Russian ideology of ‘sovereign democracy’, as he articulates it, is therefore aimed not simply at controlling, struggling against or creating an alternative to capitalism. Rather, one ought perhaps to understand this project as the construction of a political framework through which capitalism would demonstrate its artificiality and purposelessness as such.

The broader political question, of course, is whether (and if so how) this can be combined with a democratic trajectory. All Surkov will say at the moment is that Russia is moving ‘further and further away from the non-democracy’ of the Soviet Union and from the ‘faked’ democracy of the 1990s kleptocracy regime. Quite what this entails remains to be seen. While Surkov’s attitude is taken by many in Russia itself to be an idealistic and patriotic one, others are unsurprisingly not so kind. Michael Kasyanov, former prime minister and now opposition politician, as chairman of the People’s Democratic Union (PDU), states, for example, in a recent interview with the Financial Times: ‘Surkov runs the virtual world of Russian democracy. He is the main functionary of the imitation of political parties, the imitation of elections, the imitation of political pluralism.’ Such a view echoes recent research by a group of Western academics published in the journal Slavic Review (Fall 2009), which understands the concept of ‘sovereign democracy’ as merely a ‘hybrid regime’, occupying what Luke March terms the ‘grey zone’ between liberal democracy and outright dictatorship.

Nonetheless, what appears attractive about the concept of ‘sovereign democracy’ in Russia is that it is neither a left-wing melancholy, surviving on, for example, a post-autonomist faith that, all evidence to the contrary, the oppositional biopower of multitude is surreptitiously extending its panoptical empire of ‘immaterial labour’ and ‘general intellect’, nor merely, as is frequently supposed, a right-wing rage insisting on Russia’s exceptionalism and nationalistic destiny. Certainly, the creation of nationally minded elites is the important aspect of the ‘sovereign democracy’ project, but it is by no means the entire story. In fact, leaders like Surkov see their new system, grounded in Schmitt’s distinction between the friend and the enemy as the essence of the political, as the model that Europe itself, disillusioned with the logic of the post-modern state form embodied in the European Union, should follow:

I often hear that democracy is more important than sovereignty. We do not admit it. We think we need both. An independent state is worth fighting for. It would be good to flee to Europe but they will not receive us there. Russia is a European civilization. It is a badly illuminated remote area of Europe but not Europe yet. In this regard, we are inseparably tied with Europe and must be friends with it; they are not ‘enemies’. They are simply competitors. So, it is more insulting that we are not ‘enemies’. To lose in a competitive struggle means to be a loser. And this is doubly insulting. It is better to be ‘enemies’ and not competitive friends as is the case now.

Surkov goes on to cite Schmitt again at this point, emphasizing precisely the need to think politically, to imagine an ‘other Europe’, as an alternative to the European Union project, sidelined both by the rise of nationalism at home and the pressures of globalization beyond.

Garadza and Surkov are not alone in hearing echoes of Schmitt in Putin’s and Medvedev’s political arguments. Andrey Makarichev, a professor of politics at Novgorod University, also claims, for example, that Putin’s reforms are founded on Schmitt’s logic:

Both [Schmitt and Putin] understand that the problem today is that the state is lost among the many different institutions upon which it is dependent. Therefore, in the process of this relativization, the state becomes a mere derivative from this multitude of institutions, interests, etc., and power takes on arbitrary or ‘peacemaker’ roles only.

Putin’s Russia might at least bring some clarity to this dilemma, Makarichev argues. On the one hand, Putin or Medvedev are effectively saying: ‘We are in charge, leave decisions to us, we are the experts.’
This presents itself as a process of taking power from ‘the people’, what Makarichev describes as a first stage of ‘depoliticization’. On the other hand, because, by this means, power is consolidated and legitimized, then it is also able to put forward a new political idea about what Russia is and what it could be, hence opening up some new political space. Hence, Makarichev states,

the paradox of Putin’s answer to the Schmittian problem is that through depoliticization he is attempting to address the political problem of the resurgence of the state as a subject in its own right. In this way the political process is envisaged as a hegemonic articulation when some part of the ‘people’, at certain stages, would be able to talk from the point of view of the state in general.13

A true politics in Russia can, on this account, only come about after what must necessarily appear as a process of depoliticization.

No political process, no politics

It is important to remember that post-socialist Russia’s capitalist development never was a natural process, so to speak. First, at the beginning of 1980s, when the writing was on the wall for the Soviet system, long before the ‘perestroika’ was announced in 1987, the state and, particularly, its KGB-oriented party elites started testing the waters of what might become the market economy. They lent capital to various semi-legal and criminal individuals and groups. For example, former Komsomol (Party Youth) such as Vladimir Gusinskiy or Michael Chodorkovskiy (both now fallen oligarchs) were financed by the KGB (now FSB) to start their businesses. The Party never planned to convert to the real market economy. The conflict with Chechen traders in Moscow in the 1980s and subsequent wars in Chechnya demonstrate this point.14

Yet when the ‘shadow market’ was normalized, it was the authorities that organized and gained from privatization. Boris Berezovskiy, for example, began his business career as deputy secretary of the Security Council. Many kleptocrats have certainly enjoyed their position within the government. However, even though they managed to privatize cash flows and put the money offshore, they were never businessmen in the strict sense, since they did not create any businesses.

Another and more significant obstacle for capitalist development in Russia was a hatred and suspicion of capitalism, effectively generated by Soviet ideology. As Boris Groys argues of such ideology:

For my relationship to power to become dialogical, I have to imagine that power is a subject. So, I have to think that capitalism is not only based on buying and selling but is also based on the fact that some ‘dark subjective powers’ viciously oppress me. Soviet ideology operated precisely by suspicion since it was convinced that what is hidden behind any market mechanisms is class interests and capitalist exploitation. We can say that Soviet ideology has verbalized capitalism, having transformed it from the market’s logistics into a transcendental subject of oppression.15

The Russian version of capitalism, then, has always developed under suspicion. To get rid of this suspicion the state must, according to Surkov’s logic, take control and produce a new ideology. This ideology does not alter the thesis of the artificiality of capitalism, which is written into the genetic memory of Russia, but puts capitalism to work for the state’s own purposes. From the beginning of Putin’s strategy of economic nationalism in 1999, through to 2006, Russia posted growth rates averaging 6 per cent of GDP, while the average of the G8 countries was just 2 per cent. IMF debts of $3.3 billion and $22 billion owed to the Paris Club were repaid ahead of schedule in 2005 and 2006 respectively. Most importantly for the Russian public, the problem of capital flight was checked. The non-free market economy seems to be remarkably healthy by orthodox economic standards. According to America’s RAND Corporation, the positive outcome of economic nationalism has been ‘the husbanding rather than the dissipating of economic rents from high oil and gas prices’.16 The Chicago School of monetarists had shaped the policies pursued by the IMF and the World Bank throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The ‘Washington Consensus’ was for blanket market liberalization, selling off state assets and floating currencies on the assumption that the natural laws of the market would correct distortions and establish a proper equilibrium. It was their advice that led to the shock therapy pursued under Yeltsin. But to the horror of the economists, those countries – Malaysia and China – that rejected the ‘Washington Consensus’ did much better. The especially negative result of Russia’s collapse in the 1990s discredited the Chicago School of free-market believers.

The Russian state today is not conceived of, then, as a handmaiden to that post-Fordist ‘communism of capital’ without material equality described by thinkers such as Paolo Virno – in which, ‘dismissing both Keynesianism and socialist work ethic, post-Fordist capitalism puts forth in its own way typical demands of communism: abolition of work, dissolution of the State, etc.’17 Rather, it is conceived of as an obstacle to it. What is more, the current situation is thereby
perceived, ultimately, as far more potentially political in character compared with the kind of post-Fordist process defined by Virno, which only ever has a single subject – that is, capital itself. By this logic, there is at least in Russia, by contrast to Western liberal democracies, the emergence of some sort of identifiable political subject that could be contested.

On the surface, it seems that politics in contemporary Russia are a replica of Soviet-style authoritarianism, just as Kimmage argues. However, one striking aspect of ‘sovereign democracy’ is precisely that, by bringing forth some kind of identifiable political subject, it ensures that there is a political process. This is at the heart of Makarichev’s argument. And, of course, there cannot be any democratic politics if there is no political process – even if this has to go by way, as the Makarichev proposes, of what appears initially as a process of depoliticization, in which power is first seized so as to put forward a new political idea about what Russia is and could be. (First, ‘we’ have to agree that we are all Russians.) Kimmage superficially assumes that ‘sovereign democracy’ leads to an oppressed opposition, an indifferent populace, and a lack of challenges from independent business. But, by comparison to Putin or Medvedev, the great weakness of the so-called ‘opposition’ in Russia is actually their disconnection from, and attitude of superiority towards, the Russian people. Medvedev’s and Surkov’s own distrust of popular sovereignty may certainly be a weakness, and potentially dangerous in form, but if there is presently no substantive popular opposition to it, it is simply because their critics are, by and large, far more hostile to the people than is the current regime itself. Groups such as ‘Another Russia’ led by the former chess champion Garry Kasparov, the National Bolshevik Party led by the extreme nationalist Eduard Limonov, or the mainstream liberal opposition party Yabloko led by Grigoriy Yavlinsky are better at getting their press releases taken up in the West than they are at talking to Russians. Their common theme is that popular endorsement of the Medvedev regime signifies repression and a supine public. But the greatest challenge this ‘opposition’ faces is actually their very evident lack of public support. As such, their statements tend towards simple demands to smash ‘the state’ and a mocking of any popular will.

Above all, perhaps, the opposition do not like the fact that Russians continue to put their trust in the state, and to demand that Putin himself should solve particular conflicts – such as the most recent one in the provincial town of Pikalevo, when almost an entire adult population went onto the main highway, connecting North-West Russia with Moscow, and demanded Putin come and restore their jobs lost as a result of the business activities of the town’s elites – turning to the Russian government and not the ‘opposition’, which tells them to struggle for their individual rights. As long as the opposition remains open to charges of relying on the financial support of the ‘offshore aristocracy’, it is the government that will be called upon to address problems of unemployment and low wages – which it often does via the populist measure of forcing regional oligarchs to reopen manufacturing industries and pay salaries. Of course, such direct ‘politics’ show the weakness of the state, which is slowly re-motivating its authority over civil society – but the Pikalevo actions proved effective.

Meanwhile, Russian civil society itself is neither oppressed nor apolitical. During Yeltsin’s regime, the state ignored rather than oppressed civil society; today it is civil society that ignores the state – in our view, a small but still positive change. For sure, Russian civil society today is not participating enough in the bargaining of power between political leaders and national elites, but this is largely because they are still suspicious that the new ‘state oligarchs’ would eventually return to old ‘business oligarchs’ mode. And while civil society may not be interested in political parties or activism, this cannot be considered simply as apathy. Putin and Medvedev still enjoy popular support. However, when state intervention is more clearly confined to the macroeconomic realm, then we might witness some real challenges concerning the character of the state’s intervention into capitalism. In the past this intervention was deep enough to penetrate into the micro-level of the Russian economy, but, for the moment, its beneficiaries have been a relatively small set of political elites. While the economy boomed, Russians never seemingly felt the elites’ success as being at their expense. So far as civil society is concerned, it has seemed better to have one capitalist – that is, the state – rather then the hybrid forms of politico-economic blurred actors, where the rules of the game are never clear, which characterized the Yeltsin era. Meanwhile, as far as the Kremlin is concerned, sovereignty comes first: business can only offer real challenges when it is dependent; the populace can only be politically engaged if there is a political process, ensured by the transparency of the game – that is, there is a stage and there are actors, the identity of which should be clear to all; and, finally, there can be no citizens unless there is a country.
A lack of alternatives

One of many reasons behind the continuing popularity of Putin and Medvedev lies in the lack of any credible alternative. Yet this alternative is lacking not merely because of harsh ‘Putinism’. Such an alternative has been absent since the days of Gorbachev. Opposition leaders such as Yavlinsky or Kasyanov were there – and, indeed, offered their own economic and political reforms, such as the famous ‘500 days plan of resurgence of economy’ at the beginning of Yeltsin’s privatization, which contributed to the state of total devastation and despair that characterized the immediate postcommunist era – and they are still here, offering ‘alternatives’ to their unrealistic and crashed ambitions and expectations.

The state of Russia today offers little consolation to radicals. The government’s critics struggle to relate to a wider audience, and the greater part of the population identifies with a regime that has a stranglehold on debate. The real process of power politics is forbiddingly authoritarian, and indifferent to critical voices. At the same time, there is certainly little to prove that ‘sovereign democracy’ can ultimately work, raising the question of whether the fusion of state-controlled capitalism and sovereignty might be even more disastrous than a neoliberal hegemony led by the capital imaginary. Do we have to choose between the dictatorship of capitalism and the dictatorship of the state’s fusion with capitalism? Or is this a false choice altogether?

Unlike the governing classes in Western Europe and North America, the Russian elite is engaged in a political struggle for authority. Authority in the West is evasive, difficult to pin down, diffuse. Not so in Russia, where the elite are forcefully politicizing events, for good or ill. That might hold dangers, but, as Makarichev suggests, it may at least open the possibility for an engagement, a contest for a different interpretation of events. At the same time, the failure of the opposition is painful to behold. They have abstained from the issues that Russian people feel strongly about – Russia’s standing in the world, the greed of the oligarchs, the need for work and the hope for betterment. And they have conflated very reasonable anxieties over political freedom with the protests of oligarchs and Western investors against state intervention in capitalism. For this reason, the harsh truth is that if any debate is to be opened up over Russia’s future, it will almost certainly take place in the terrain that is opening up as the governing elite plants its new flag.

Notes

2. Ibid.
3. Catherine Belton, ‘Kremlin Moves to Regain Control of Business’, Financial Times, 7 February 2008. According to Russian economic weekly Expert’s 2006 annual survey, 200 of Russia’s largest 400 companies were under state control, with almost 40 per cent of the entire revenues of these 400 companies concentrated in the hands of the state. Considering that the equivalent numbers in 2004 were 81 companies and 34.6 per cent, respectively, the state’s advance into the economy, particularly the expansion of state ownership in Russia’s largest companies, was remarkable indeed. See ‘Annual Survey of Russia’s Largest Companies’, Ekspert, 36, 1 October 2007.
4. Nikita Garadza, ed., Suverenitet (Sovereignty), Evropa, Moscow, 2006. All translations from Russian are by the authors.
7. PDU was one of the co-founders of the first The Other Russia conference in July 2006 and of the Other Russia coalition led by Kasparov. However, Kasyanov and Kasparov have recently parted ways citing ideological disagreements.
10. Hardt and Negri hence argue, in their interview with Russian weekly Zavtra, that Russia is, as ever, too late: the struggle against capitalism is outdated and unnecessary; instead Russia must integrate capitalism further so that the self-organization of multitude can develop and take over both: capitalism and the state. See Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, interview with Oleg Kildushov and Maxim Fetisov, Zavtra 14, 5 April 2006, www.zavtra.ru/cgi/veil//data/zavtra/06/646/72.html.
11. Surkov, ‘How Russia Has to Deal with International Conspiracies’.
13. Ibid.
Markus Mießen: You were recently announced as the youngest curator of a biennial ever. As curator of the upcoming Bucharest Biennial, how do you think the issue of age, generation, and lack of legacy – in the most positive sense of the term – will affect your decision-making?

Felix Vogel: I guess this lack of legacy was one of the reasons why the Biennial appointed me as curator. Being less “contaminated” by the art system, I take this as a productive chance to examine different approaches to such an exhibition. For me, neither age nor generation play a significant role in decision making and I would rather like to speak in terms of the German term “Zeitgenossenschaft” – it could be translated very badly with the noun “contemporary”, it seems to have a more universal meaning, because it is less concentrated on one subject and closer to something like “zeitgeist”. Also I would not be able to characterise what this is – “my generation”. First and foremost, I do not want to give my own personal setting an important part in conceptualising and putting together an exhibition, because I think that authorship is less important than collectivism. Also, concentrating on the urban and socio-political context seems to be more interesting and productive than placing my personal background and experience too much in the foreground. Maybe during the exhibition people might say that this is a special approach for my generation, but I am not expecting this and I am not working with this as a supposition.

MM Could you please elaborate on your interest in the socio-political?

FV When I am talking about the socio-political I understand this as the conglomeration of all processes and actions that are taking place to structue (social) life. This has pretty much to do with practices of regulations through modes of inclusion and exclusion. What I call the socio-political cannot be equated with the political. I am speaking with Jacques Rancière, who has influenced me a lot, when I am saying that the political is something rare and something that is not happening very often, whereas the socio-political is always there, although it is something different than what Rancière calls ‘police’, since this term is a more active one. My self-conception as a curator along with my self-conception as an actor in today’s society is based on an active role in analysing and critically questioning what the socio-political is and how it can be changed. I am sure that art exhibitions can play an active role in intervening in and making visible processes in the socio-political.

(Shortened excerpt from East Coast Europe, edited by Markus Mießen, Blumberg Press 2008.)

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Rentier capitalism and the Iranian puzzle

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The word ‘Iran’ usually signifies unpredictability, offering either raw material for the narratives of news agencies, or a fascinating enigma. Recent events have once again underlined the fact that the 1979 Iranian Revolution is still poorly conceptualized. To state the obvious: the outcome of the revolution, the figure of Khomeini and the Islamic republic, with its combination of misogyny, anti-imperialism and brutal repression, make up a puzzle. However, this puzzle is not some well-kept secret, hidden by the Iranians, which would become accessible to us if only if our narratives were sufficiently nuanced, or if religious or some other form of secret codification were more thoroughly explored. It is an objective puzzle. Reluctance to adopt a theoretical approach is generally just another instance of exoticism. Against this exoticism, the point of departure in this comment is the simple proposition that the Iranian puzzle – to paraphrase Hegel – is puzzling for the Iranians themselves.

The recent uprising was not unpredictable; nor is it a new revolution. Its actors are not clear about its agenda or about its future direction. These events are above all parts of a new sequence of the Iranian Revolution. It is a renewed effort to redefine the revolutionary agenda of 1979. This revolution, like many others, is still in search of its own realization. The first sequence of the revolution involved a twofold inscription of a rupture. Its onset in 1978 was a sign of the closure of the emancipatory projects of the twentieth century, including the post-colonial projects of the period after the Second World War; but it was equally a leap from centuries of the absolute sovereign state form into the amplitude of historical possibilities, to construct the common cause of a res publica. Such a process could not be, and has not been, decided once and for all during its first brief sequence between 1978 and 1981. The street rallies since June 2009 openly refer to the revolution and its initial sequence thirty years ago, but at the same time and at each popular assembly, the reiteration of the old slogans releases words such as ‘Independence’ and ‘Freedom’ from the closed discourse of the official propaganda machine. By small shifts in the wording of slogans, even those that are patently religious, chanting people redefine the revolution. This means that the revolution has not got a proper name; it cannot be qualified (as it is in the official state discourse) as ‘Islamic’. The Iranian Revolution is not a closed history. The objective puzzle around which the terms of the social antagonism are organized resides in the way the material conditions of life are organized, the way value is produced and circulates in a distributive system.

Rent and the return to Capital

Between February 1979 (the fall of the monarchy) and June 1981, Iran witnessed a series of tense conflicts and splits among revolutionary forces. The outcome of these revolutionary events was an Islamic republic, a coalition of Islamist groups around the figure of Khomeini. Their ambition, at least as declared during the revolutionary struggle, was to create a social order that included the poor (‘the wretched of the earth’). The novelty, even for the revolutionary people, was the claim – or hypothesis – that the spiritual dimension of life, neglected by other political projects of the century, could provide the ground for constructing such a just order. More importantly, between 1978 and 1981, independent workplace councils and neighbourhood committees were created all over the country. That ambition and the material reality of popular self-organization could be properly called the communist moment of the revolution. The establishment

of the Islamic republic after 1981 meant, however, the physical suppression of these councils and the replacement of the critique of capitalism by a petrified enthusiasm borrowed from mass rallies during the uprising against the Shah. The momentary enthusiasm of chanting revolutionaries was transformed into an incoherent set of moral codes and religious symbolism. This petrified enthusiasm, which could be called a politics of spirituality, informed a state ideology that inherited the critique of social injustice and corruption from the first revolutionary sequence. The sole point that conferred a certain coherence to this set of moral codes and symbols was that they would soon become cultural commodities, signs of a particular but nevertheless exchangeable imaginary produced within a rentier capitalism.¹

Rent has conventionally been understood as related to the pre-capitalist relations of landed property. This is also the way Marx seems to start his treatment of the question. This conventional conception is precisely the flaw in the contemporary understanding of the rent. Here, the return to Marx’s Capital should be taken in a literal sense of the word: Capital should be read in reverse order, from the third volume backwards. What Volume 3 deals with is capital qua commodity as subordinated to the monetary system itself. Marx’s succinct definition of rent should be read against this dialectical turn in which capital itself becomes a use value within monetary speculation: rent is ‘an excess of surplus-value, based upon monopolized nature’.² In cases studied by Marx, the rentier was still a distinguishable social category. The economy of rent was defined in opposition to capital investment. However, Marx’s definition goes in fact beyond this historical opposition. It gives us a key to grasp the dialectical transformation of capital into a use value by capital itself, once we take into consideration that ‘monopolized nature’ is fully integrated into capital accumulation. Monopolization is only a moment in a historical circle of an ongoing re-monopolization of territories and spaces by capital.

The notion of rentier capitalism underscores the relation between rent and value production in the contemporary conjuncture, which is distinguished by the primacy of global financial capital, along with the development of new means of production (new communications technology) and forms of commodification (image and cultural commodities).³ If rent was historically opposed to both fixed and mobile capital investments,⁴ this opposition ceases to be meaningful in contemporary capitalism. It is thus not a particularly bold statement to infer that rent, in the mature age of a global capitalism, is indistinguishable from profit and is assimilated into the speculative activities around the rate of profitability. This means that the assimilation of rent into capitalist relations turns the classical terms upside down: it is now production which is perceived as an external space, as land and its resources were for nineteenth-century capitalism. A rentier capitalism is a local system in which the average rate of profit is determined by the excess of surplus value extracted from the global process of the realization of value. It is the full transformation of capital into a commodity. This means: the overflow of cash into a local territory, the discontinuity between the level of production and distribution of goods and services, the expansion of commodity circulation in that territory into new spaces, and finally the creation of material conditions for speculations by financial capital.

In Iran, rental revenue has dominated the state economy since the oil crisis of 1973–74,⁵ which immediately followed the nationalization of both the oil fields and the local extractive industry in January 1973 (a dramatic turn scarcely discussed in the literature). The extent of the domination of rent from extractive industry can be seen in the constant correlation between the annual rate of investments, GDP, annual oil production and the international oil market.⁶ By 1977, about one-third of the gross domestic product, three-quarters of government revenue, and nine-tenths of foreign exchange earnings came from the oil sector.⁷ The consequence was a rapid development in terms of annual growth of the economy. From an average of 10 per cent in the years 1963–1973, annual growth
jumped to 34 per cent in 1974 and an unprecedented 42 per cent in 1975, although it slowed down in 1977 when recession brought it back to 15 per cent. In the two years prior to the revolution, annual growth fell to an average of 5 per cent. By contrast, one year after the revolution, capital investment in machinery fell dramatically, to less than 20 per cent of its 1977 level, but state expenditure remained the same or higher.

As for the composition of capital, in the years prior to the revolution, it was divided between the state apparatus, oligarchic industrial capital and mercantile capital. The last is often conflated with the Iranian bazaar and sometimes qualified as the ‘traditional bourgeoisie’. Terms such as ‘bazaar’ and ‘traditional bourgeoisie’ have been the source of confusion in the discussions about the class-based interests represented by the Islamic Republic. Yet, in 1979, the bazaars had already lost their historical and pre-capitalist role as the urban and architectural nexus of artisanal production, distributive channels, finance and communal urban organization. The bazaar was a historical form of urban polity until the beginning of the twentieth century. It played a central social and economic part in communal urban organization and enjoyed a relatively independent position in relation to the imperial state structures during Safavids (in the sixteenth century). Such an urban socio-economic organization was granted far greater authority in communal affairs outside of state control, compared to the constraints of North European cities.

By 1978, however, the bazaar was merely an annexed part of a new mercantile capital, mainly preoccupied with the import and distribution of commodities, with financial and investment thrusts. Its decline was correlated to the demise of the imperial order in Iran on encountering European industrial imperialism in the nineteenth century. This new mercantile capital was conditioned by the communication infrastructure created since the 1950s, providing a qualitatively faster network for transporting goods and capital transaction. The process of capital accumulation in this sector during the 1970s became increasingly dependent on rentier revenue, which supported a high level of domestic consumption. In the years between 1973 and 1979, oligarchic industrial capitalism, connected to the court and bank system, prevailed, while the emerging mercantile capital remained excluded from direct access to the benefits from rent revenues.

During the two years prior to the revolution, the relative stagnation of investments and the so-called Dutch disease engendered internal contradictions within the industrial sector. The overflow of cash from the international market into the local economy, inflation, and stagnation of capital investment were critical issues that surpassed the old structure based upon the differentiation between rent and productive capital. The historical function of the ‘politics of spirituality’ as the state ideology emerged at this point.

The revolution had already eradicated the oligarchic privileges of industrial capital, along with the political sovereignty of the Shah. With the exclusion of revolutionary control over production and workplaces by the Islamic republic, rentier capitalism was freed from both the self-organizing control of society and the restraints of an old state structure based on the exigencies of a monarch. The new republic provided mercantile and financial capital with politically conditioned access to rentier revenue, and paved the way for the reintegration of the industrial sector, now as a dependent partner, into a new capital composition. The governmental rule of Khomeinists did not represent the old social classes. First, it corresponded to the emergence of a new class, the rentiers within a system whose functioning was locally independent of industrial production and internationally independent of imperialist bloc politics. The expansion of a rentier system meant the redistribution of rent income, which resulted in new conflicts within this class. The same redistribution and its political conflicts were also a reaction against the unfolding of the revolutionary process and the constant pressure of popular demands. It should not be forgotten that the labour force in Iran today still has access to an advanced welfare system compared to the rest of Asia. At the same time, the Islamic republic has never developed an industrial infrastructure compared to the pre-revolutionary period. Instead, since 1988 it has dismantled parts of labour protection laws and promoted privatization of such sectors as telecommunications, transport and old industrial plants, following the International Monetary Fund’s recommendation. What in certain literature is usually called the middle class is mainly the urban labour force in both private and public service sectors, public health care, and the school and higher education structures.

Corporate networks, post-urban spaces

This brings us to the third and most specific feature of rentier capitalism in Iran. The expansion of rent-based relations, the inner conflicts of the rentier class, and the weight of social demands in a society that experienced the self-organizational period of the revolution, has created a new mediating space of value production, since the mid-1980s. The politics of spirituality is above all reproduced within this space. It consists of
an extensive network of human relations in a myriad of small structures, organized in foundations, small funds, mosques, Islamic associations, paramilitary gangs, military guards and modern media. This network is funded by rent revenue from oil, and its different sectors are involved in the production of cultural signifiers, a vast monitoring system, and rules of virtue. Private and state ownership and management are fused together within this corporate network. Assets officially belonging to the state may be permanently managed by these semi-independent structures. While indistinguishable from governmental offices, and with access to the rent revenues, the corporate network is not included in the official state budget. At the heart of this network there are four major foundations with their own sub-networks and internal economy. These foundations are exempted from taxes and have access to a number of governmental financial facilities including foreign currency at a reduced exchange rate. Their budget is neither public nor controlled by the national state authorities. Nevertheless, the corporate network is part of the Islamic republic and its institutions. During the last decade, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, a smaller army parallel to the conventional army structure, started to expand within this corporate network and is itself now another major actor within it. These foundations run large projects in diverse sectors: from manufacturing, banking, industrial agriculture, estate market, to museums, the film industry and newspapers. Their tasks are to arrange demonstrations at official occasions, train Islamic managerial cadres and produce Islamic cultural products such as new forms of prayer and festivals. More significantly, they also run extensive social programmes and provide a broad range of services in rural areas and for those affiliated to the Islamic organizations. The extent of their annual investments in Iran, the region, and worldwide is reportedly equal to more than a quarter of the country’s GDP. The Foundation for the Oppressed alone reportedly has around 700,000 employees. In 1992, its annual budget was equal to 10 per cent of the government budget or about $10 billion. By the mid-1990s, this foundation was considered the largest economic conglomeration in the region. No central body ideologically controls these foundations. Their numerous ties within the corporate network connect them to both mercantile capital and the media.

The corporate network is characterized by a complete lack of distinction between sites of production and the space of social relations, between production of material commodities and production of cultural goods, and, finally, between public and private. The corporate network is not comprehensible unless its relation to another feature of the rentier economy is clarified: there was a steep increase in the influx of people to big cities during the latter part of the 1970s. Tehran experienced a doubling of its population during the few years prior to the revolution. Because of the system’s incapacity to absorb this influx into industrial production or public services, the poor masses remained an important social force excluded from urban social relations. In this respect, the corporate network has played a crucial role in expanding rentier relations into these suburban – or, more precisely, post-urban – spaces since the beginning of the 1980s, which form a continuous space embracing the earlier villages and agricultural zones on the outskirts of major cities. The constant flow of people to urban centres was mediated, concretely and physically, into the production of cultural commodities, a living labour that was literally invested with what was earlier called ‘petrified enthusiasm’. The image of ‘a country of believers in a state of mystical unity with a political and spiritual supreme leader’ has not only been the living form of a local investment, but also took active part in the economy of a globalized circulation and production of spectacular and exotic images as goods. At the same time, neither the politics of spirituality nor the corporate network represents the political and social life in these post-urban spaces. These networks are above all communicative and productive channels through which rentier relations expand further. The same network structures, which connect the influx to image production, have been both the target of and, on occasion, used as a starting point for, protest movements and activism among the poor since 1980.

The Islamic Republic is not a totalitarian state or a classic case of military dictatorship. It has a flexible, non-constitutive governmental rule that represents the boundaries of a rentier system faced with the Iranian revolution. As a political machine, its functioning can be summarized at two interrelated levels: (1) it connects speculative mercantile activities to rentier income from the oil industry, by controlling the flow of cash into society; (2) it produces cultural goods that bind the human influx to the politics of spirituality within the structures of the corporate network.

This specific configuration of political power and production, its conflicts with certain imperialist ambitions in the region, and, more importantly, its inner contradictions – all these features would remain incomprehensible without taking into account the fact that rentier capitalism is the reverse of the failed communism of the revolutionary sequence. Likewise,
the moral and spiritual signifiers circulated by this corporate network are the rentier system's political and economic reaction against both the self-organizing forms of the revolutionary sequence and the monetary flow from the so-called international market.

Notes
The material in this Comment derives from a research project generously supported by the National Council for Research, Sweden, 2004–07.


4. This is richly documented throughout Part VI of Capital, Volume 3.


13. In 1980, merchants were exempted from a considerable part of tax on revenue, according to a parliamentary report quoted by former Iranian president H. Bani Sadr in Xinan be Omid, Paris, n.d., pp. 77–9.


15. The major foundations are the Foundation for the Oppressed (Bonyad-e Mostafan), Martyrs’ Foundation (Bonyad-e Shahid), Housing Foundation (Bonyad-e Maskan), and the Imam Khomeini Foundation Relief Committee (Komite-e Emdad Imam Khomeinie).

16. There are numerous articles in Persian on the subject, particularly from the so-called reformist camp. The only comprehensive report in English is Ali Alfoneh, ‘How Intertwined Are the Revolutionary Guards in Iran’s Economy?’, Middle Eastern Outlook 3, October 2007.


20. On the inflow to the urban centers, see Masoud Karshenas, Oil, State, and Industrialization in Iran, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990. For a comparison with the post-revolutionary period, see Hassan Hakimian, ‘Population Dynamics in Post-Revolutionary Iran’, in Parvin Alizadeh, The Economy of Iran.


22. For a history of activism among the poor, squatters and immigrants, see Asef Bayat, Street Politics: Poor People’s Movement in Iran, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997; and Mobarezat zahmatkeshan xarej az malahude 56, Peykar Organization, Tehran, 1980.
Trend lines and frontlines


Geopolitics and political economy are registers that the recent revival in the fortunes of radical political thought has largely evaded or sublimated. The tendency has been to turn away from state power to explore the resources of subjectivity, and to emphasize lines of resistance over structures of accumulation.Articulating the economic and the international has also proved easier said than done, as testified by the spectrum of positions on the role of oil in the invasion of Iraq. A deficit of historical understanding and political orientation marks the present. This is the predicament that Balakrishnan’s *Antagonistics* seeks to diagnose and to counter.

Intended as a ‘chronicle of the second decade of the post-Cold War status quo’, this collection, comprising review essays written between 1995 and 2008, plus a new essay on ‘Machiavelli and the Reawakening of History’, is driven by the conviction that the Left requires a disabused cognition of the political and economic fields, as well as a rethinking of rupture and foundation. In keeping with the vow of oppositional sobriety that has marked the second series of the *New Left Review* – of which Balakrishnan is an editor, and in which all of the chapters were originally published – we are told that neither the readability of the conjuncture nor the possibility of a global antagonism are in any way given. Today, it is ‘as if the same logic that neutralizes the power to build new hegemonies is generating dimensions of disorder and change beyond intelligible totalization’. Rather than a mere failing of the collective intellect, disorientation might be written into the nature of things.

With the waning of mass subjects, whether revolutionary or reformist, able to bend the complexity of the social into unified trajectories of change, the ‘essential question of whether a politics oriented toward the long-term tendencies and limits of capital is still possible’ is also left in abeyance. Political thought and practice cannot attain totality, lost amid temporal cadences and spatial differences that they can neither master nor synthesize. Althusser’s maxim that materialism means not telling yourself stories seems to have served the *New Left Review* as a regulative idea for the past while, and Balakrishnan’s project explicitly partakes in the journal’s ethos and direction – indirectly summarized as a ‘combative but clear-eyed pessimism, orienting the mind for a Long March against the new scheme of things’. But, despite the invocation of Schmitt’s idea of ‘neutralization’ as the atmosphere of the present, there is also a sense that the volatile character of this new scheme of things, indexed to the current crisis, is also a kind of occasion – provided that, following *The Prince*, we face up to the idea that an occasion might be ‘a near complete absence of what we would call an opportunity’.

Between the Schmittian prelude and the exploratory Machiavellian conclusion, *Antagonistics* surveys a number of efforts to totalize this interregnum, both longitudinally (the *longue durée* of socio-economic formations and international hegemonies) and vertically (in terms of our current political predicament). The book is divided into two sections, ‘Concepts of the Geopolitical’ and ‘Reflections on Politics’, attesting to the uncertain relation between the intra- and inter-national. The objects of Balakrishnan’s attention are of disparate importance and varied political provenance, but there seems to be a premium on books of great scope and ambition – that is, on attempts to totalize past and present. We are thus presented with critical evaluations of works ranging from Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* and RETORT’s *Afflicted Powers* on the anti-capitalist Left, to Philip Bobbitt’s *Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* and Azar Gat’s *War in Human Civilization* on the imperial Right, passing through the centrist equivocations of Habermas and Bhikhu Parekh’s *Rethinking Multiculturalism*.

Throughout, Balakrishnan writes with poise, fluency and considerable erudition. His passing praise for Gat’s ‘pleasantly old-fashioned historical literacy’ reflects his own (and the *New Left Review’s*) admiration for cultures of scholarship and modes of writing of a more classical stamp than is usual in a postmodern academy driven by ‘impact’, the blind
accumulation of citations, and a hostility towards inquiries with long gestation periods. The patience and precision evidenced by several of the essays are counterbalanced by calibrated and bracing derision. At times, the stinging rebukes (of Bobbitt’s ‘astonishingly ignorant assertions’ on Prussia or Gat’s ‘neo-social Darwinism’) are strong enough as to make one wonder if the trouble was really worth it. The assurance with which Balakrishnan dispatches his targets, and the insights he produces in the process, make one wish for a book that would preserve the problems posed by Antagonistics while relegating many of its interlocutors to the endnotes.

Balakrishnan’s contention that ‘political commitments grounded in thought can be distinguished from opinion and ideological attachments by their capacity to subsume the authentic insights of opposed conceptions of the world’ is commendably mature, and his suspicion of an ‘over-politicized’ reason for which partisanship trumps rationality is legitimate. But, for all the tributes to the grand visions of the authors he reviews, there is a sense that the ratio between subsumption and dismissal weighs in favour of the latter. While we’re happy for a reviewer to levy criticisms without erecting counter-arguments, a certain frustration is generated by the repeated sequence of generous estimate, devastating criticism and promissory gestures of futurity – best captured, in the last line of one of the essays, as ‘negations that do not yet have a name’.

The structural limits of a collection of reviews are most obvious in the second half, which, for all of its merits, feels distinctly occasional, covering the Jünger–Schmitt correspondence, Sheldon Wolin’s study of Tocqueville and Niethammer’s uninspiring musings on collective identity, among others. Unlike the treatment of geopolitics and its histories, it does not amount to anything like a survey of contemporary reformulations of the political. Balakrishnan’s barbed allusions to the Left’s deficit of realism, to the vanishing of any sense of strategy and to the evacuation of metaphors, detracting attention from a sober assessment of the capacities and limits of military power in the present conjuncture.

So, it is a little perplexing (though maybe marketing considerations could be blamed for this) that the subtitle of Antagonistics places it in an ‘age of war’. Balakrishnan in fact disputes this notion historically (noting the demobilizing effects of consumerism on the populations of advanced capitalist countries), economically (underscored America’s military dependence on a fragile capitalist order) and strategically (doubting the effectiveness of imperial force in policing the excluded). Emphasizing the ‘structural crisis in the relations between capitalism and geopolitics’, he goes so far as to impugn the very feasibility of the central categories of politics and historical sociology: war, state, revolution and modernity, ‘a narrative category that no longer comprehends the military, economic and cultural vectors of the latest phase of capitalism’. The political translation of this impasse is less convincing. Balakrishnan asks: ‘what does “anti-war” mean when the phenomenon of “war” itself has been dissolved into...
a nebulous region of arbitrarily classified, asymmetrical violence? I suppose the answer would be ‘the attempt to eliminate or curtail a nebulous region of arbitrarily classified, asymmetrical violence’. There are numerous criticisms to be made of the anti-war movement, namely of its inability to capitalize at a critical moment on mass support and move beyond voicing disapproval, but its opposition to molecular and endemic imperial police actions was persistent, and in fact anticipated by opposition to the murderous ‘pre-war’ sanctions on Iraq. The New Left Review’s own editorial line on the occupation, one of intransigent anti-imperialism, does not seem to have wavered because of the mutations in the legal, logistical and ideological parameters of warmongering.

In this respect, and in light of Balakrishnan’s commendable concern with the possibility of totalization in the present, it is somewhat baffling to see little engagement – save for a discussion of RETORT’s unspoken reliance on Rosa Luxemburg – with the recent resurgence in the fortunes of imperialism as a combatively totalizing concept. The claim of ‘a near-universal tendency on the part of Marxists to understand the relationship between capitalism and war in terms of a systematic logic’ goes untested in the absence of an engagement with the writings of David Harvey and Ellen Wood, among others, whose accounts, whatever their limitations, cannot be so easily taxed with simply subsuming the contingencies of the geopolitical under a monolithic logic of accumulation. An engagement with this literature would also have allowed Balakrishnan to specify the articulation between two pivotal claims made in Antagonistics: first that capitalism is devoid of a geopolitical logic; and second that it is the evolution of capitalism alone that provides a long-term developmental account of the successive socio-economic transformations that determine the relative wealth of nations, and the field of selection in which different strategies of state formation, including ones based on the attempted suppression of capitalism, come to be tested.

This second formulation hints at a retooling of historical sociology for the study of the relation between the economic and the political, and within the political itself between the geopolitical and the intra-national, with revolution (or some yet nameless negation) a precarious parallax between all of these. Deepening this suggestive line of inquiry – especially the idea of a strategic ‘field of selection’ – might also permit a more precise account of the very separation between the political and the economic, which is both formative of capitalism and constantly undermined by the incessant military endeavours to make the world free for trade. How does the relative autonomy of the ‘event structure’ of geopolitics square with the Leninist lesson that ‘the massively uneven development and violently cyclical pattern of capitalist economic development make any future euthanasia of military-diplomatic statecraft highly unlikely … the definitive separation between of the political from the economic never takes place’? Further investigation of these questions, and of the ominous enigma concerning the effect of the economic downturn on our geopolitical configuration, will require more direct surveys of the aforementioned ‘field of selection’ – something that Balakrishnan has already undertaken in his recent ‘Speculations on the Stationary State’ (New Left Review 59) and its augury of ‘a period of inconclusive struggles between a weakened capitalism and dispersed agencies of opposition, within delegitimated and insolvent political orders’. That Antagonistics concludes with an unlikely pairing of Beckett’s imperative to ‘fail better’ and Machiavelli’s reflections on the link between corruption and the transcendence of the present order testifies that, despite his suspicions of the current tendency to ‘over-politicise’, Balakrishnan too cannot evade the painful hiatus between structure and agency (or between tendency and strategy). The only mediation to be had is provided by the rot at the heart of the system.

In the earliest of the essays collected here, on class and nation, Balakrishnan asks: ‘In the context of a modernity defined by agonistic individualism and impersonal forms of social power, can agency be exercised by large-scale collectivities?’ The imperative not to tell oneself stories might demand silence on this count. Yet it is obvious that without some prospect of recomposition of a collective agent, of some class formation, however anomalous, the Left’s only relationship to strategy will be alienated and contemplative, reduced to registering the strategies of its adversaries (who are never short of class consciousness) in the pages of the Wall Street Journal and Foreign Affairs. It is to be hoped that the lines of research traced in this collection of polemics will converge into an independent effort at totalization, even if the historical moment is refractory to cognitive mapping. In many ways, Antagonistics is inspired by the Weberian project to complement Marx’s economic materialism with a political materialism and a military materialism. Forging a strategic materialism, with Machiavelli and Gramsci, will doubtless prove an even more difficult, if essential, task.

Alberto Toscano
It is necessary [to posit its existence] because the data of consciousness have a very large number of gaps in them; both in healthy and in sick people psychical acts often occur which can be explained only by presupposing other acts, of which, nevertheless, consciousness affords no evidence.

Far from representing some hidden kernel or inner opacity at the locus of the subject, for Freud, on the contrary, the unconscious is a kind of transparent darkness that must be posited to account for the lacunae that burst forth from within consciousness itself.

Although reared in the Cartesian tradition of ‘clear and distinct’ self-awareness, modern mind sciences take as unquestionable the (Freudian) leaping point that not everything available to consciousness is exhaustive of the totality of the mind’s contents. And yet, today, no prominent neuroscientist (with the exception of Mark Solms) openly acknowledges this Freudian heritage, rather preferring either silently to proceed along with his or her ahistorical search for neural correlates of consciousness, or to issue offhand dismissals. There is an obvious irony in such disavowals: the very commensurability of the mind sciences is grounded in a preservation of Freud’s general observation of the subject qua consciousness decentred from itself; it’s just that neuroscience views his more specific ontology of unconscious psychical processes – repression, condensation, displacement, and so on – less as a relic of ‘folk psychology’ than as a sort of ‘voodoo-psychology’. A less obvious irony, however, is the recurrence of a debate within modern consciousness studies that first occurred within the work of none other than Freud himself. If Laplanche is correct that Freud’s Copernican insight (e.g. an excentric decentrement, the external alienness of the unconscious, the radical alterity of the enigmatic other) constantly risks reassimilation by his own Ptolemaic (recentring) counter-revolution, it’s no coincidence that this intra-Freudian polemic returns under new guise in debates between his prodigal progeny, Thomas Metzinger and Alva Noë, around the meaning of a decentrement of the subject from the phenomenological experience of consciousness.
Decentrement is indeed a strange if not wholly nebulous matter. Today, it’s a ubiquitous catchword of postmodern cultural studies, but is also employed by Badiou’s Lacanian-infused theory of the body (when taking the former as its object of critique); it’s a conclusion of Einstein’s theory of relativity, but also the pivot point for quantum mechanics; it’s a baseline assumption of modern consciousness studies, but as these intra-discursive polemics – and now the basic dispute between Metzinger and Noë – demonstrate, there is more than one way to decentre the subject. Decentrement, yes, but decentrement of whom, to where, and relative to what?

*The Ego Tunnel*, consisting of seven chapters, and including interviews with three prominent neuroscientists and an introduction to Metzinger’s self-model theory of subjectivity (SMT), unambiguously stakes a claim in answer to this question. (In his acknowledgements, Metzinger implies that the book is intended as the popular version of a more technical argument presented in his earlier *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (2003), but the author’s encyclopedic knowledge of modern consciousness research flows so effortlessly through the text that it nonetheless convokes an air of rigour and profundity such ‘reader-friendly’ books often lack.) However, understanding both the broader philosophical implications of SMT and the novel methodology developed by Metzinger to access what he calls ‘the puzzle of consciousness’ (i.e. how consciousness can arise in the physical object of the brain) requires some clarification of his central ontological thesis – that ‘there is no such thing as a self… [N]obody has ever been or had a self.’

Now, if by saying this Metzinger were merely suggesting a revision of the folk substantialist notion of an invariant essence marking the self-identity of the subject, such a platitude would be a bit late in arriving. After all, from Hume and Kant to Nietzsche, Sartre, and beyond, one legacy endowed us by modern philosophy is the illegitimacy of a belief in the self as substance. But Metzinger’s claim is both more original and more radical than the assertion that the self is an ephemeral product of reflection, a contingent linguistic construction, or procedurally oriented flux of becoming. In fact, when the author introduces the core concept of his SMT – labelled ‘the phenomenal self-model’ (PSM) – he evidently conceives it less as a contestable assertion, or merely one more speculative theory of the subject open to debate and critique, but than as a *philosophical truth* derived from cutting-edge research results in neuroscience.

What, then, does the neuroscientific data on which SMT relies tell us about subjectivity? To begin with, it tells us that the conscious brain is ‘a reality engine’. Inside consciousness you might experience, for instance, the visually rich image of apricot-pink rays of sunlight shinning from behind a majestic amber mountaintop. But ‘[a]t there, in front of your eyes, there is just an ocean of electromagnetic radiation, a wild and raging mixture of different wavelengths’, most of which perpetually remain inaccessible to your conscious model of reality. ‘What is really happening’ when you’re consciously experiencing a sunset ‘is that the visual system in your brain is drilling a tunnel through this inconceivably rich physical environment and in the process is painting the tunnel walls in various shades of colour.’ Of course there exists a world outside the subject, but the conscious experience of it is an endogenous event. ‘In principle you could have this [same experience of a sunset] without eyes, and you could even have it as a disembodied brain in a vat.’ The philosophical conclusion follows: consciousness is a representational space, containing virtual objects from a simulated world, carved into your ego tunnel by the neural network in your head.

But there’s more. If neurophilosophy is correct when it delimiteds the minimally sufficient conditions for consciousness as (a) a unity of attentionally available mental information (globality) that is (b) phenomenally experienced as an island of presence in time (presentationality), the puzzling fact remains that the subjective experience of consciousness is perpetually marked by (c) an irreducible introspective deficit, a sort of ‘in-built blind spot’ of the representational processes that the mind uses to experience the world phenomenally (transparency). One never actually experiences consciousness of self as a consciousness of the representational processes the mind uses to model the world, but only ever experiences the self as *directly* experiencing the world, as such. Metzinger argues that the transparency of such subpersonal processes is what gives rise to the phenomenal experience of selfhood (PSM): but the key here is that it’s just that – it’s *merely* phenomenal. As it turns out, even the phenomenal experience of oneself as *a self* is no more than a hallucination produced by the brain’s non-phenomenal, representational processes; one’s very sense of selfhood results from auto-epistemic closure in a system too complex to understand itself. This is why Metzinger invokes the metaphor of an ‘Ego tunnel’, ‘[an] ongoing conscious experience [that] is not so much an image of reality as a tunnel through
reality’: not only is the tunnel itself virtual, so too is the existence of the self perceived as inhabiting it. Like Freud before him, Metzinger seeks access to the enigma of subjectivity by way of investigating deviations from ‘standard’ conscious experiences: drug-induced hallucinations, out-of-body experiences, various meditative states, phantom limb and alien hand syndromes, schizophrenia, and so on. Few exceptions to the ‘ordinary’ experience of consciousness are left untouched by Metzinger, who derives from them an overall conclusion of threefold subjective decentrement. First, the subject is decentred from a direct engagement with the world outside; that conscious experience (e.g. the smell of sandalwood or vision of a sunset) can be neurally induced indicates that the subject does not directly experience the world, but merely simulates a phenomenal engagement with virtual objects in a virtual world. Second, the subject is decentred from ownership of its body: the phantom limb syndrome, out-of-body-experiences, and the rubber hand experiment (whereby the visual image of the repeated stroking of a rubber hand induces the sensation that it’s one’s own hand) betray the fact that the phenomenal experience of bodily ownership is virtual, in so far as it can be artificially simulated or transferred to non-bodily objects. Lastly, the subject is decentred from agent: the alien hand syndrome, schizophrenia, and recent neurological and psychological research point to the existence of a subpersonal entity that supervenes on the experience of agency, implying that the inner experience of intentionality is retroactively bound by the mind to the representation of any given action.

Metzinger combines an appreciation of the basic questions constituting the history of philosophy with a mastery over recent advents in neuroscience and virtual technology. No serious theory of the subject can afford to fail to confront his methodology founded on the transparency of the self (i.e. PSM), his openly reductionist commitment to finding a global neural correlate of consciousness, and the philosophical thesis wedged between the two – namely, that because consciousness is ‘an exclusively internal affair’, the subject is simultaneously decentred from itself as a self and recentred back (as a virtual object) in the neural network of the brain.

Similarly to The Ego Tunnel, Alva Noë’s Out of Our Heads was not specifically written for the neuroscientific community, and cites a series of fascinating studies from which interesting philosophical conclusions are drawn. Yet Noë’s aim is to rethink the very foundations of the neuroscientific paradigm on which Metzinger’s SMT stands. This means that both philosophers often cite the same studies, but provide radically different interpretations of each, proving once again that there’s more than one way to decentre the subject. Noë’s basic position is that there’s a self-imposed myopia inherent to the standard neuroscientific approach to consciousness, in so far as it paradoxically grants the existence of a historically evolved, environmentally embedded organism who engages with the world (as Bataille put it) ‘like water in water’, and yet proceeds to reduce its own theoretical aperture to a series of physiochemical processes in the brain. As Noë points out, this is a dead end, not just because there’s nothing particularly special about individual neurons or their electrochemical behaviour (brain cells are pretty much all alike); and not just due to the fact that – as research studying neural activity in the visual cortex has repeatedly shown – the link between conscious experience and neural correlates is more or less plastic; but even more fundamentally, because consciousness itself is no less that an ongoing, active engagement with the world.

So, if after years of painstaking experimentation, and meticulous deployment of expensive cutting-edge technology in the service of neuroscientific research, we’re still stuck puzzling over the enigma of consciousness without having made any significant progress, this results from the simple fact that we’ve been searching for it in the wrong place. Contrary to the ‘unquestioned assumptions’ of neuroscience, ‘the brain is not the locus of consciousness inside us because consciousness has no locus inside us. Consciousness isn’t something that happens inside us: it is something that we do, actively, in our dynamic interaction with the world around us.’ To equate the brain to consciousness as a stove to the generation of heat, or as the stomach to digestion (Noë calls this the ‘gastric juices conception of consciousness’), is to mistake a necessary condition for a sufficient one. Contrary to Metzinger’s SMT, the brain is not ‘a reality engine’, and consciousness is
not ‘an exclusively internal affair’; the brain can no more generate consciousness on its own than a musical instrument can play itself. Rather, consciousness is ‘always already’ decentred from the brain, embedded in a broader environmental context, permeating the mere ostensible boundaries between brain, body and world. In short, ‘we are out of our heads’.

At first glance, then, the polemical poles here seem clear enough. On the one hand, from neuroscientific studies depicting the mind’s representational processes as transparent, Metzinger theorizes a decentrement of the subject from anything whatsoever, but then incidentally imports a Ptolemaic counter-revolution into his SMT by recentering the subject *qua* consciousness back to the brain as locus. Transparency no doubt is, as Metzinger puts it, ‘a special form of inner darkness’, but his presumption that because this darkness appears to be internally generated, the subject is as well, reduces the interactive complexity of subjective embodiment in and with the world outside. Descartes made this philosophical error nearly four hundred years ago, and Metzinger makes it again today. On the other hand, by virtue of the fact that the subject *qua* consciousness is every bit as situationally extended as it is an internal set of neural processes, Noë seeks to inaugurate a Copernican revolution in consciousness studies by substituting, or at least supplementing, a neuroscientific approach to consciousness with a biological one. Yet laudable though this may be, the reader can’t help but feel that *Out of Our Heads* is lacking something. For example, we may agree that, yes, consciousness is a matter of situational, active embodiment, and yes, the subject is always already decentred out of our heads and on to the world. But beyond such vaguities – preliminary trivialities already established in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* – Noë is notably silent about how to proceed, as if he’s merely left awestruck by the enigma lays not so much in what exists that we cannot observe, but rather in what *must* exist that we cannot observe, such that what we do observe can even exist. For, like astrophysicists buried deep inside the earth in search of dark matter from outer space, we are still trying to get onto the next step.

Benjamin James Lozano

**Bioethics unbound?**


What do we want? ‘Responsible non-foundational bioethics.’ And when do we want it? ‘Now.’ In *Bioethics in the Age of New Media* Joanna Zylinksa argues that new forms of post-human life urgently demand new forms of bioethical thinking that are able to break with the ‘inherent humanism’ that is the largely unexamined underbelly of existing bioethics. The latter is traditionally a field of inquiry constrained, in theoretical terms, to moral philosophy, and in disciplinary terms to medicine and particular forms of sociology. As a field the judgements it makes are notably expansive: framed in deontological, universal, utilitarian or otherwise systemic terms. By contrast, in Zylinksa’s hands bioethics becomes an inquiry into the contemporary forms and constitution of ‘life itself’, a post-human endeavour and a bid to generate a vast expansion of the bioethical terrain. Constraint here arrives in relation to the ethical judgements offered or the (bio)ethical ‘recipes’ generated: simply, there is none. Zylinksa sets out to develop a bioethics without content where no prescriptions can be offered or totalizing generalizations made: a singular ethics that can only be continuously made anew through decisions taken in relation to specific events.

Avowedly, then, the concern is not with defining what is, or isn’t, ‘right’ about a series of biodigital developments and/in their potential ‘applications’ within contemporary societies; nor is one system of ethics being proposed to take the place of another – although a new framework is being sketched out. The attempt is rather to ‘shift the parameters of ethical debate’ as such (my emphasis). The focus is life itself, *bios* and *zoe*, or what is termed here the social
and molecular. For Zylinksa, recent developments in bio-digital technologies not only call into question established definitions of what constitutes humans’ ‘ontological status as skin-bound sovereign beings … their kinship with, and dependency on, other species and material forms’, they also undermine what is defined as a ‘pervasive’ theorization of culture as a bulwark or ‘a system of defence of humanity against technics’.

In response to these developments Zylinksa makes three key theoretical moves. First, and in relation to recent thinking on technology/technics, comes a break with what is (rather loosely) defined as the humanist presumption of a relationship of terminal division between humans and non-humans (the latter defined as the machines-and-other-animals who are now standard characters in the technoscience lexicon). In place of this comes a post-human analysis leaning on (Heidegger and) Derrida/Steigler’s accounts of technics on the one hand, and Foucault/Agamben’s theorizations of biopolitical life on the other. The wager is that the relationship between technology, culture and ethics can be rethought, and the potential of technology reassessed in a more open way, if attention is paid to what Steigler has termed the co-evolution of human and the technical. Co-evolution is understood as ongoing (taking specific biodigital forms) but also as an originary process. Steigler’s sense of epiphyleogenesis, ‘whereby the human is able to develop, indeed becomes unbounded, “through means other than life”’ (as Robert Sinnerbrink summarizes it), is thus used by Zylinksa to generate a new genealogy for the human, whose ‘singularity’ is still to be recognized, but who is to be radically repositioned.

The second move is away from an ethics derived from moral philosophy and applied practice and towards the ‘first philosophy’ of Levinas and his conception of ethics as relations. ‘Towards’ is the key word here since Zylinksa, having nailed her colours to the Steiglerian mast of the originary technicity of the human, clearly has to question the Levinasian insistence on the irreducible humanity of the Other as that which produces a demand in response to which a decision might be taken, and in doing so generates the conditions of possibility for ethics. In a world where those Others might include (Kac’s) green flop-eared art bunnies of bio-digital provenance and where humans partly made with new materials might be said to mount an appeal that is not purely human either, some other way of thinking the relation of alterity – the demands it might make and the forms of responsibility it might entail – is required. Evidently the other kind of alterity invoked here is that produced through the technical constitution of the human: we could perhaps say that this is a relational bioethics that proposes to take account of the différance that technics makes.

The third parameter shift Zylinksa performs is to argue that bioethics needs to intersect with cultural and medium theory. The new materials contributing to contemporary co-evolution take specifically digital form. In his comments on the General Intellect, Virno famously argued that information had transformed the ‘whole world of life’, and in so doing terminated an economy based on value and a politics based on recognition. Bioethics argues, in a parallel vein, that information technologies ‘modulate’ co-evolutionary processes and instantiate new forms of life. And while the goal here is not to derive a political response but rather to rethink ethical frameworks, these too are viewed as necessarily located beyond an economy of recognition – or representation. Thus when Zylinksa argues that bioethics needs to be explored in the context of contemporary media culture this might be taken as a comment on the proximate location of narrowly biopolitical debate (e.g. on questions such as cloning, abortion, surveillance or gene therapy), on the media’s constitutive role in the ongoing construction of various categories of identity (e.g. of legitimate or non-legitimate bodies), and as a comment on the necessity of taking account of the degree to which digital communication structures our place in the world and our relations (our proximate distance or intra-activity) with and from each other. Mediatization is key to the project of rethinking what might constitute an ethics of contemporary life.

Consonant with the centrality awarded to the media, an appropriate starting point for Zylinksa’s inquiry is to be found in a critical rereading of the disciplinary history of bioethics through the work of Van Rensselaer Potter and cybernetics. The latter was one of the two early developers of bioethics but was later overshadowed by the Georgetown School. The media focus generated through this reading continues, but with the totalizing claims of first-wave cybernetics moderated substantially, in a series of case studies designed to ‘perform the proposal’ of the book. These include a chapter on the management of life, exploring the distinction between self-performance and self-construction in blogging sites, which are taken as examples of what might constitute instances of ethical or non-ethical narcissism. Zylinksa is concerned to recognize the rarity with which decisions (constructions rather than performances) are taken in these overtly technical-social forms of engagement, but also
to make the case that decisions can still be made (i.e. identity does not inevitably reduce to the execution of the programme in informational contexts), and so the necessary conditions for ethical life remain.

Elsewhere, an exploration of the bodies of ugly ducklings turned to swans (in a chapter on the eponymous extreme makeover TV series) considers a certain slippage between the operations of technology and of the culture industries. For Zylinska an opening emerges when (or because) audiences turn down the invitation to align their bodies with those better-managed offerings viewed on screen. This both underscores Zylinska’s strikingly hopeful view of contemporary technology and distances her somewhat from Steigler’s demand for a politics of memory as a necessary countermeasure to forms of digital colonization (for instance as it emerges in Echographies). For this reader, the refusal to pass judgement, and/or the desire to avoid systemic critique (either of the normative pressures valorizing various forms of augmentation or of the biopolitical economy of makeover TV), here threatens to collapse into something close to its reverse: an overt alignment with bio-technological ‘advancement in general, as an ethical project.

This optimism is modulated in a further chapter considering the bioethical implications of the trope of the ‘secret of life’ in relation to the reconfiguration of genomics and work on the human genome project. Zylinska’s argument is that the ‘secret of life’ formulation not only reflects an understanding of life as informational code but was itself a ‘significant episode’ in the colonization (marketization) of the ‘private realm of the flesh’; which is to say it played a part in the increasing inclusion of bare life in the political realm. In particular, attempts to crack the secret of life operated to conceal some vital questions about new zones of ‘life’ (zoe and bios and their intermixing) ‘via the scientific rhetoric of revelation and transparency’.

Bioethics has much to recommend it. It might be said that Zylinska is tilting at an easy target – since it is widely acknowledged that the critical focus of bioethics has been lamentably narrow – but this would be unjust. Zylinska identifies a need and performs the necessary task of deconstruction with panache. Certainly the key proposition of the book, which is the need for an ethics fit for contemporary ‘humamachines’ (a term first coined by Mark Poster) who must make ethical decisions as singular individuals, in hybrid environments, from which they are never completely separate, is compelling. If the (non-systemic) model developed by Zylinska in response to that need is more unevenly delivered, that isn’t entirely surprising given the multiple scales and registers at which the work operates. It is, however, sometimes frustrating. In particular the redoubled invocation of alterity/connection that relies on Levinas and on Steigler, and that is given as central to the (conditions of possibility for) bioethical life as well as to (the conditions of possibility for) bioethics itself as always already technical, is provocative, but it is offered as a proposition rather than being more fully elaborated here.

Finally, Zylinska states that her aim has been to explore ‘the transformation of the very notion of life in the digital age’. Yet the intractable questions arising in this work cohere less around ‘life’ than around questions of ‘the human’. Virtually banished early on, in a kind of revisionist zeal, the figure of the human returns increasingly often towards the end of the book as the inevitable bearer of responsibility, and in those moments when responsibility is taken. Moreover, this human often reappears somewhat shorn of its technical supplements, of what suddenly look like its mere prosthetic attachments. A question to be developed further here, then, is what kind of (ethical) decisions I may be able to take, what kind of responsibilities I take on, being always already – but also always specifically and only partially – constituted as a technical being?

Caroline Bassett
Tightly knit


Since Foucault’s cautionary note about the ‘entry of life into history’ as the beginning of an era of biopower, biological and political existence have become ever more closely entwined. Biotechnology, biosecurity, bioterrorism, bioethics, biovalue or even biosex are just some of the new codes that specify the imbrication of the biological with the social, cultural and political. Melinda Cooper’s book thus joins a series of recent reflections on the role of life in the conjunction of contemporary biotechnology with neoliberal apparatuses of power.

Like other writings on biotechnology and capital by Eugene Thacker and Kaushik Sunder Rajan, Cooper’s approach brings together Foucault’s work on biopolitics and Marx’s analysis of capital. While taking up Foucault’s insight about the co-constitution of biology and political economy, she challenges his critique of neoliberalism, proposing an understanding based on the speculative drive and the financialization of everyday life. This reformulation of neoliberal capitalism underpins the overall theoretical argument. If one were to put the analytical approach in a nutshell, ‘displacement’ might be the right word. The possibilities and utopian drives of the life sciences are displaced into the exploitative project and manifold violence of neoliberal capitalism. For Cooper, life as increasingly constituted in the life sciences is life that can regenerate itself ad infinitum and is thus essentially prone to becoming the matter of capitalist reproduction and accumulation.

Displacement is a familiar term in recent left cultural analysis: from class to identity, from equality to difference or from freedom to security. Here, displacement entails reappropriation and new forms of domination and exploitation (although at times the question of the political effects of such displacement remains open). Thus, displacement recurs in each chapter to render the critical relation to recent developments in, respectively, the pharmaceuticals industry, the US government’s positions on terrorism, security and AIDS. US security politics displaces insecurity and fear from the structural level to relocate it in relation to biothreats. Neoliberalism displaces the waste of growth-driven economies elsewhere through the mediation of life sciences. The conceptual exchanges that underpin the displacement between life sciences and neoliberal capital are simultaneously made possible and furthered by institutional alliances. In high-risk areas of life-science experimentation, for instance, venture capital funds have made possible an institutional alliance between neoliberal practices of speculation and the promissory drive of life-science experimentation.

This re-problematization of the development of life sciences and incorporation of their concepts and practices within various apparatuses of governance in the service of capital reproduction is powerful and persuasive. Yet there is another implicit form to the displacement that is at the heart of Cooper’s approach. The potential of life sciences is not only displaced, reappropriated by the neoliberal capitalist project, but also, in a sense, essential to the very expansion of capitalism, in so far as ‘profits will depend on the accumulation of biological futures rather than on the extraction of non-renewable resources and the mass production of tangible commodities’. The life sciences appear as untapped potential, the new spaces of appropriation which open unthought possibilities for capital confronted by the earth’s spatio-temporal limits and dwindling non-renewable energy sources. The cellular and body generativity of stem-cell science, for example, bears uncanny similarities to the processes of neoliberal financialization, thus rendering institutional alliances almost a conceptually driven necessity. Capitalism appears to extract surplus value from the infinite potential of life. Thus, Cooper finds authors like Stengers and Prigogine inadvertently complicit in the valorization of the infinite potential of life. While opposing narratives of scarcity and limits, the life sciences reposition the abundance and regeneration of life as a site of capitalist profit. This malleability of life and infinite potentiality for surplus creation – in short, its capacity to become the universal equivalent of capitalist production and circulation – is rooted in a particular reading of Marx’s and Foucault’s analysis of capital and biopolitics inspired by the Italian workerist tradition.

The intimate connection between biology and capital reproduction is implied by the centrality of the ‘creative forces of human biological life’. The biotech industry displaces the force and potential of
life into the self-valorizing power of capital. Yet, the shift from material to immaterial labour was steeped in transformed conditions of production. How, then, does labour and its infinite creative potential shift to ‘life itself’ and its biospheric complexity? A fine conceptual ‘displacement’ takes place here: from labour to regenerating life, from production to circulation. Immaterial labour foregrounded the role of affect and communication in generating the new communication and informational commodities of post-Fordism. The self-regenerating life and surplus productivity emerging in the life sciences is, however, not linked with collective powers, but with the speculative practices of finance. If the life implied in biotechnological labour is not the life of the worker, whose potential for cooperation can give rise to the resistance of the multitude, as Hardt and Negri would have it, what resistance is possible in a world in which the displacement of biology by capital has become the motor of accumulation? ‘Life itself’ as emerging out of the project of the life sciences is also not the life of populations upon which biopower deployed its regulative technologies. Not only has the project of life sciences been displaced – that is, reappropriated by the neoliberal capitalist project – but the emancipatory potential of ‘life itself’ remains to be established. Neither workers nor collectivities (masses, populations or people) appear to have any place in the project of the life sciences.

The transformation of life into exploitable surplus, its continuous potential for regeneration as the equivalent of the financialization of the economy, resonates with the financialization literature on the rise of speculative capital and financial derivatives. Yet, the displacement of production by the sphere of circulation as ‘financial markets have become the very generative condition of production’ is problematic. As the argument in the financialization literature goes, neoliberal capitalism entails an autonomization of circulation from the sphere of production. If industrial capitalism valued production over circulation, labour over risk, investment capital over speculation, and territorialized forms over other socio-political organizations, post-Fordist capitalism reverses these hierarchies. Production appears to have been superseded – or at least obscured – by other modes of value-generation to such an extent that Marx’s definition of capital as $M\rightarrow C\rightarrow M’$ sees money replaced by risk. In a sense, Life as Surplus can be seen to go one step further in this argument by introducing surplus-generative life in the formula of surplus-generative risk. The new formula for capital takes production largely off the analytical screen: nonetheless, just as financial practices are dependent on the materialities of production (such as collateral assets, for example), the life sciences are also embedded in the materialities of production.

At the same time, Cooper introduces another element into the relation between neoliberalism and the biotech industry: they are mediated through security knowledge and practices rather than immediately transferable through conceptual exchange or institutional alliance with capital. Both conceptual exchange and institutional alliances are complicated by the introduction of security considerations. Thus the governance of scarcity has shifted to military considerations, with dwindling resources increasingly being seen to lead to violence, conflict and waves of environmental refugees. AIDS was securitized as a global threat in a move symptomatic of the changing post-Cold War definitions of security: from national security to human, biological, environmental security, and so on. While expanding the realm of security to encompass more and more spheres of life, these new modalities of securitization do not challenge the national security logic. The militarization and the reappropriation of ‘legitimate’ security concerns by the military and security professionals is concurrent with the reappropriation of the life science potential, their financialization and integration into the accumulation processes of capital. However, the expansion of security into new domains is not just a displacement of militarization and warmongering, but can also be indicative of the transformation of the concept of security. Security is increasingly understood not in military terms – or rather not exclusively in military terms – but also as the protection and promotion of mobility and circulation of populations, goods and services. In that sense, new practices of security appear conceptually similar to the focus of neoliberal governance, in a way reinforcing the exploitative apparatuses of power. Nonetheless, analytical attention to not only the proliferation but also the heterogeneity of security practices might help lessen the tightly knit apparatuses of neoliberal dominance that appropriate all other practices. While security governance appears increasingly focused on circulatory processes, radical contingencies and catastrophic risks, critiques of security have focused on the production of insecurities and forms of resistance and mobilization against insecurity. In that sense, utopia is ultimately not an originary promise that can be displaced or reappropriated, but a practice at the interstices of the production of insecurity and mobilizations against the insecurities of capitalism.

Claudia Aradau
I wonder how often the term ‘postcommunism’ has been used before. We are certainly used to the adjective ‘postcommunist’, routinely attached to socio-political formations that, having failed in one eschatological undertaking, ‘the building of communism’, have more or less seamlessly switched to another transitory ‘historical process’, that of overcoming their ‘communist’ past; where ‘communist’, unless we are falling into vulgar ideological labelling, denotes nothing more than a disposition. To speak of ‘postcommunism’ is to speak of being ‘post’ something that has never been achieved in practice, or, if ever achieved according to its own theory, would have signified the impossibility of any further ‘post’ by virtue of bringing History to its end. Yet, this is precisely how Sergei Prozorov thinks ‘postcommunism’: as a stable, theoretically identifiable social condition that has followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. True, in its specific empirical manifestations this condition may be most visible in today’s Russia. This, however, is not due to Russia’s failure to perform the ‘postcommunist transition’ properly, not because it got stuck, against its own will, at some unwanted and anomalous juncture of the historical process. On the contrary, ‘postcommunism’ here is presented as potentially universal and normatively desirable, thus warranting the thinking of ‘the ethics of postcommunism’. Or, as one of the main protagonists of Prozorov’s story, Russian rock artist Boris Grebenshikov, puts it: ‘everyone dreams of living like this, but they don’t have the guts’.

The ‘they’ in question are the ‘last men’ of Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’, preoccupied with ritualized technocratic management of their otherwise meaningless and powerless lives. Importantly, this lack of meaning and power is what characterizes, according to Prozorov, contemporary Russian Putinism, all its authoritarian pretences notwithstanding. Thus, far from glorifying any allegedly unique Russian ‘daring’, Grebenshikov presents an example of a genuine ethos of resistance. This is an ‘example’ not as a set standard for others to follow, but as a manifestation of concrete social practices, long in operation in Russia and in the Soviet Union – an exemplar, which is, as Giorgio Agamben continuously reminds his readers (and Prozorov is among the most attentive ones), the original meaning of paradigm. So, Prozorov’s ‘postcommunism’, explored mainly through the close reading of Agamben’s texts and Grebenshikov’s lyrics, is nothing less than a paradigm of resistance to the current global political order that, to use one of Agamben’s famous definitions, remains in force without signification. As such, it directly addresses what Agamben presents as the central task of contemporary theory and practice; that is, ‘a thought capable of thinking the end of the state and the end of history at one and the same time, and of mobilizing one against the other’.

The book begins by comparing Kojève’s and Agamben’s conceptions of the end of history, focusing on the idea of ‘work’, central to both the former’s reading of the Master–Slave paradox and the latter’s understanding of the ‘happy life’ as the only worthwhile alternative to the current reign of biopolitics. Prozorov’s clear preference here is for Agamben’s ‘profane messianism’, realized in the figure of the Workless Slave; that is, one of the protagonists in the Hegelian account of History who, by simply ceasing to work, breaks out of the struggle for recognition and thus breaks down the dialectical logic of Hegelian history as such.

This theoretical scenario is then shown to be realized in practice in Yeltsin’s Russia. Rather than presenting Yeltsin’s era in purely negative terms, as a failure to perform successful democratic transition or a failure to achieve stable political order, Prozorov instead posits Yeltsin as a guardian not of ‘any specific form of order but the very possibility of trying out various courses of political development that, however, could always be played back, suspended or reversed with no consequences for the country’. He then translates this into Agamben’s philosophical terms, as an ‘extraordinary condensation of potentialities, all of which are, however, suspended in the aspect of their actualization. All things can and do happen, though without significance or finality, “as if they did not”’. This is one of the main characteristics of Agamben’s ‘messianic time’ made possible through the radical suspension of the teleological time of History and, consequently, rendering impossible any project-centred community, which, finally, allows for the (re)articulation of politics that is only possible in so far as humans are ‘beings
of pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust’.

In fact, Yeltsin’s dismantling of all the teleological underpinnings of, first, perestroika, and then ‘postcommunist transition’ was so successful that History could not be reignited either by the coup of October 1993 or by Yeltsin’s appointed successor Vladimir Putin. Appearances notwithstanding, Putinism amounts to little more than the ongoing ritual of the glorification of power without either ability or willingness to use power for any order-transforming projects. Counter-intuitively, but perfectly in accordance with Agamben’s analysis of the state of exception, this powerlessness of Putinism finds it best expression in the almost complete reduction of Russian politics to the use of executive force: ‘Perceiving itself as illegitimate in the absence of any historical project, authority in postcommunist Russia manifests itself through a snobbish redoubling of its own power, as the power of those who hold power or … as cratocracy.’ (In Agamben’s language: the sovereign power that remains in force without signification by virtue of its being in force.)

Thus the end of History in Russia is joined with the end of the state that now appears merely as an empty shell. However, the actual emptying of this shell requires a story of its own, this time told by Prozorov not from the perspective of the sovereign, but from that of the ‘slave who refuses to work’. Despite this provocative formulation, the empirical phenomenon behind it is rather familiar; namely, the continuous disengagement of Russian society from the public sphere that, according to Prozorov, began already in the Soviet Union and has only accelerated since 1991. This is where Grebenshikov enters the picture as an apostle of the ‘generation of janitors’. Apostle’ here is again used in an Agambenian sense, as someone who, unlike a messiah, is recapitulating a messianic event rather than foretelling it, thus initiating a different, non-teleological mode of both storytelling and temporality.

In the case of Grebenshikov, this is especially interesting given the changing perception of his public role under Soviet and Putin’s regimes. In Prozorov’s reading, Grebenshikov never acted in a clear-cut dissident manner. Yet, under Soviet rule his open and explicit disengagement from the public sphere was readily recognized as a form of resistance. However, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Grebenshikov, although clearly benefiting from the changes, expressed little enthusiasm about the political developments that followed and produced some of his very gloomiest songs. Still later, his acceptance from Putin of the Order of Merit for the Fatherland was seen by many as a renunciation of any sound opposition to sovereign power. Not in Prozorov’s reading though. For him, the evolution of Grebenshikov’s ethos is a story of coming to terms with the central characteristic of Russian postcommunism, bespredel.

Literally translated as a condition of limitlessness, bespredel is also a direct consequence of the reduction of Russian political order to pure potentiality. The problem here consists in a ‘paradoxical conjunction of extreme potentiality and utter impossibility, whereby the absence of limits to the practice of freedom consumes the experience of freedom itself in the perpetual deferral of its actualization’. Hence the task: articula-

Alexander Astrov
Tumulting with reason

Filippo Del Lucchese, Conflict, Power and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: Tumult and Indignation, Continuum, London and New York, 2009. 192 pp., £65.00 hb., 978 1 44115 962 2.

On the very brink of the English civil war, Thomas Hobbes was compelled to argue that it is a ‘great hindrance’ to civil government when no distinction is made ‘between a People and a Multitude’ (De Cive). A people is nothing if not of a piece, consisting entirely in its capacity to act as one (‘one will,’ ‘one action’). A multitude is dissolve and tends towards dispersion; unable to hold itself together, it does not act, it only unbinds. The act par excellence of the people is the sacrifice of its sovereignty; it brings itself into existence by collectively surrendering its power for the security of a terrorized peace. The integrity of a people secures the abbreviation of its power in the body of a king. It is impossible, then, for a people to rebel, for the ‘King is the People’ (my emphasis). The identity of king and people is strict. This is not only a political prescription, it is an ontological proposition. The multitude, in turn, knows only revolt. It is the eruption of a wild supplement at the heart of the city, unruly and uncouth, at once a residue of the incivility of nature and a remnant left over from the historical constitution of the popular One. When men, Hobbes writes, do not distinguish between people and multitude, they are ‘tainted’ by mere opinions – passions, not reason – and so ‘do easily Tumult’.

Filippo Del Lucchese’s Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza takes this ease with which the multitude tumults as its point of departure. It aspires to reconstitute what Del Lucchese calls the ‘rationality of the multitude’. The multitude tumults with ease not because it lets itself go, prey to passion and opinion, but because its revolts are the manifestation of a logical and ontological consistency that the entire history of modern political thought has laboured to suppress. Machiavelli and Spinoza are presented as two prongs of an assault on this tradition. Del Lucchese brings the two thinkers together in convincing ways, tracing the overt textual evidence of Machiavelli’s effect on Spinoza, while also placing them in a general configuration of thought, outside any dubious question of influence. His book is a historical reconstruction of a moment just before the consolidation of our contemporary political imaginary, dominated by contractualist accounts of the formation of the city, a moment ravaged by conflicts internal to the polis, peasant rebellions, and religious and civil wars. Yet Del Lucchese’s project is not simply a historical account of a specific moment in the history of political thought. It also represents a contribution to the excavation of what Althusser called the ‘underground’ materialist current of philosophy, stretching from Epicurus and Lucretius to Marx by way of Spinoza and Machiavelli, a tradition characterized by its anti-finalism, its primacy of the encounter over form, and its suppression of the modal category of the possible in favour of necessary contingency.

Conflict, Power and Multitude breaks up into three thematic cores that do not quite correspond to the book’s title: realism, conflict and multitude. Each section proceeds from the ‘ontological’ plane in order then to address the fields of politics, history, law and epistemology. Machiavelli’s political realism, founded on the recursive relation between virtue and fortune, is read as an ontology, concerned with the ‘conception of nature, the idea of causality [and] the role of necessity in human events’; Spinoza’s account of the conflictual dynamics of individual modes is said to propose a politics and a theory of law. Machiavelli’s ‘realist’ theory of fortuna, in the section on realism, is treated as an ‘absolute negation of contingency’ and recast as an overdetermined occasion that gives rise to the virtue that will, or will not, seize it. This temporality scanned by occasional openings to be filled or left empty gives rise, Del Lucchese argues, to a paradoxical ‘hope’ whose condition is a world drained of all possible ends. The second section, on conflict, focuses in part on Spinoza’s theory of the individual mode and its ‘primal drive to resistance’ to the forces of decomposition that threaten it from within and without. This same resistance characterizes the ‘multiple individual’; it bands together as a tense field of internal differentiation, affirming itself through its irreducibly conflictual brushes with constituted power. For both Machiavelli and Spinoza, conflict is not an anomaly, a localized troubling of the social peace. It is the constant throb of collective force, the engine of democratic organization.

The most ambitious chapter of Conflict, Power and Multitude, on the ‘rationality of the multitude’, comes fittingly at the end. Del Lucchese examines Spinoza’s theory of the ‘multiple individual’ as an ontological category that corresponds, on the political and epistemological planes, to the practice of democracy (‘self-organization’ as a ‘complex multiplicity of individuals’) and to Spinoza’s enigmatic third type of knowledge.
(or scientia intuitiva). ‘The question is what links the conditions that enable the development of the highest kind of knowledge, and ultimate of wisdom, with the collective dimension of the multitude, specifically in the form of … a multitude that has self-organized itself into a democracy?’ Del Lucchese reconstructs Spinoza’s ambiguous allusions to this form of knowledge that – unlike imaginary constructions derived from sensible experience and the abstract, general laws of the common notions – taps directly into the ‘singular essence of things’. By linking this knowledge, at once rational and affective, to the ‘absolute’ form of politics (as Spinoza characterizes democracy), Del Lucchese argues that this ‘science’ of the political is less a contemplation of the singular than a practice of singularities. A form of knowledge is, finally, a ‘form-of-life’. The form-of-life of the multitude consists in the scientific articulation of self-organization and revolt. The rationality of the multitude is the knowledge of its own nature – that is, its own laws: it knows that it is ‘right’ to rebel. It tumults with good reason. Conflict, Power and Multitude reconstructs a moment in the history of thought with great rigour, a reconstruction that is an important contribution to the reactivation of an ‘alternative modernity’ and, more generally, to the underground current of materialist thought. Del Lucchese transforms a series of concepts (law, conflict, the occasion, democracy, multitude, ‘commonality’) that are absolutely contemporary, even if – or perhaps because – they are drawn from texts written on the threshold of political modernity. The book is also acutely sensitive to its intervention in the present, its persuasive textual analyses framed with and against contemporary political thought (Agamben, Nancy, Rancière). The limits of Del Lucchese’s project can, however, be discerned in his identification of ‘conflict’ – it is the subject of the book’s second section, but plays a structuring role throughout – with resistance. Del Lucchese argues that the ‘primal drive for resistance’ that founds Spinoza’s theory of individual modes should be understood in this way: ‘where there is power, there is resistance’ and, beyond this Foucauldian formula, ‘wherever there is life, there is resistance’. It is this reversibility of power and resistance, undoubtedly present in the texts of Spinoza, which can no longer be taken for granted. Indeed, one might venture that it will be necessary, in order to understand the nature of conflict and even ‘violence’ in its contemporary forms, to take leave of this logic of power altogether. Jacques Rancière, whom Del Lucchese also invokes in these pages, argues, for example, that conceiving the specificity of political processes requires abandoning the concept of power per se – and, by the same measure, resistance. Rancière proposes, instead, replacing the reversibility of power and resistance with the ‘heterogeneity’ of two logics, those of the police and the political. ‘Nothing is political in itself’, Rancière insists, ‘merely because power relationships are at work in it’. The mere presence of the police is not enough to trigger a political sequence. Perhaps, then, what is necessary for the exercise of collective political virtue is a supplement of some kind, an intrusion that cannot be explained by a given situation’s relations of force: an event, or, to use Machiavelli’s own term, an ‘occasion’.

Jason E. Smith

Endemic


In early August 2003, some 10,000 people fled for their lives and at least 300 civilians were killed as pro-government militias took over the town of Kutum in Western Sudan. In an unprecedented move, the governor of North Darfur, Osman Youssef Kibir, confirmed that the civilians were slaughtered by ‘a misled and unrestrained group’ of militiamen claiming to support the government. Kibir, however, denied any government responsibility. Many were not convinced. They pointed out that since the militias who had conducted the campaign were armed and trained by the government, then the hawks in Khartoum must have had the upper hand and were determined to crush the revolt led by the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), which had emerged from the Darfur Liberation Front.

The SLA had taken up arms in February 2003 claiming that the government had ‘introduced policies of marginalization, racial discrimination, and exploitation, that had disrupted the peaceful co-existence between the region’s African and Arab communities’. The SLA had then apparently seized Kutum to use as a bargaining chip but with no intention of holding it. So when fighting broke out on the town’s outskirts, precipitating a flood of refugees, the SLA retreated and the militias moved in. Many erroneously saw these events as marking the beginnings of what has come to be known as the Darfur tragedy. The unfolding of the tragedy was manna from heaven for those myriad

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loobbies with either anti-Arab or anti-Muslim agendas. The powerful Christian Right lobby in the USA, for example, quickly seized upon it to chastise Khartoum's Muslim rulers and by so doing provided added fodder to George W. Bush's White House in its so-called War on Terror. The conflict was depicted as one in which 'black farmers' ('non-Arab' or 'African') were pitted against 'pro-Arab militias' called Janjaweed ('men on horseback').

The earlier pronouncements of the anti-Khartoum protagonists, which betrayed their intent, were taken as gospel truth by Western media which went along with their analyses of how 'Muslim Arabs' were committing acts of 'genocide' against 'black Africans'. As such, a lazy section of the Western media left unchallenged, and even parroted, the earlier assertion by the Christian Right that 'Muslim Arabs' were indeed butchering 'black African Christians'. Of course, it did not take long for them to realize that the Darfur conflict in fact pitted Muslims against Muslims. The tragedy was thus largely viewed through the prism of race. Unfortunately, this simplistic category of identity is not to be relied on in such a molten and intricate society with its ever-shifting alliances, and in which racial categorizations between 'Arabs' and 'Africans' are so fluid that they are tenuous. This is true of Darfur – an area the size of France, with large deposits of uranium, copper and oil – as it is true of the whole of Northern Sudan. In his intellectually coruscating and challenging book *Saviours and Survivors: Darfur, Politics and the War on Terror* Mahmood Mamdani undermines certain assumptions about these categorizations, and indeed about what Darfur and the responses to it are all about. The anti-Arab and anti-Islam lobbies, which coalesce in the Save Darfur Movement, view these assumptions as sacrosanct. However, in intent, they and their responses, including humanitarian intervention, are nothing but ideological. The Save Darfur campaigners, for example, have been deliberately obscurantist by distorting the dynamics of the conflict and by insisting on conjectures that ignore some of the salient factors that underpin this conflict. What is thus refreshing and surprising about Mamdani's book is its confidence in challenging these assumptions and the degree to which he is able to bring fresh insights into the origins of the Darfur crisis, its dynamics, the response of the humanitarian agencies, and how Darfur was used as a justification for Bush's War on Terror. He has succeeded in putting into proper context the UN and African Union interventions together with the mediation efforts of Africa's top diplomat, Salim Ahmed Salim.

The genesis of the Darfur conflict can be traced to the armed tribal clashes that have been endemic to the region since Sudan's independence. These intensified as a civil war (1987–89) between local militias, but, as Mamdani notes, each of the militias had its own ethnic identification and none was organized along racial lines. The government got sucked into the conflict after the Islamist coup in 1989 and the opposition parties joined in the fray in 2002–03. Never has this been a conflict between 'Africans' and 'Arabs', however.

Mamdani – who has earned a reputation of going against the current, including that of fellow leftist academics – dares to ask some other rather germane questions also, such as, why do we call the killings in Darfur genocidal but not those in Iraq, where not only are the figures higher than those for Darfur, 'but the proportion of violent deaths in relation to the total excess mortality is also far higher in Iraq than in Darfur: 38 percent to nearly 92 percent in Iraq, but 20 to 30 percent in Darfur.' The sensationalist allegations of 'genocide' in Darfur had been routinely peddled by the Bush administration, despite the fact that they were disputed by well-informed aid agencies, including Médecins Sans Frontières.

The book's historical narrative is highly informed. Mamdani's discussion of the Islamist ideologue Hassan al Turabi brought back fond memories of the two-hour discussions that I once had with him in his north Khartoum villa one evening in January 1996. Then he was the éminence grise of President Omar Hassan al Bashir and was regarded by many as the chief architect of the Islamist government that was installed in Sudan in the early 1990s. Now, espousing what some see as African Islamism, he is a key opponent of the al-Bashir regime but an ardent supporter of the Dafuris in their struggle against the centre of power. Mamdani has also done well in documenting the travails of Darfuri intellectuals, including the London-exiled Ahmed Ibrahim Diraige, the first chairman of the Dafur Development Front when it was formed in 1964, later governor of Northern Darfur, and the first and only Darfuri cabinet minister when he was appointed in the Umma Party government in 1968.

Many books have been written about Darfur, some competently, but what distinguishes Mamdani's is the depth of research that has gone into it and the non-partisan way that he has approached his subject. It is well researched, well sourced, methodologically well grounded and well argued. This is scholarship as it should be.

Ahmed Rajab
From 24 September to 2 October 2009, students from the University of California, Santa Cruz occupied and blockaded the University’s graduate student commons: nominally in protest against the cuts in education spending in the UC system, more generally against the entire educational machine and the meagre job prospects awaiting graduates who will be saddled with tens of thousands of dollars of debt. It is not surprising that these protests should originate in California. The state is bankrupt, with some even speculating on it being the country’s first failed state. However, although the occupation movement was born from these circumstances, what differentiates it from the more conventional protests and rallies on California’s campuses is the way it has sought to use this issue as a rallying cry to re-energize a more radical, universal opposition to the prevailing state of affairs. As its main theoretical text, *Communiqué from an Absent Future*, puts it, the aim is ‘to create the conditions for the transcendence of reformist demands and the implementation of a truly communist content’ (see http://wewanteverything.wordpress.com/2009/09/24/communique-from-an-absent-future/).

How should we take this use of the word ‘communist’ to ‘demand not a free university, but a free society’? A passing fad of ‘hipster insurrectionists’; a semantic land grab by anarchists in order to add edginess to their provocations; or simply nostalgia, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the failure of all post-Cold War forms of left activism to challenge neoliberalism and create a new world? It could of course be all these things, or perhaps none of them. It is, however, surely a measure of the continuing weakness of the radical Left that such movements seem worth commenting on. After all, the student occupations at UCSC have been a short-lived and limited affair so far, in spite of the disastrous circumstances in California. Even though they have prompted sit-ins at the University of California at Berkeley and Fresno State, inspired an occupation at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, and garnered statements of solidarity from the Greek anarchist collectives based in the Exarchia district of Athens, we are still looking at a very small movement in numerical terms. Its seemingly global scope belies its localized marginality.

At the same time, it is easy to miss turning points, or the co-implication of political concepts with even relatively marginal political acts. The cynical response that the way the word ‘communism’ has of late re-emerged from the ghetto of dwindling Stalinist and Trotskyite party politics is just a new gloss on anarcho-syndicalism doesn’t take the power of words, or our historical-political situation, seriously enough. To get a feel for the novelty of the way the word ‘communism’ is being claimed by the occupation movement – one that would otherwise be considered simply anarchist – it is thus worth considering, by way of contrast, the state of party-based communist politics today. Only in this historical context do the differences become clear between *Communiqué from an Absent Future* and the stylistically similar, Situationist-inspired text of the French Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (for which see Alberto Toscano, ‘The War Against Pre-Terrorism’, *RP* 154, March/April 2009, pp. 2–7).

**Communist politics as we know it, and knew it**

Historically, communist politics is firmly associated with the party formation, and if there is one phenomenon in relation to which the decline of communism is charted, it is the decline of such parties across the world. To understand the antinomies this introduces into any attempt to reconstitute communism in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to understand that the main point of distinction between the parties nowadays is the extent to which they engage in the horse-trading of coalition-building as a strategy of influence. So, for example, what divides the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) in France from, say, Italy’s Rifondazione Comunista is that whereas Rifondazione...
entered into coalition with Romano Prodi’s short-lived administration – and was irrevocably compromised by voting for reactionary measures on Afghanistan, and so forth – the NPA has made it a founding principle not to enter into coalition with France’s Socialist Party and has remained outside government. An unenviable choice then: Rifondazione’s horse-trading, inevitably leading to compromise, or the NPA’s absolutism, leading to a certain passivity and/or marginalization in the face of the rational calculation of political realities.

It is not enough to frame this problem through a traditional critique of these parties, and to denounce their leaderships or ideologies. Rather, the electoral figures show a consistency of marginality no matter the variables. For instance, despite the stories of the spectacular growth in membership of the Japanese Communist Party early in 2009, and despite the fact that Japan has been one of the hardest hit of the industrial economies in the global financial crisis, during the election in August their share of the vote actually fell, from 7.25 per cent (in 2005) to 7 per cent. A similar pattern repeats itself with the electoral results of the NPA, who failed to win any seats in the European elections. And despite the massive popular unrest since the December uprising, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) saw their share of the vote for the parliamentary elections drop to 7.5 per cent. There is a consistent pattern: almost no matter what the organizational model, or ideological niche pursued, traditional communist parties show no sign of anything other than decline (highlighting why debates as to which of these are really communist parties, or reformist or revolutionaries, are mostly irrelevant).

What this analysis make clear is that the relationship of the current occupation movement to party politics is far from, for example, the relationship of the Situationist International to the French Communist Party from the 1950s to the 1970s – as some traditionalist communists might see it. Whereas Situationism came out of a similar ideological hotpotch of anti-totalitarian thought, counter-culturalism and impatience with the institutions of the day, the fact remains that they were positioned in a dialectical tension with a strong, mostly pro-Soviet Communist Party that still had some realistic chance of seizing power. The same could broadly be said of the associated anarchist-communist split; functionally, anarchism amounted (albeit with a few counter-examples, such as in the Spanish Civil War) to a kind of moralizing counterpart to the authoritarian tendencies of Marxism–Leninism in the twentieth century, forming what might in liberal theory be approvingly conceived of as an agonistic equilibrium.

Dialectically, then, the relationship between student insurrectionary ideas of communism, and communism as pursued through party politics from the 1960s until today, is fundamentally refigured by the collapse in the potentiality of the communist parties to take power. So where once the nihilist position of a group such as the Situationists played a performative role, now we could argue that nihilism is a position fully cognizant of reality. When the students in Vienna sloganize their rejection of politics as rational calculation – ‘We refuse to subjugate ourselves to the logic of politics and economy!’ – this has a certain rational irrationality it did not have in the past. Moreover, with regard to the way the terms ‘anarchist’ and ‘communist’ are used to describe this disposition, in so far as it seems almost unimaginable that we will witness a global wave of communist vanguard revolutions (even in Nepal, Prachanda’s Maoist Party has, for instance, played the democratic game and instituted neoliberal economic policies), the relationship between communism and anarchism should today be taken to infer points of distinction beyond the question of the party and the role of the state. What marks the difference rests with the question of how productively to engage in the context of political nihilism.

From the coming insurrection to the absent future

Consider the differences between the UCSC student movement’s text and the stylistically proximal manifesto of the French anarchist collective, the Tarnac 9. There are ample similarities in terms of style and tactics – voluntarism, rejection of reformism, levelling of total critique – but there are also differences that point to a more nuanced and, dare we say it, ‘realistic’ form of political nihilism. Alberto Toscano has described The Coming Insurrection an ‘anti-urbanist libertarian anarchism’ marked by its ‘indifference’ to ‘a Marxist discourse of class struggle, and [a] delinking of anti-capitalism from class politics’ (RP 154, p. 5). To this, he provides the following rejoinder: ‘it is doubtful that actions with “no leader, no claim, no organization, but words, gestures, conspiracies” may be taken as a model for organized emancipatory politics.’ It is easy to agree with Toscano that the total critique of The Coming Insurrection exists in complete separation from immanent possibilities of social transformation; perversely via their overidentification with immediate experimentation and realization in the ‘now’. It is therefore not surprising that such a position defaults
to a ruralist, rejectionist posture. Despite rhetorical similarities to to the UCSC occupation movement’s text, there are, then, significant differences.

For one thing, whereas the title of the Invisible Committee’s text has a portentous tenor of affirmation, the UCSC movement’s emphasis on the ‘absent future’ registers a profound uncertainty. This could be viewed thematically – the absent future being the non-future for debt-straddled graduates – but there are indications throughout the text that this should also be read politically. The analysis puts forward a full-scale critique of any notion of islands of respite from the logic of capitalism, arguing that all eventually become subsumed. Similarly, putting their action at a distance from the student activism of the past, they argue:

The old student struggles are the relics of a vanished world… their mode of radicalization, too tenuously connected to the economic logic of capitalism, prevented that alignment from taking hold. Because their resistance to the Vietnam War focalized critique upon capitalism as a colonial war-machine, but insufficiently upon the exploitation of domestic labour, students were easily split off from a working class facing different problems.

The first couple of pages operate with a deadpan humour. In regard to graduate school and all those PhD candidates and teaching assistants dreaming that ‘I will be a star, I will get the tenure track position’, the manifesto states:

A kind of monasticism predominates here, with all the Gothic rituals of a Benedictine Abbey, and all the strange theological claims for the nobility of this work, its essential altruism. The underlings are only too happy to play apprentice to the masters, unable to do the math indicating that nine-tenths of us will teach 4 courses every semester in order to pad the paychecks of the one-tenth…

Where the text really takes off, however, is with its introduction of a Marxist economic analysis of the relationship between labour and capital, in its second section. This points to the limits of any reformist settlement for the public university in an advanced capitalist system:

Between 1965 and 1980 profit rates began to fall, first in the US, then in the rest of the industrializing world…. For public education, the long downturn meant the decline of tax revenues due to both declining rates of growth and the prioritization of tax-breaks for beleaguered companies…. Though it is not directly beholden to the market, the university and its corollaries are subject to the same cost-cutting logic as other industries: declining tax revenues have made inevitable the casualization of work…. We cannot free the university from the exigencies of the market by calling for the return of the public education system.

So far, so agreeable. Equally, in distinction to the anarchist emphasis on maintaining worker co-operatives as the immediate realization of non-hierarchical, anti-capitalist social relations within the capitalist swamp, the text insists upon the necessity of a revolutionary procedure. Unsurprisingly, however, it is in how this could be achieved that things become a bit murky.

Communiqué takes inspiration from the anti-CPE movement in France, which ‘manifested a growing tension between revolution and reform’. Yet aside from criticizing those elements within the movement making reformist demands, they stop far short of saying what, in the absence of a vanguard party willing to conduct a popular coup d’état, could bridge popular mobilization and revolution. Rather, the text endorses the tactics of the Greek December uprising, which made ‘almost no demands’; not because ‘they considered it a better strategy, but because they wanted nothing that any of these institutions could offer’. The fact that the uprising resulted in a social swing to the far Right, a siege of the semi-autonomous Exarchia district, and politically, and paradoxically, the election of a centre-left political dynasty – all of this remains uncommented-upon.

Making no demands, then, because all demands are effectively recuperated within the system, is tied to a strictly nihilist position in which actions are firmly divorced from the necessity of concrete results.

This form of nihilist anti-statist politics is quite different from that recently advocated by Simon Critchley. Unlike in Critchley’s neo-anarchist idea of making infinite demands upon the system which it cannot possibly fulfil, in order to act as a non-statist procedure for change, the Communiqué attempts to circumvent any legitimation of capitalism or the bourgeois state, and the cynical tacit interplay of the militant and political insider. In reconstituting the idea of communism in the twenty-first century, the position advocated by the UCSC occupation movement is probably the right one. It posits no obvious idea of how a non-party-based, non-statist communism could be realized or sustained. But holding on to a Marxist analysis, analysing social relations as totality, and rejecting any romantic recourse to the wishful thinking of the noble insurgency or long-term islands of non-capitalist workplaces, it is perhaps as good a position to occupy as any other in the idealational interregnum of the present.

Nathan Coombs