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The Question of Caster Semenya

Mandy Merck

Caster Semenya, the South African runner, won the 800 metre gold medal at the World Championships. What did Pierre Weiss, head of the world athletics governing body, say in response to questions about her sex?

The Times Sport Quiz, 26 December 2009

What indeed? The question of Caster Semenya’s sex has been posed far beyond the purviews of sport since last August, when the middle-distance runner set the fastest time of the year in her event at 1 minute 55.45 seconds, an extraordinary 2.5 seconds faster than the silver medallist. In the previous month the eighteen-year-old had broken her own personal best in the 800 metres by 7.5 seconds. Such a rapid improvement typically triggers a doping test, which is what Athletics South Africa told Semenya they were conducting in early August. In fact, the confidential investigation was performed by a gynaecologist and prompted in part by a sports blog allegation that she was ‘born a hermaphrodite’. Despite a warning from the South African team doctor that further tests at the World Championships could be traumatic for the athlete, the ASA then sent Semenya to Berlin, where after her semi-final victory she was submitted to media questioning and a ‘gender test’ announced publicly on the day before the final. When she nevertheless won the gold medal, the International Association of Athletics Federations withdrew her from the winner’s press conference and let Weiss answer the questions. His reply: ‘It is clear that she is a woman but maybe not 100 per cent.’

The resulting protests drew a variety of racial analogies, with Guardian journalist Anna Kessel noting the irony of South Africa’s tribute to its ethnic diversity, the eleven-language national anthem ‘Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika’ being played over the silenced Semenya as she accepted her gold medal.1 At home Semenya’s treatment was widely denounced as racist, and African National Congress MP Mandla Mandela, grandson of Nelson, argued that ‘as an African athlete she has been the victim of prejudice.’2 The story of Saartjie Baartman, a slave of Dutch farmers near Cape Town who was taken to Europe to be publicly exhibited in 1810, was repeatedly invoked. Baartman was a Khoisan woman from the Eastern Cape whose curvaceous figure, with large breasts and very prominent buttocks, made her a lucrative attraction in London and Paris. Advertised as ‘the Hottentot Venus’, she sang and danced in scanty clothing for paying spectators. When Baartman died, at the tragically early age of twenty-six, her skeleton and organs were preserved and displayed at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1974. It was not until 2002, after repeated requests by Nelson Mandela, that her remains were repatriated and buried with due ceremony in her homeland.3

Baartman’s expansively feminine features would seemingly make her the obverse of the muscular, broad-shouldered Semenya, were it not for another characteristic that led the French to exhibit her genitals as well as her brain and bones. Like those of some
other Khoisan women, her inner labia were unusually long, signifying to nineteenth
century anthropology the commensurately outsized libido and gender ambiguity
often assigned to African women. Although no similar condition has been attributed
to Semenya, the indignity of Baartman’s genital exposure was clearly recalled when
South African MPs compared her treatment to the investigation by the IAAF, who
subjected the athlete to reported examinations by a gynaecologist, an endocrinologist, a
psychologist and a ‘gender expert’. Soon afterwards leaked reports of the IAAF findings
appeared in the media, headlined in the New York Daily News ‘Caster Semenya, forced
to take gender test, is a woman … and a man’:

The 18-year-old South African champ has no womb or ovaries … According to a source
with knowledge of the IAAF tests, Semenya has internal testes – the male sexual organs that
produce testosterone. Testosterone is a hormone responsible for building muscles and for
producing body hair and a deep voice.

The test of sex

Semenya’s outing as an alleged ‘intersexual’ (a term now almost as disputed as the
derogatory ‘hermaphrodite’) publicized the limits of sexual dualism in a way not seen
since 1993, when the biologist and historian of science Anne Fausto-Sterling startled
the readers of the New York Times by asking ‘How Many Sexes Are There?’ Deploiring
the dualist constraints of the pronoun system in which she wrote, she introduced the lay
public to three additional sex types, people with ‘one testis and one ovary’, those who
‘have ovaries and some aspect of the male genitalia but lack testes’, and the category
that the media would later assign to Semenya, those who ‘have testes and some aspect
of female genitalia but no ovaries’. Fausto-Sterling’s description of the by-then recog
nized taxonomies as ‘at least five sexes – perhaps even more’ was merely the latest
provocation in her series of influential challenges to the presumption that human beings
are dichotomously divided in biology, psychology or intellect.

Encouraged by her Times article, the Intersex Society of North America was soon
established to campaign against the medical mismanagement of non-typical gender
conditions. Among its educational strategies was the design of a ‘phall-o-meter’ to
illustrate the medical wisdom that then ordained the surgical reduction or enclosure of
infant genitalia bigger than 0.85 but smaller than 2.0 centimetres. Further procedures on
female-assigned intersexual infants have included the construction or expansion of the
vagina, labio-scrotal reduction and extensive hormone treatment, procedures that may
cause scarring and pain, reduce or obviate sexual pleasure and threaten psychological
and physical health – all without consent of the patient. Meanwhile, intersexual infants
assigned as males may have experienced multiple surgeries to secure ‘proper’ genital
function, interpreted as a socially convincing and sexually penetrative penis, rather than
one that offers pleasure to its owner. Informing these practices were assumptions that
valued ‘aggressiveness and sexual potency for boys and passiveness and reproductive/
sexual–receptive potential for girls’ as well as the designation of homosexuality
and blurred gender identities as ‘bad outcomes’. To challenge such practices and the
secrecy that has surrounded them, a coalition of patients, clinicians and psychologists
began agitating to defer treatment until the subject is able to grant informed consent,
eventually developing new protocols for care predicated on honesty, the patient’s active
decision-making, psychosocial support, the avoidance of stigma and the recognition of
varying sexual norms.

But as Fausto-Sterling later warned in Sexing the Body, the acceptance of intersex
conditions need not rule out sexual hierarchies, or even sexual dualism. Traditional
cultures within New Guinea and the Dominican Republic recognize a locally occurring
congenital condition in children with XY chromosomes, involving a tiny penis/clitoris,
undescended testes and a divided scrotum, as a third sex. Nevertheless, after the
virilization of these individuals via naturally produced testosterone at puberty, they usually identify with the dominant masculinity of their culture in a system recognizing three body types but only two (unequal) gender roles. Bowing to Suzanne Kessler’s critique of the primacy her five-sex system gave to physical rather than ‘cultural genitals: the genitals one is assumed to have under one’s clothing’, Fausto-Sterling abandoned any precise enumeration of the sexes. Instead, challenging the enforced conformity of social and anatomical gender, Sexing the Body opposed sex registration at birth and sex testing for athletes.

Asked to comment on the Semenya case, Fausto-Sterling joined former IAAF medical commission chair Arne Ljunqvist in observing that high levels of testosterone do not in themselves create a competitive advantage, since not all intersexed individuals have receptors sensitive to it. As comment proliferated, Sexing the Body’s estimate that 1.7 per cent of children may be born with some form of intersex conditions (‘roughly 115 million individuals on the planet’) circulated in the blogosphere. Eventually the controversy even reached the London Review of Books. Writing on its blog, Judith Butler observed that the investigations of Semenya’s sex by a panel of experts suggested that sex-determination is decided by consensus and, conversely, where there is no consensus, there is no determination of sex. Is this not a presumption that sex is a social negotiation of some kind? And are we, in fact, witnessing a massive effort to socially negotiate the sex of Semenya, with the media included as party to the deliberations?

For sports administrators, Semenya’s suspect anatomy revived anxieties over sexual norms first registered at the Berlin Olympics of 1936, notorious for Hitler’s attempt to discourage Jewish competitors and his rage at the four gold medals won by the black American Jesse Owens. Long forgotten is the contretemps surrounding the eventual gold and silver medal winners in the women’s 100-metre sprint, the US runners Stella Walsh and Helen Stephens. Both women’s facial structure and musculature raised suspicions of gender impersonation, and when Stephens won the Olympic committee ordered an examination of her genitals, which were pronounced female. (After her death in 1980 Walsh was discovered to have ambiguous genitalia.) But it was not until 1966, when Cold War rivalries focused on the highly successful Russian athletes Tamara and Irina Press, that compulsory physical examinations for all female competitors were introduced for athletics championships. Before they could be examined, the Press sisters withdrew from all further competition.

By the 1968 Olympics, the invidious parade of naked female competitors passing investigating physicians was replaced by cytological analysis for a feature found only in cells with XX sex chromosomes. But humans may exhibit a variety of sometimes contradictory chromosomal and physiological characteristics. To take only two examples, children with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS) are born with XY chromosomes but feminine genitalia, while children with Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia are born with XX chromosomes but may have masculine genitals. So in 1991, analysis for the SRY gene then believed to determine male foetal development succeeded chromosomal testing. But when eight entrants to women’s competitions in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics were found to have the SRY gene, further examination identified AIS in seven, and another condition known as ‘5-alpha-reductase deficiency’ in the eighth. Neither is deemed to produce unfair physiological advantages and all eight were allowed to compete. Subsequently the SRY gene was discovered to be absent in some individuals with testes and the chromosomal formation 46XX, leaving the question of sex determination unresolved. With no deliberate gender misrepresentation ever established in athletics, by 1999 compulsory gender verification, already abandoned by the IAAF, was also discontinued for the Olympics. Yet the IAAF retains the option of sex assessment in what they regard as suspicious cases, despite the American Medical Association’s
argument that testing women athletes (and only women, since no sporting advantage is discerned in male femininity) is discriminatory, stigmatizing, expensive and potentially inaccurate. Thus in 2006 Indian track star Santhi Soundarajan was stripped of her Asian Games silver medal in the 800 metres after failing her gender test. Despite a later diagnosis of AIS, the devastated athlete abandoned competition. As three British scientists reviewing the evidence conclude,

> there is no evidence that female athletes with DSDs [disorders of sex development] have displayed any sports-relevant physical attributes which have not been seen in biologically normal female athletes. However, numerous female athletes have been unfairly barred from competing.¹

Ironically, Semenya's winning time in the Berlin 800 metres did not threaten the extraordinarily long-standing world record of 1:53.28 set in 1983 by the Czech runner Jarmila Kratochvilova, who ran a world-record 400 metres a few days later. A sports doctor who examined Kratochvilova at the time pronounced her strongly muscled shoulders, arms and thighs not those ‘of a normal physiological female body’, but Kratochvilova's silver medal at the 1980 Olympics indicated that she had passed the then-chromosomal sex test. Remarking on her resemblance to Semenya, the conservative UK journalist Dominic Lawson joined a number of commentators in calling for an end to the sex segregation of sport, comparing it to ‘the rigidity of South Africa’s former apartheid laws’. But unlike those who proposed open competition divided, like boxing, into weight levels, or who pointed out that Semenya’s first sport had been soccer – from whose male professional ranks Maribel Dominguez was officially excluded after a Mexican team had offered her a contract in 2005, and whose South African lesbian star Eudy Simelane was ‘correctively’ raped and murdered in 2008 – Lawson seized the opportunity to attack the telecasting of women’s sports and then moved on to transsexuals:

> the modern interpretation of sexual identity … demands that we ascribe to individuals the gender they believe they are, or want to be, even when it conflicts with that assigned to them by their genes. This is why it is socially correct at drinks parties or other public events to treat a pre-operative transsexual as a woman, even if you are all too aware of the five o’clock shadow under the foundation and of hands that look capable of twisting the tops off bottles.²

Lawson was merely repeating the views of Germaine Greer, who had previously responded to the Semenya affair by observing that ‘in sport sex discrimination that is illegal everywhere else is the rule’, whereas in other social spheres

> Nowadays we are all likely to meet people who think they are women, have women’s names, and feminine clothes and lots of eyeshadow, who seem to us to be some kind of
ghastly parody, though it isn’t polite to say so. We pretend all the people passing for female really are.

Despite their lip service to anti-discrimination, both commentators certified the male-dominated regime of sport as the last bastion of reality, in which women's endeavours are, to quote Lawson, ‘inherently inferior’ and counter-genetic sexual identities invalid. To the protests of intersex activists, Semenya’s alleged gender irregularity is explicitly equated with transsexuality – crucially, in the case of this black athlete, a ghastly transsexuality, one that must not pass. In terms that signify both sexually and racially, ‘passing’ as well as ‘ghastly’ – with its overtones of the ghostly, the disembodied, or, in the American racist epithet, the ‘spook’ – Greer decried ‘a man’s delusion that he is female’.

These observations echo those of the Olympic official Norman Cox, who in the late 1940s responded to black women’s track and field success with the suggestion that a special category of competition should be created for those ‘hermaphrodites’ who so often defeated ‘normal’, ‘childbearing’ women. Seventy years later, similar reactions greeted Semenya’s victories. But, as Greer herself concluded, ‘doesn’t all competitive sport canonize and glamorize the exploitation of genetic advantage? Who said life was fair?’ Again, she was not alone. For every opinion piece on the ontology of sex, the Semenya affair provoked just as many on equity in sport. In the New Yorker, Ariel Levy argued that professional basketball ‘has had several players with acromegaly – the overproduction of growth hormone. Michael Phelps, who has won fourteen Olympic gold medals, has unusually long arms and is said to have double-jointed elbows, knees, and ankles. Is Caster Semenya’s alleged extra testosterone really so different?’

Similarly, Carole Cadwalladr asked in the London Observer, ‘Should sprinters of West African ancestry, who dominate the medal boards, compete in a different class to sprinters of other racial origin? Should the Kenyan and Ethiopian long-distance runners be siphoned off into a league of their own?’ As other commentators pointed out, the historical attribution of ‘unfair advantages’ to blacks and intersexes ignore routinely unremarked differences in childhood nutrition, access to coaching and equipment, training regimes and financial resources more generally. By these criteria Soundarajan, the undernourished child of brick-kiln workers in Southern India, or Semenya, who trained barefoot in a rural district where the black monthly income averages less than £100, would hardly count as advantaged.

The spell of gender

But if sport suffered as badly as sex in this affair, gender may yet survive. As Suzanne Kessler has argued, ‘in the everyday world gender attributions are made without access to genital inspection. There is no sex, only gender, and what has primacy in everyday life is the gender that is performed, regardless of the flesh’s configuration under the clothes.’ With a strikingly perverse spin on queer performativity, intersex activists have elected to stick with the system. A strong opposition persists to any characterization of genital variation as additional gender identity, or indeed identity at all. The varying chromosomal, external and internal sexual characteristics involved do not lend themselves to the creation of a community, or to any necessary engagement with queer politics. And if intersex is not claimed as an issue of sexual identity, still less is it proposed as one of sexual orientation. Not only do the dominant discourses of contemporary advocacy contrast intersex, as gender-variant anatomy, with transsexuality, as gender-variant identity, they also oppose it to homosexuality as gender-variant eroticism. Rejecting the historical parallels with the nineteenth-century nomination of homosexuals as ‘inverts’ or an ‘intermediate sex’, as well as the twentieth-century lesbian and gay opposition to the pathologization of homosexuality, many intersex adults have defended the controversial 2005 medical definition of their conditions as ‘disorders of
sex development’, if only to ensure appropriate medical attention to the health risks sometimes involved.

So how, as parents used to ask about the stain on Monica Lewinsky’s dress, do you answer children’s questions? Psychologist Elizabeth Myer advises that you tell them ‘that a person’s sex is something only a doctor needs to know to provide adequate health care. All we need to know as friends, colleagues, family members, fans, etc. is the gender identity of the person.’16 But when gender is detached from the increasingly recognized variety of bodies, it reverts to twosomes, with all the anxious polarities still operating. Thus, in an online ‘message to the media on the Caster Semenya issue’, the AIS Support Group admonishes: ‘don’t confuse biological intersex with gender dysphoria … the vast majority of our members appear completely female’.17

As of early 2010, the IAAF had repeatedly delayed issuing its final ruling on Semenya’s sex and her eligibility to enter future competitions. While she awaited the decision that will determine her running career, Stella Sandford and I were completing a collection on the American feminist Shulamith Firestone, who forty years ago argued that women’s subordination could no more be abolished within the two-sex system than the proletarian’s could be within capitalism:

just as the end goal of socialist revolution was not only the elimination of the economic class privilege but of the economic class distinction itself, so the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally.18

If there is any answer to the questions about Caster Semenya, it is in the continued relevance of that recommendation.

**Notes**

9. Dominic Lawson, ‘No Sexing, Please – Let’s All Run Together,’ *Sunday Times*, 23 August 2009, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/sport/olympics/olympics/olympics-2009-athletics-article6805788.ece. Lawson’s other example was Shi Pei Pu, the androgynous Chinese spy of *M. Butterfly* fame.
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Marxism and war

Étienne Balibar

War for Marxism is not exactly a concept, but it is certainly a problem. While Marxism could not invent a concept of war, it could re-create it, so to speak – that is, introduce the question of war into its own problematic, and produce a Marxist critique of war, or a critical theory of warfare, war situations and processes, with a completely original content. In a sense, this could be conceived as a kind of test for the capacity of Marxism to establish itself as a genuinely independent discourse. There is a wealth of illuminating analysis in the history of Marxist thought concerning war in general and specific types of war. But something awkward happened: instead of helping to broaden the scope and confirm the coherence of Marxism, the problem of war instead produced a profoundly deconstructive effect, stretching Historical Materialism to its limits and showing that it could not really give an account of these limits.

But there is more than that: the intervention of Marxism in debates around war, therefore also peace and politics, has profoundly disturbed this traditionally symmetrical pattern by imposing the consideration of revolution as an additional term (and, to a large extent, ‘class struggles’ form only the background for the idea of revolution). The disturbing effects on the concept of the political are to be observed not only within Marxism itself but also within so-called ‘bourgeois’ theory. However, seen from the Marxist point of view, as expressed by Marx initially in The Poverty of Philosophy and the Communist Manifesto, the concepts of class struggle and revolution are not political; they anticipate the ‘end of the political state’, or they suppress the autonomy of the political sphere. Conversely, at the end, the combination of ‘war’ and ‘revolution’ as realizations of, and obstacles to, the class struggle appear to be profoundly unpolitical. In other terms, not only does the understanding and managing of war remain a problem for Marxists, not only does it feature as a limit of Historical Materialism, but, through its confrontation with Marxism, the unpolitical character of war emerges into the open. This testifies to the relevance of Marxism as one of the deepest attempts at theorizing politics and the political in modern times, but also it seems to indicate that a ‘Marxist’ solution, or an end to the riddles of any politics of war, remains inaccessible.

It is around these questions, and in order to investigate their implications, that I want to examine the articulation of Marxism and war by successively following three guiding threads, each of which confers a privilege upon certain authors and certain texts. Of course, they are not really independent, they continually overlap, but they deserve to be examined separately. These are, first, the problem of the conceptualization of class struggle in terms of a ‘civil war’ or a ‘social war’; second, the problem of the relationship between capitalism and war, and the ‘capitalist wars’, or the specific form, aims and political consequences of wars within capitalism, from a Marxist viewpoint. A third moment will be devoted to the problem of the historical relationship between revolution and war, and therefore the crucial issue of ‘revolutionary wars’, the dialectical tension between the military and the political elements within revolutionary processes or situations. This leads to disturbing questions concerning the reversal of revolutionary politics into counter-revolutionary politics through the militarization of revolutions.

Class struggle as civil war: a new concept of the political

The equation of the ‘class struggle’ (Klassenkampf) with a ‘civil war’ (Bürgerkrieg) was proposed in the Communist Manifesto and has had lasting consequences in and around Marxism. We need to understand where it came from, what it exactly meant, which difficulties it involved, which traces it left in the Marxist discourse, to become powerfully revived in the Leninist understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In turn, this Leninist revival is crucial if we want to interpret some of the dilemmas that structure political discourse today, especially in the form of what I will

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picture as the alternative between the ‘Schmittian’ and ‘Gramscian’ concepts of the political.

The saliency of this question has been enhanced in recent times by a provocative intervention of Michel Foucault. In his lectures at the Collège de France of 1976, he proposed that, from a critical and historical point of view, the well-known motto from Clausewitz’s Vom Kriege should be inverted: it is not, he writes, war that ought to be considered ‘a continuation (Fortsetzung) of politics by other means’, but rather politics itself that is another form of war. In fact, Foucault says very little about Clausewitz, but he proposes a genealogy of the expression ‘class struggle’ which takes it back to historians who, between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century, interpreted the hierarchies of feudal society and the opposition between aristocrats and bourgeois in terms of a ‘war of races’ arising out of conquest. He sees the notion of the ‘class struggle’ (which, notoriously, Marx never claimed that he had invented himself) as a late by-product of the transformation of the ‘war of races’, just like its rival in the nineteenth century on the counter-revolutionary side: the ‘race struggle’ (der Rassenkampf). This interpretation points at some of the background of the ‘invention’ of the class-struggle-based theory of world history in the Communist Manifesto, and in this sense it is useful. But it also somewhat distorts what is meant in the context and, surprisingly, seems to use against Marx something that he had precisely located at the centre of his theory, namely the idea of an irreconcilable antagonism – whose best name is precisely ‘war’ in a generalized sense.

We have to return to the actual formulations. The equation of the class struggle and a social or a civil war results from two phrases, to be found at the beginning and the end of Chapter 1 of the Communist Manifesto:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruination of the contending classes. …

In depicting the most general phases of development of the proletariat, we traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution, and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundations for the sway of the proletariat. This equation raises a number of exciting problems. First, concerning its immediate sources, which also determine part of its meaning. We know that the text of the Manifesto is a palimpsest: almost every phrase has been borrowed from previous authors, ancient or contemporary, but the result of their combination is strikingly new and original. In this case two contexts are particularly relevant. The very notion of antagonism, of Kantian rather than Hegelian origin, came through the Exposition de la Doctrine Saint-Simonienne, a crucial text which has also provided the binary patterns of ‘exploiting’ and ‘exploited’ classes, starting with slaveholders and slaves, and ending with capitalists and wage-labourers. But the Saint-Simonsians themselves adopted, or even systematized, the idea that would become one of the pillars of the ‘sociological tradition’, namely the idea that industrialization involves an overcoming of the military forms of domination in history, a tendency to replace war by commerce and production. Marx in a sense would reverse this conclusion, explaining that the Industrial Revolution and the process of proletarianization launched just another form of war. In doing this, he recurs to a terminology and a metaphoric discourse that have both a narrow and a wider background. Narrowly speaking it directly draws on the Blanquist discourse of the ‘guerre à mort entre les classes’ – that is, a neo-Jacobin discourse from which a few years later the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ will also derive. The wider background, equally important, concerns the whole discourse critical of the new industrial and bourgeois society in the 1840s in terms of ‘Two Nations’ fighting each other, as in Benjamin Disraeli’s novel, or in terms of ‘guerre sociale’ as in Honoré de Balzac, which we know was enormously influential on Marx and Engels.

On the meaning of this formulation, I concentrate on three points:

1. Although Marx would understand it as a radical critique of the idea of ‘politics’, or the autonomy of politics as defined by party politics after the bourgeois revolutions, the war model for the class struggle undoubtedly involves a new concept of the political. It seems that the best way to understand this is to develop the text’s indication concerning an oscillation between ‘phases’ when the civil war is latent, or invisible, and other ‘phases’ when it becomes open or visible. Politics in the essential sense would precisely concern the transition from one phase to the other, the becoming visible of the latent struggle (therefore also its becoming
conscious, organized) – perhaps also the reverse. Therefore its leading to a decision in the social antagonism, called a ‘victory’ or a ‘defeat’ (and we should never forget the third disturbing possibility: der gemeinsame Untergang der kämpfenden Klassen, a ‘tragic’ case reminiscent of Hegelian formulations concerning the fall of the Ancient civilizations). It would be already very interesting to discuss correspondences between this concept of politics and the one that is involved in Clausewitz’s formula, although Marx and Engels at the time had not read him, but it is actually true that his ‘formula’ becomes here somehow inverted.

2. A representation of the class struggle as a long civil war, covering whole historical epochs and ultimately the whole course of history, implies that classes themselves are pictured as ‘camps’ or ‘armies’. Interestingly this representation of the classes as armies pre-dates any Marxian considerations on the class-party, or class-consciousness, which are subordinated to it.

3. Finally the idea is directly linked to the representation of a polarization of classes, and a catastrophic outcome of the economic process in capitalism. There is a complete teleology involved here. The more we progress in the history of class struggles towards modern capitalism, and the more we progress in the industrial revolution within capitalism itself, the more civil society becomes actually divided into radically exclusive antagonistic groups, external to one another, and the final confrontation will take place when the old social order is entirely dissolved and the bourgeois capitalists have reduced the proletariat to a desperate situation of starvation or revolt – that is, revolution.

All this was to leave profound traces in the Marxist discourse, and, as we will see, after a period of latency it would be reactivated in a new situation in which revolution and catastrophe appeared again closely interrelated. However, in the short run, it was rapidly dropped, and this dropping made the emergence of the Marxian critique of political economy and the Engelsian doctrine of ‘historical materialism’ possible: we have to understand why. My hypotheses are the following:

1. The equation of Klassenkampf and Bürgerkrieg had to be dropped because the revolutions and counter-revolution of 1848 to 1851 displayed a pattern of actual ‘civil wars’ in which the proletariat not only was defeated, but experienced the inadequacy of its representations of the relationship between crises and class politics: the polarization worked in the opposite direction of communism. It also experienced the insufficiency of its understanding of state power and the state apparatus. As a consequence the relationship between the idea of a ‘class army’ and a ‘political party of the whole class’ tended to become reversed.

2. This tragic experience was repeated a number of times in the history of Marxism until today. But also: each new type of civil war would raise new problems concerning the class structure of civil wars, or the way they split and distort class structures.

3. The great exception to this tendency concerns Lenin’s theory and practice of the dictatorship of the proletariat between 1918 and 1921. This revival has had incalculable consequences. Indeed a number of preliminaries would be necessary here, ranging from a discussion of successive understandings of the notion of the ‘dictatorship’ among Marxists to a description of the war conjuncture which prompted Lenin and the Bolsheviks to launch the motto of the transformation of the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war’. Suffice it here to indicate that the dictatorship of the proletariat is conceived by Lenin as a long ‘life and death struggle’ between the old and the new society, which combines military and administrative, violent or ‘terrorist’ and non-violent or mass ‘pedagogical’ tactics, therefore confronts the political leadership (or the party) with a permanent strategic dilemma. In many respects this class war is therefore also a non-war, or an anti-war – just as the state in the dictatorship of the proletariat is pictured as a non-state, or an anti-state, already in the course of its ‘withering away’. And also many dialectical formulations actually cover inextricable riddles, such as how to combine an intensification of the proletarian ideology, which is necessary to forge the unity of the working class as an army, and secure its hegemony over the allied classes, with a progression towards a classless society.

4. Ideally we should finish this first review with a description of the new dilemma that arises out of a reflection on this experience, which I would express in the emblematic form: Carl Schmitt or Antonio Gramsci – which ‘post-Leninist’ concept of the political? Not by chance, this alternative was particularly explored within Italian Marxism or post-Marxism in the 1980s and as a consequence also elsewhere under its influence. Schmitt, to be sure, is not a Marxist, but he had a profound understanding of certain aspects of Marxism, which in turn reacted
on Marxism as a political theory. This comes from the fact that he wanted to build a concept of the 'political' as preventive counter-revolution, in the form of a prevalence of the exterior enemy (i.e. the national enemy) over the internal enemy (the class enemy of the state), but in practice he knows that the suppression of the internal enemy must come first and has to be continuously repeated.¹³ As for Gramsci, his concept of the political is not based on the primacy of the notion of enemy (not even class enemy), but it remains tied to the model of war in a clear manner. The dictatorship of the proletariat becomes here the search for 'hegemony' and its strategic core concerns the different degrees in the 'relationship of forces', which culminate in the superiority of the 'war of position' over the 'war of movement', although this would depend on the circumstances and the structure of the society itself.¹⁴ Rather than a 'suppression of the counter-revolution', the 'war of position' is best described as an alternative to the 'passive revolutions' of the bourgeoisie which carry processes of modernization from above, while pushing back the 'subaltern' strata in the politically dominated function of a pure economic resource.

**War and capitalism**

I will need to be more than schematic on the second issue, which covers an enormous literature: war and capitalism, therefore the historicity of war from the point of view of 'historical materialism'. Historical materialism is a creation of Engels – which is not to say that Marx rejected it. There are different ways of understanding where this general theory is rooted. One of them refers to the extension of the critique of political economy and the Marxian analysis of the capitalist mode of production into a complete scheme of interpretation of the 'law of development' of society and its dialectical transformation into another society or Gesellschaftsformation. But another one, equally decisive, refers to the necessity of providing an understanding of social processes that complicate the class struggle, or even seem to reverse its typical tendency, reducing them 'in the last instance' to the same principle of evolution. Two such critical problems are the problem of religion and the problem of war. Engels addressed them very seriously, especially the second, on which he certainly influenced Marx and played a leading role. This can be explained by his personal experience as an organizer in the military phase of the 1848 Revolution in Germany,¹⁵ but also by his special interest in concrete institutional history.

The 'war' which is now in question is not a class war, neither is it a 'general' or 'generalized' notion of violent antagonism: it is the empirical war – especially the national war, but also some times the civil war, for example, the American Civil War, which drew considerable attention from Marx. A quick look at the Marx–Engels Werke for the years between 1857 and 1870 will show that several volumes are entirely or almost entirely devoted to articles and essays on diplomacy and war inside and outside Europe,¹⁶ which Engels and Marx address simultaneously as European democrats (especially when they attack the counter-revolutionary order imposed by the alliance of Britain and Russia, later turned into rivalry) and as would-be leaders of an international working class which should emerge as an autonomous historical player. Add to this the full volume of descriptive and theoretical essays written by Engels for the New American Cyclopaedia on military categories and past examples of warfare.¹⁷ It is now time to grant this enormous textual corpus its full meaning and assess its role in the creation of historical materialism. But it is also necessary to discuss the extent to which it actually deconstructs the body of theory that it was supposed to build.

My hypothesis here will be that, with Engels, a first critical appropriation of the ideas and problems of Clausewitz's Vom Kriege is taking place (and also of Clausewitz's earlier book on the French-Russian War of 1812), which already acquires a constitutive function. Others will follow, each time shifting the accent to different aspects of what we might call Clausewitz's 'axiomatics' of warfare, and sometimes reversing his interpretations, particularly for what concerns the crucial notions of the distinction between absolute and limited wars, the primacy of the 'moral' factor in modern wars, and the superiority of defensive strategies over offensive strategies in the long run, therefore allowing it to develop in a different manner the idea that war is a 'continuation' of politics by other means. Herfried Münkler speaks of a 'Dialektik des Militarisimus' that Engels would have pursued all through his life, but he also draws our attention to the fact that, under the impact of the contemporary experiences which take us to the early phases of imperialism,¹⁸ Engels had to acknowledge that a 'historical materialist' conception of warfare did not lead to a universal assessment of its relationship to the class struggle, much less to a certainty concerning its role in the transition from capitalism to a classless society.

In Engels's presentation of the dialectic of war and militarism, two different 'contradictions' interact: one concerns the influence of military technology on the
organization of armies and the changes in strategic models (analogous to the development of productive forces), and the effects of the incorporation of the people, or the masses, into conscription armies (analogous to social relationships of production). The other contradiction concerns the increasing role of nation-states and competition among nations, and its antagonistic relationship to the internationalization of economy and the development of internationalism among the working classes. Engels progressively moved from the idea that the race to technological improvements and new weaponry would reach an absolute limit, because it imposed an excessive financial burden on states, to the idea that the arms race was virtually as unlimited as the process of capitalist accumulation itself. And he moved from the conviction that conscription armies would transfer the class struggle within the core of the state apparatus itself to a more hesitant prognosis that the capacity to block the general war between rival capitalist states would depend on the working classes’ own conversion from nationalism to internationalism. From this consideration, which brings a strong element of uncertainty into historical materialism, we can already anticipate Rosa Luxemburg’s dilemma in 1914, when the Great ‘European Civil War’ of the twentieth century would break out in spite of the efforts of pacifists and socialists who had tried to mobilize the working classes of each country against their own governments: Sozialismus oder Barbarei?20

Let me indicate in a programmatic manner three other questions which should be associated with this general problem of a theory of war as constitutive of historical materialism:

1. After Engels the Dialektik des Militarismus becomes transformed into a theory of imperialism, in the form of the idea that when capitalism reaches the ‘stage’ of competition among dominant nations for the colonial appropriation of the world, militarism is no longer a mere consequence but also a motor of the historical development. (Ironically, this socialist idea, widely shared at the time, became later, in fascist states but also in ‘Keynesian’ liberalism, a positive assumption and programme for the capitalists themselves.) This reopened the question of the interaction between the political and the military, and questioned the definition of what is ‘determining in the last instance’. The problem would become even more complicated after ‘socialist states’ had emerged as a consequence of the wars themselves and became major ‘strategic players’ in the confrontation between militarized state powers at world scale.

2. This leads to a second crucial question, which, as we know, was never really settled: the question of the actual roots and effective character of internationalism, which appeared as the form under which the exploited classes can impose a specific orientation on world politics – or not. Its ‘reality test’ was precisely met during the wars. What the Communist Manifesto had described as a fait accompli, namely the withering away of patriotism or nationalism within the proletariat, appeared now as a hazardous process open to antithetical evolutions. On the one hand it oscillated between pacifism (whose last brilliant exposition in Marxist terms may have been E.P. Thompson’s theory of ‘Exterminism’ conceptualizing the programme of anti-nuclear social movements) and so-called revolutionary defeatism, particularly advocated in the Trotskyite tradition.21 On the other hand, it became profoundly disturbed by the fact that the masses under consideration were not the similar working classes of equally developed capitalist states, but rather the dissimilar populations of countries and regions on either side of the great colonial and post-colonial divide, with divergent ideologies and perhaps also, to a large extent, irreconcilable interests.22

3. Finally we cannot avoid a discussion of the outcome that the idea of a ‘materialist’ theory of warfare and its historical function has found in the Soviet military doctrine. The military institution came as a result of the Civil War, when Trotsky and others founded the Red Army and devised its strategy. Given the importance it had acquired at the heart of the Soviet state, already before World War II, but above all after the costly victory in the ‘Great Patriotic War’ against Nazi Germany, and the constitution of a political–military–industrial complex practically ruling the country and its satellites during the Cold War, it is not surprising that the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia in its successive editions presented a complete treatment of the question of war, where Clausewitz’s formula was canonized.23

The historical-critical examination of the effects of warfare on Marxist theory thus takes us back to the issue of internationalism. Drawing part of its inspiration from classical cosmopolitanism, but striving to disentangle its ties with utopia, internationalism was presented in the Communist Manifesto as an actual tendency in history: ‘militarism’ and ‘nationalism’ being in fact already ‘past’ (an idea which clearly reflects the Saint-Simonian influence), they would be unable to affect the revolutionary class struggle from inside. This question proved to be in fact not a
speculative but a political problem, extremely difficult to solve but also increasingly central from the point of view of the class struggle itself. This cannot be separated from the change in the function of nations and the perception of their historical role. Indeed the combination of social and national liberation movements in the century-long process of decolonization led to a completely new understanding of the articulation of the class and national factors of history, and a revived internationalism both in theory and organization, from the times of the komintern to those of the tricontinental and beyond. This now also belongs to the past, and calls for a critical examination, when the liberated colonies or semi-colonies have become in turn nationalistic or militaristic powers. But it shows the importance of discussing a third crucial aspect of the problem of ‘war and politics’ in Marxism, which is concerned with the forms and effects of revolutionary war.

**War and revolution**

In a sense, we arrive only now at what constitutes the ‘heart’ of the problem. The two lines that we have considered separately: class struggle as a (generalized) ‘civil war’, and militarism as an expression of capitalism, merge into one single practical question: how to ‘make’ the revolution? More concretely: how did the Marxists make and think the revolutions they were involved in, and which was their essential objective? Ideally we should here consider the whole of modernity as a great ‘cycle’ of historical transformations, where Marxism tried to insert itself as a ‘revolution within revolution’, until we reach the moment of ‘post-modernity’ – that is, the emergence of ‘new wars’, in part or totally post-national. Whether they still can be addressed from a classical Marxist point of view is a question all the more intriguing because, in many respects, their concept was historically elaborated by turning around certain revolutionary theories against their original intention.

The problems of ‘revolutionary war’ can be traced back at least to the French Revolution and its effects on the European political order. It created prototypes for all the subsequent elements of the debate: the ‘defensive war’ against an offensive counter-revolution; the creation of a new type of ‘popular’ army where the discipline and the fighting spirit are based on ideology and not only on command (hence the emergence of ‘political commissioners’ or the renewal of the ancient notion of ‘dictatorship’, in Schmittian terms); the confrontation of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces combining social and ideological motivation (with ‘insurrectional’ moments on both sides – the Terreur and the Vendée); the birth of the notions of ‘partisan war’ and ‘guerrilla warfare’ whose revolutionary character was immediately an issue, since in Russia, Spain and Germany it was waged against the ‘revolutionary nation’ turned imperialist, and so on. In a sense, Marxism never crossed the limits of this typically ‘modern’ paradigm, but it continuously tried to transform it or rearticulate it. The relationship to the revolutionary use of war became the criterion after which it should be asked whether the concept of ‘revolution’ itself had a univocal meaning. For the French (‘bourgeois’) Revolution, war seemed to be only an accident, but this accident changed its outcome, above all by transforming it into a system of territorial conquest, but also by re-creating and further expanding what in the 18th Brumaire Marx calls the ‘State Machine’. For some Marxists, war became the privileged revolutionary way to classless society: but which war? Or war used in which manner? Two tendencies emerged, conceptually opposed if not always historically separated: the revolutionary war of the masses (including the ‘guerrilla’ war, rural or urban), and the mass resistance to war, a revolutionary ‘war against war’ as it were, waged from inside.

We find these orientations mainly in the work of Lenin during the 1914–17 period, and the work of Mao Zedong during the ‘popular war’ led by the Chinese Communist Party against the Japanese occupation. In both cases it was associated with a striking return to some of the Clausewitzian axioms, now transferred into a completely different framework. This was prepared by Engels, who simultaneously criticized Clausewitz’s allegedly ‘idealistic’ emphasis on moral factors, and sought a materialist equivalent, which would prove compatible with an insistence on the technological, economic and social factors of the wars. This equivalent was found in the idea that people’s armies, or mass conscription, would potentially introduce the class struggle within the army itself, thus reversing Clausewitz’s typical fear of the masses in military matters into a prophecy of their emerging as new strategic actors against the state and its military machine. But it was only with Lenin and Mao Zedong that this dialectical principle would lead to a new articulation of war and politics, displacing the Clausewitzian combination from the state–army–people unity to a new historical unity of class, people and revolutionary party.

Lenin, as we know, intensively read Clausewitz, taking notes and writing marginal commentaries on his *Vom Kriege* after the collapse of the Second International and its pacifist agenda. He drafted and success-
fully tried to implement (at least in his own country) the motto of the ‘transformation of the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war’, which describes the ‘moral factor’ (the internationalist class consciousness) as the political result over time of the horrors of a ‘popular’ war (i.e. waged by mass national armies). It gives a completely original interpretation of the idea of an ‘offensive’ prepared from within the ‘defensive’, deriving its necessity from the fact that ‘absolute’ warfare with time becomes untenable. It must therefore re-create the conditions of class politics at the expense of the state, which in a sense could incarnate politics only as long as it also retained the capacity to arm the people and control its use of the arms it receives, but would become a political phantom as soon as it would be deprived of this capacity. Or, one might say, as history moves from the state monopoly of legitimate violence to the class monopoly of historically decisive violence. I submit that this displacement of Clausewitz forms one of the starting points of Schmitt’s unpolitical concept of the ‘political’ – where sovereignty is identified with the capacity to install a ‘state of exception’ in the core of the state, in order to repress the class struggle in a preventive manner, so that the definition of the ‘internal enemy’, the enemy of the ‘class civil war’, is used to re-create the monopoly of the state and its capacity to wage external wars.

But it is only in Mao Zedong’s theory of the ‘protracted war of partisans’ that we find what can be considered at the same time a Marxist rescuing of Clausewitz’s concept of war as ‘the continuation of politics by other means’ and an alternative to Clausewitz’s idea of the political. In fact I tend to believe not only that Mao Zedong was the most consistent Clausewitzian in the Marxist tradition,24 but that he was perhaps the most consistent Clausewitzian absolutely speaking after Clausewitz, because he re-interpreted all his axioms, and not only one or two of them. We now know that, after the end of the ‘Long March’, while at Yenan in 1938, Mao had organized a special seminar on the work of Clausewitz, for which he even had part of Vom Kriege translated into Chinese.25 Mao’s key idea is that the defensive strategy imposed by the fact that, initially, the imperialist adversary and the ruling bourgeoisie have armies whereas the proletariat and the peasants have none will in the end become reversed into its opposite, and lead to the actual annihilation of the ‘strongest’ at the hands of the ‘weakest’. (It would also be important here to investigate if Mao’s strategic thinking does not have also roots in traditional Chinese philosophy and historiography.) So the length of the war, the dialectical equivalent of the Clausewitzian ‘friction’ now called ‘protracted war’, is the time needed for the tiny nucleus of revolutionary workers and intellectuals who have sought refuge within the masses of the peasantry to achieve simultaneously a triple result: (1) to arm themselves at the expense of the adverse forces by performing local guerrilla attacks against isolated detachments of the invading army; (2) to ‘learn’ the art of strategy by expanding the theatre of war to the national level; (3) finally, to ‘solve the contradiction in the people’ and separate the people from its enemies, by transferring hegemony from an external power to an immanent power, representing the common interest of all national dominated classes. The communist party is supposed to be (and to remain over a long period) precisely that immanent power.

The blind spot of this analysis seems today rather clear, namely the fact that the international global context of World War II is practically ignored, as if only the national forces would count strategically in the anti-imperialist struggle. ‘Self-reliance’, the great Maoist motto, has a latent nationalist dimension, which was not without consequences for the subsequent development of the Chinese Revolution. But the result remains impressive in terms of a new historical interpretation of the political rationality of war and its political subject. So, in a sense, we have come full circle, and it is not by chance, probably, that the closure of this circle consists in the reversal of the hierarchical relationship between institutional warfare waged by the state and popular guerrilla warfare.

To what extent does this reversal ‘resolve’ the aporias affecting Clausewitz’s model of ‘escalation to the extremes’ in conventional wars? It rather displaces them: Clausewitz’s difficulty came from the fact that the state could not be said a priori to have become the absolute master of the ‘instrument’ it had to build and
use in the course of the transformation of wars into ‘absolute wars’ – that is, wars waged by the people in arms. Mao’s difficulty, or the difficulty we read in Mao with hindsight, comes from the fact that the immanent power of the organization which transforms a people into an army, namely the revolutionary party, can completely perform the strategic reversal and remain a political agency only by becoming a state itself (even if a state periodically destroyed and reconstructed by revolutionary episodes, in the Maoist vision taught during the ‘Cultural Revolution’). The only thinkable alternative – very unlikely in the circumstances of a war of national liberation – would be that it refrained from ‘taking power’, or carrying on the revolutionary war until the ‘final’ goal (Zweck), which is the complete destruction of the enemy – thus somehow ‘scaling down’ the war from ‘absolute’ to ‘limited’. But the subject of the strategic process remains in every case a split subject, or a subject oscillating between sovereignty and insurrection. Some modern theoreticians and commentators of ‘molecular wars’ (Enzensberger) or ‘imperial wars’ (Hardt and Negri) solve the aporia by simply eliminating the category of the subject, or reducing it to negative or defective figures (such as ‘the multitude’). But in this case it remains to be explained how the category of ‘war’ itself can be maintained, except metaphorically.

It is also notable that these questions became central in the debates around ‘guerrilla warfare’ which came to the fore in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in Latin America after the victory of the Cuban Revolution and the attempts at expanding its ‘model’ into a project of continental (or even multi-continental) anti-imperialist networks of local partisan hotbeds (focos). Many episodes of this recent history remain obscure, not only because personal controversies and betrayals are still haunting contemporary assessments of the outcome and the legacies of the revolutionary cycle that, in the end, was crushed by a combination of military dictatorship, US intervention, divisions and political adventurism from inside, but because many of the debates remain abstract, ignoring the extent to which each episode of militarized class struggle was in fact a continuation of local and national histories under other names. This is essential to understanding the interferences from movements and ideologies of another descent which, in fact, considerably displaced or affected the Marxist discourse from the inside. Such was clearly the case, in Latin America, with ‘political theology’ in the broad sense, particularly in the form of ‘Liberation Theology’, for example. Without such interference, one would not understand the emergence, in a more recent period, of ‘post-military’ guerrilla movements such as the Mexican Zapatistas, which have pushed the Clausewitzian notion of the ‘defensive strategy’ to the extreme, reacting to an increasing militarization of the dominant social order and its preventive counter-revolutionary techniques waging terror against social movements by willingly dissociating popular resistance from the seizing of state power – thus giving a new and unexpected content to the Gramscian idea of a ‘war of position’ in terms of political ‘self-restraint’.

Ethics, politics, anthropology

In the early twenty-first century, many of the questions evoked above seem now to belong to an irreversibly past era, together with the dialectical terminology in which they were discussed. ‘New Wars’, combining sophisticated technologies with ‘archaic’ savagery, external interventions with ‘civil’ or endogenous antagonisms, are everywhere in the global world around us. They seem to be reviving a ‘Hobbesian’ pattern of war of all against all rather than a Marxist primacy of class determinism, except that this pattern of generalized antagonism does not come before the institution of the modern state with its ‘monopoly of legitimate violence’, but rather after it. It is ‘post-institutional’. However, even when the wars involve a significant factor of resistance to imperialist conquest or domination, they have no specific ‘revolutionary’ content or prospect, but rather a nationalist, religious or cultural one.

This is not to say that the large cycle of Marxist elaborations, continuously intertwining the categories of politics, war and revolution, have lost all interest. First, they teach a political lesson: more than 150 years after the Communist Manifesto, the ‘peaceful strategy’ (and more radically, the strategy of pacifist, anti-militarist revolution) and the strategy of ‘armed revolution’, the arms of critique and the critique of arms, have both failed to destabilize capitalism. It is only capitalism, apparently, that destabilizes itself by developing gigantic areas of social anarchy, or anomie. This could suggest that the problem of revolutionary transformation was ill-formulated. More precisely it would suggest that, for revolutions, ‘war’ is not a strategy, or a strategic instrument, but rather a condition, an element, so that any ‘revolutionary’ perspective – in the sense of radical social transformation – has to address its permanent structures of extreme violence just as it has to address the permanent structures of exploitation. If ‘war’ is a boundary or a limit (Grenze) of historical materialism (as is ‘religion’, partly for the same reasons), it could become also a condition of possibility for its renewal (or perhaps its transcendence), provided
the initial equation of class struggle and civil war be displaced and reconceptualized in terms of the contribution of the class struggle and exploitation processes to a general economy of violence to which other factors also contribute. As a consequence, ‘wars’ in their different forms are always already ‘normal’ means of politics, but the quest of ‘other means’ to make politics is permanent, and potentially subversive.

Notes

2. It is only in a very few places (especially in the 1851 brochure The Class Struggles in France) that Marx also used the expression ‘class war’ (Klassenkrieg).
5. This is the genealogy that Eduard Bernstein was eager to criticize at the end of the century (Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus, 1899) in order to draw a line of demarcation between the rational and the prophetic sides of Marxism. Indeed the rejection of the civil war analogy for the understanding of the class struggle will become foundational for the so-called ‘reformist’ wing of Marxian socialism.
6. Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil or the Two Nations (1845): ‘Two Nations, between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets.’
8. There is one exception, however, to this dropping of the formula equating ‘class struggle’ and ‘civil war’: the passage in Capital, Volume I, which describes the struggles in early-nineteenth-century Britain for the legal limitation of the working day as a ‘long and rude civil war, more or less hidden, between the capitalist class and the working class’: it is indeed crucial for a complete discussion of the ‘war model of the political’ in Marx. See ‘Fin de la politique ou politique sans fin? Marx et l’aporie de la “politique communiste”’, my contribution to the conference A 160 años del Manifiesto Comunista. Relecturas del pensamiento de Marx, Universidad Diego Portales y Universidad Arcis, Santiago de Chile, 26–28 November 2008, http://stl.recherche.univ-lille3.fr/seminaires/philosophie/macherey/macherey20082009/Balibar_17122008.html.
9. This is true even for the recent idea of the ‘molecular civil war’ proposed by Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, Ausichten auf den Bürgerkrieg, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1993.
10. See V.I. Lenin, Left-Wing Communism, an Infantine Disorder, 1920.
11. Of course this was entirely blurred in the institutionalized form of the dictatorship of the proletariat created by Stalin.
12. Here we must lament the fact that, due to her murder at the hands of fascist paramilitaries commissioned by the socialist government in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg could not join a debate on these policies: she had supported the Russian Revolution against its reformist critics while implicitly rejecting the model of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a ‘protracted civil war’.
16. The Crimean War, the wars of Italy and Austria, Austria and Germany, Germany and France, the colonial expeditions in Afghanistan and China, etc.
18. And the first steps into the direction of World War I, which he correctly anticipated. See Herfried Münkler, Über den Krieg. Stationen der Kriegsgeschichte im Spiegel ihrer theoretschen Reflexion, Velbrück Wissenschaft, Weilerswist, 2002.
24. As several commentators have acknowledged, including Raymond Aron, Penser la guerre, Clausewitz, Gallimard, Paris, 1976.
25. I owe these indications to Christof Ohm, who revised my article for the HKWM. He refers to the Ph.D. thesis by Z.Yuan-Lin, La critique des armes I et II, Bollati-Boringhieri, Turin, 2000.
26. The related strategic controversies inseparably concerned the issue of the ‘class base’ of the anti-imperialist insurrection, therefore the kind of genealogy that linked it to the age-old traditions of popular rebellions and illegalities, and the alternative of a pure ‘political leadership’ (subordinating the armed detachments of the revolution) or a ‘military-political leadership’ in which the political ‘temporarily’ took the form of a military command, thus pitting a ‘Maoist’ against a ‘Castrist’ (in practice, rather a Guevarist) conception of the revolutionary war. Régis Debray, Révolution dans la révolution, Maspero, Paris, 1967; La critique des armes I et II, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1974.
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A sudden topicality

Marx, Nietzsche and the politics of crisis

Peter Osborne

Karl Marx was a thinker of crisis. But in what sense was he a theorist of crisis? In what sense did he propound something that might legitimately be called a ‘crisis theory’?

The question may seem an odd one. After all, although there is no one text by Marx specifically dedicated to the topic, it is generally held to be pervasive throughout his economic and political writings from the late 1840s onwards; indeed, to constitute their very rationale – the energizing demonstration of the necessity of social change, via the demonstration of the tendency to crisis inherent in the capitalist mode of production itself. Marxists have long debated the meaning and significance of the ‘crisis theory’ contained in Marx’s passages on this topic – in particular, the question of whether or not it constitutes a theory of breakdown or collapse (Zusammenbruch). This question was at the heart of the revisionist controversies around the time of the First World War, for example, in which both Rosa Luxemburg (The Accumulation of Capital, 1913) and, later, Henryk Grossman (The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System, 1929) upheld the theory of breakdown against what were held to be ‘revisionist’ positions.

The revival of Marxist theory in Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s brought a corresponding revival of interest in crisis theory. Numerous new books and articles were published on the topic, with titles like (from the anglophone literature) ‘The Marxian Theory of Crises, Capital and the State’ (David Yaffe, 1972), Capitalism and Crisis (Walton and Gamble, 1976), United States Capitalism in Crisis (Union of Radical Political Economists, 1978) and Economic Crisis and Crisis Theory (Paul Mattick, 1981), leading up to Simon Clarke’s synthetic Marx’s Theory of Crisis (1993). In the last two years the genre has been revived once again. In the UK, the 2007 Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize (the only significant English-language book prize for a work of historical materialism) went to Rick Kuhn’s Henryk Grossman and the Recovery of Marxism. The most recent book by the 2004 winner of the prize, Michael Lebowitz, returns to his work on crisis theory from over twenty years ago. And the journal at the centre of the revival of Marxist Studies in the anglophone academy, Historical Materialism (founded in 1992), has carried various articles and a symposium theorizing the current global financial crisis in terms of Marx’s theory of crisis. To each crisis, we might say, its own revival of Marx’s ‘theory of crisis’.

This alone should give us pause for thought. (I still recall the manner in which, at the Socialist Movement conference in Chesterfield in the north of England on Monday 19 October 1987, the day of what is still the largest one-day stock market crash in history – the Dow dropped over 22 per cent, in a crash unconnected to a general crisis – by the early afternoon, the Trotskyist economists associated with the then recently abolished Greater London Council publicly announced the arrival of the long-awaited collapse of the capitalist system.) Just as Marx saw periodic crises as ‘bringing to the surface’ the underlying ‘barrier’ (Schranke) to the development of the productive forces inherent within the capitalist mode of production, economic crises also bring to the surface a desire to displace the politics of social transformation onto economic events. In this respect, one might say: periodic economic crises are windows onto the permanent crisis of Marxist political thought.

In counter-position to this recurring dependence of a politics of fundamental social transformation upon periodic economic crises, Antonio Negri has argued that the problem with the Marxian analytic of subsumed labour is that it ‘exclude[s] social labour-
power as the potentiality for crisis’, neglecting ‘the antagonism that the plural substantial times of subjects oppose to the analytic of command’. Negri thereby posits the possibility of a purely political kind of capitalist crisis. Yet such a purely political antagonism has shown no signs of generating a crisis for the capitalist order. (The ontologization of politics appears here as a symptom of the crisis of political thought, rather than its solution.) Negri’s accompanying declaration that, ‘synonymous with real subsumption’, crisis is now ‘simultaneous and stable’, indeed ‘constituent with the current phase of capitalist development’, redefines out of existence the politically crucial aspect of the traditional idea of crisis: namely, the conception of crisis as a decisive turning point in a process, a point at which a decision must be made. (By whom or what?) Marx himself famously insisted, against Adam Smith: ‘Permanent crises do not exist.’ It is the tendency towards and potentiality for crisis that is permanent, not the crisis itself.

**Crises of accumulation, crisis of capitalism?**

The doubt as to whether Marx should be thought of a crisis theorist – as opposed to a ‘thinker’ of crisis in some more general, yet-to-be-determined sense – stems from the disjunction between the all-pervasive, general-historical character of the concept of crisis in its modern form (including the historico-political notion of a crisis: of the capitalist system as a whole, as a condition of a transition to a new mode of production – a notion which clearly motivated Marx), on the one hand, and the restrictedly conjunctural character and relatively narrow political-economic basis of Marx’s so-called ‘theory of crisis’, as a theory of periodic crises or cycles within capitalism, on the other. For Marx, economic crises within capitalism are normal stages in the conjunctural cycle or spiral of expanded reproduction. Textually, what is thought of as the theory of such crises is primarily to be found in Part 3 of Volume 3 of Capital – put together by Engels from Marx’s notes and published in 1894 as ‘The Law of the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall’ (especially chapter 15, ‘Exposition of the Internal Contradictions of the Law’) – along with some passages in the Grundrisse (in ‘The Chapter on Capital’) and Theses of Surplus Value (especially chapter 17), which describe ‘overproduction’ as ‘the fundamental contradiction of developed capital’ and ‘the basic phenomenon in crises’, respectively. In so far as there is a general theory of capitalist crisis here, it is threefold.

1. **Crises are modes of appearance of structural contradictions** within the process of capitalist production – they bring contradictions ‘to the surface’, as Marx says.
2. **Crises are means for the temporary solution**, and hence new forms of mediation, of such contradictions, which restore the conditions for accumulation.
3. **The restoration of conditions for accumulation** is at the same time the renewal of the terms of the contradictions within the system that gave rise to the crisis in the first place.

Hence the ‘periodic’ or ‘cyclical’ character of such crises, taking the developmental form of a spiral. As Marx put it in Capital:

> From time to time [periodisch] the conflict of antagonistic agencies finds vent in crises. The crises are always but momentary and forcible solutions of the existing contradictions. They are violent eruptions that for a time [den Augenblick] restore the disturbed equilibrium.

The mechanism of the capitalist production process itself removes the very obstacles it temporarily creates.

Capitalist production seeks continually to overcome these immanent barriers, but overcomes them only by means which again place these barriers in its way and on a more formidable scale.

Debate has focused on whether crisis tendencies can always, in principle, be countered by what Marx called ‘counteracting tendencies’ (widerstrebende Tendenzen) and, we must add, crucially, their political management (the Keynesian moment – a crucial aspect of the process that is no longer part of ‘the capitalist production process itself’) or whether the barriers to the development of productive forces that are involved represent some kind of cumulative ultimate limit to capital accumulation, since, in Marx’s famous words in Chapter 15 of Capital, Volume 3: ‘The true barrier [Die wahre Schranke] to capitalist production is capital itself.’ As David Harvey has recently pointed out: ‘How to understand crisis formation remains … by far the most contentious issue in Marxian political economy.’

There are a number of theoretical difficulties here. First, Marx’s recurring discussions of the ‘immanent barriers’ to capital accumulation determine limits purely formally, in comparison with hypothetically ‘unfettered’ production at the same level of development of the productive forces. There is no sense that a subsequent mode of production might impose its own, different kind of limits to production. ‘Limit’ here
is thus the negative or reverse side of a productivist utopianism (to be distinguished from its use by Marx in the sense of those ‘limits of variation’ that define the field of operation of his concept of law). Second, although Marx often uses the terms synonymously, a ‘barrier’ (Schranke) is not quite the same thing as a ‘limit’ (Grenze), in that a barrier (unlike a certain conception of limit) can always in principle be overcome. Furthermore, the existence of certain inherent limits (relative to formal possibility) is not in itself a barrier to infinite expansion. There is no contradiction in the idea of an infinite expansion within limits. Taken in the context of the multiplicity of tendencies counteracting breakdown or collapse, there are thus scant purely theoretical grounds for believing in its necessity. As Marx put it: ‘[The] process would soon entail the breakdown of capitalist production, if counteracting tendencies were not constantly at work.’

However, whatever position one takes in this debate, the literature on Marx on crisis, from Maksakovsky’s 1928 The Capitalist Cycle to Lebowitz’s 2008 Following Marx, is agreed on one thing: in so far as Marx has a ‘theory’ of crisis, it is a critical political-economic theory of crises in capitalist production. In so far as ‘crisis’ has a political meaning for Marx, though, it is in its relation to the broader historical process of a transition to a new, non-capitalist mode of production (‘social revolution’). In this respect, ‘crisis theory’ is necessarily inadequate to the thinking of crisis required, even if one were to believe that it establishes the inevitability of ‘breakdown’ (which I do not; which is not to say that such a breakdown might not come about – in which case, socialism remains far less likely an outcome than barbarism). Analysis of the historical process demands not merely an account of fundamental contradictions and their expression in conflicts and crises, but an account of crisis as a condition of possibility of the new, in this case the qualitatively historically new: new forms of social production, new relations of production and forms of organization. Crisis ‘theory’ is thus in principle inadequate to thinking the historico-political meaning of crises – and this includes Marx’s own account (or ‘theory’) of capitalist crises, however central to such a thinking it might be.

Hence my reluctance to think of Marx as a crisis ‘theorist’, with respect to the politics of crises, which was his ultimate concern.

It is a failure to adhere to the disjunction between forms of analysis here (historical development of the mode of production beyond its own limits, on the one hand, and political economy of capital, on the other) that generates the quasi-theological notion of a ‘final’ crisis of the capitalist system, as a whole, as some kind of event, rather than a process with a duration of many decades, if not centuries, appropriate to the idea of a ‘social’ rather than a merely ‘political’ revolution. And it is this notion that lies behind the substitution of a theory of breakdown for a (generational) politics of transformation. Nonetheless, the political significance of the concept of crisis motivating Marxist debates depends upon some projected articulation of these two levels, some conjunctural political effectivity at the level of the mode of production, in response to ‘periodic’ crisis. It is the assumption of such an articulation that has led, historically, to charges of ‘economism’ and ‘determinism’ being laid against Marx’s work, despite the fact that the projected mechanism of articulation is, precisely, not economic but political – namely ‘struggles’ directed towards the reappropriation of the collective powers of social labour. This is a ‘mechanism’, if one may continue to call it that – a mechanism for the transformation of conjunctural crisis into structural change – which falls outside the ‘theory’ of crisis as such. Rather, as Balibar argued back in the 1960s: ‘The analysis of the transformation of the limits … requires [minimally, we might add – PO] a theory of the different times of the economic structure and of the class struggle, and of their articulation in the social structure.’

It is the current near-total absence of the social conditions for such a politics of reappropriation, of
course, that has reduced the politics of crisis to that of the state’s management of the interests of ‘capital in general’, in antagonism with those of particular capitals (currently, mainly banking capital) – making crisis almost exclusively an intra-capitalist affair. Hence the current debates regarding the extent to which certain financial instruments, such as credit derivatives, threaten the ongoing expanded reproduction of the system, in a structural manner, and the extent to which what we are seeing is simply another periodic crisis in the spiral of expanded reproduction, in which capital has run up against a barrier of its own making, and thereby set itself the task of overcoming it, as the condition of a new cycle of accumulation. There is no reason, in principle, to believe that it cannot achieve this task, with the coordinated help of the major capitalist states; albeit at considerable cost to the lives of working populations.

At the outset, then, we can discern basic temporal distinctions between the way the concept of crisis functions at three levels: (1) the longue durée of history (transition between modes of production), (2) the theory of crisis as part of the political economy of capitalism (the theory of ‘the cycle’), and (3) actual, concrete conjunctures, such as the current ‘global financial crisis’, as it is called. In fact, this crisis is arguably more of a crisis of the money-form of capital (of the radical diversification and speculative intensification of forms of ‘money’) set off, in part, by the unforeseen consequences of various technical alternatives to the perceived unreliability of the US dollar as a store of value. Any account of crisis adequate to Marx’s political desire – which was constituted at the level of history – would involve, minimally, the articulation of these three temporalities.

However, maintaining these distinctions between levels and hence objects of analysis, and further investigating the concept of crisis in its fundamental political meaning at the level of its greatest historical generality, was not the way the literature on ‘crisis theory’ responded to the supposed economism of the traditional Marxist version. Rather, especially since the 1970s, the response has been what one might call a Weberian methodological turn in crisis theory toward a pluralization of types of crisis, not just within political economy (most notably, James O’Connor’s 1973 The Fiscal Crisis of the State), but societally. Jürgen Habermas’s Legitimation Crisis (also 1973) was an important text in this regard, with its multiple classifications of types of crisis, setting out from the distinction between system and lifeworld, and moving on to distinguish economic crisis, rationality crisis, legitimation crisis and motivation crisis. In his 1987 survey, The Meaning of Crisis (a book that singularly fails to discuss, precisely, the question of meaning), O’Connor synthesizes such approaches via further generic distinctions between economic crisis, social crisis, political crisis and personality crisis. This kind of typologizing particularization takes the meaning of crisis for granted and simply seeks instances of it, empirically, in a largely descriptive manner.

But what of the generality and fundamentally historical character of the concept of crisis? At this point, it is useful to take a brief digression via Koselleck’s historical semantics, in order to remind ourselves of the kind of concept that crisis is. I shall draw on three texts here: Koselleck’s 1959 Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society, his 1982 entry for ‘Crisis’ in the 8-volume Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe/Basic Concepts in History, and the more recent essay ‘Some Questions Regarding the Conceptual History of “Crisis”’, into which the results of the latter are condensed.

**Historical-semantic digression: Koselleck**

It is the virtue of Koselleck’s semantic history to have shown how in its contemporary, all-pervasive lifeworld sense, the concept of crisis dates specifically from Europe in the eighteenth century, as one of a set of categories constitutive of the emerging discourse of the philosophy of history – including, crucially, both progress and revolution, in its modern historical-political meaning. On Koselleck’s account in Critique and Crisis, the Enlightenment concept of critique, which developed within the terms of the absolutist state, transformed ‘history’ into a utopian philosophical concept, by virtue of the dislocation of the subjects of critique (the Illuminati) from any possible political action, within the constraints of absolutism. For Koselleck, all philosophy of history is thus constitutively Utopian. The critical process of enlightenment is thereby seen to have ‘conjured up’ a historical concept of crisis by virtue of the alienation of criticism from history. History presents itself as crisis because it demands a decision or an intervention that the critical subjects in question (the Illuminati) from any possible political action, within the constraints of absolutism. Or to put it another way (which Koselleck himself does not): crisis is constituted as a historical category according to a structure of thought within which it is speculatively political (that is, it has
a political meaning) but is nonetheless, in any particular instance, politically irresolvable (that is, is not amenable to political action). The historical concept of crisis thus registers an aporia in the historical concept of politics. In other words, what I earlier called ‘the crisis of Marxist political thought’ runs far deeper than Marx’s work, down to the bedrock of all philosophico-historical concepts of political practice.

In the eighteenth century, the concepts of ‘progress’ and ‘revolution’ offered alternative resolutions to this sense of history as crisis, within the terms of Enlightenment philosophy of history. It is the historical and philosophical failure of these two alternatives that now turns ‘crisis’ back onto the philosophical concept of history and the aporia of politics out of which it emerged; albeit only for so long as any particular crisis lasts. As Koselleck put it:

It is in the nature of crises that problems crying out for solution go unresolved. And it is also in the nature of crises that the solution, that which the future holds in store, is not predictable. The uncertainty of a critical situation contains one certainty only – its end. The only unknown quantity is when and how.
The eventual solution is uncertain, but the end of the crisis, a change in the existing situation – threatening, feared and eagerly anticipated – is not.21

In being extended to history, the concept of crisis is thus objectivized in a manner that goes beyond both knowledge of it and any possible practice. This perhaps explains why, as Koselleck notes, the terms ‘criticism’ and ‘crisis’ appear to be mutually exclusive in polemical use.26

Historically, in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, what was originally a single Greek concept fractured into the separate ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ components of ‘criticism’ and ‘crisis’, respectively. The indeterminacy associated with the notion of ‘crisis’ is the result of the projection of the etymological core of the term (from the Greek krinò, meaning to cut, to select, to decide, to judge – a root it shares with the term ‘criticism’) beyond its original jurisprudential context of a situation calling for a decision (in which a decision could, indeed had to, be made), into a situation in which a decision cannot be made, because (at least on Koselleck’s account of the politics of the Enlightenment) there is no possible appropriate subject. This is an account that projects the political consequences of the underdevelopment of Prussia in the eighteenth century into the heart of the concept of Enlightenment itself.

It was the restriction of the term ‘crisis’ to a medical use in medieval Latin (based on the ancient usage in Hippocrates and Galen) – whereby it denoted the crucial, or ‘critical’, life-or-death stage in the development of a disease, at which point a decision had to be made – that introduced a distinctive existential tension into the term; while it was the apocalyptic element of its theological usage – which extended the legal context to judgement before God – that prepared the ground for its extension to history as a whole.27 Political thought thereby became, via the concept of crisis, the diagnosis of history. Yet, for Koselleck at least, there is no doctor to intervene: the question of the historical future is inherent in the concept of crisis only as a problem, or horizon, never as a solution.

Marx’s innovation in the discourse of crisis was to posit a solution immanent to the conditions of the crisis itself – for him, initially, the world-historical role of the proletariat, and, subsequently, the collective worker. It is not possible here to address the notorious, ongoing question of the ‘blocked’ historical role of such political subjects in fundamental social – that is, historical – change, except in the briefest and broadest of ways. Its parameters have changed significantly since Marx’s and Koselleck’s days, both empirically and theoretically (especially with regard to the concept ‘subject’). In the first place, in line with Marx’s own historical projection, the post-1989, tendentially global, extension of the field of operation of capital accumulation has brought about a convergence of the concept of history with that of historical capitalism: an ongoing reduction of history to historical capitalism. However, despite this, in many ways stunning, empirical confirmation of Marx’s long-term historical vision, the problematic of the collective worker as historico-political agency on a global scale, which has consequently been posed anew, on new spatial grounds, nonetheless remains primarily theoretical, formal, speculative or purely potential, for all the hopes raised by such place-holders as ‘the multitude’, ‘multitudes’, ‘movements of movements’ and the like. For there is an aporia here: the more effectively global the collective worker becomes, the less politically actual it is.

The standard explanation for this phenomenon, modelled on the effect of imperialism on the European working classes at the time of the First World War – namely, the ability of nation-states to articulate workers’ interests primarily in national rather than class terms – retains its relevance. Indeed, this relevance is heightened by the broadening geopolitical distribution of the elements of the labour process. However, this is not the sole or even perhaps the primary problem; and the spatial dynamics of political
identification with regard to states are also being transformed in myriad and complex ways. Equally, and in the long term probably more, important is the role in the formation of social subjects in capitalist societies played by abstract social and economic forms. Capitalistic sociality (the grounding of social relations in exchange relations) is essentially abstract: primarily, a matter of form rather than collectivity. Collectivity is produced by the interconnectedness of practices, but the broadest forms of interconnectedness and dependencies that are produced exhibit the structure of a subject (the unity of an activity) only objectively – that is, in separation from both individual subjects and particular collectivities of labour – at the level of states and beyond. Not only does the subject-structure of capital no longer correspond to (although it must still articulate itself across) the territorially discrete entities of nation-states, but the dominant forms of economic subjectivation (of individuals as constituents of variable capital and consumers of commodities) are now accompanied by forms of financial subjectivation (of individuals as subjects of loans, credit-card debt, pensions, benefits, etc.) that further subsume labour to capital in the sphere of its circulation. As Harvey has put it, in another context: ‘There is a sense … in which we have all become neoliberal.’ In other words, there are ‘counteracting tendencies’ not just to crises of accumulation but to the formation of collective social subjects through capitalist production as well.

What are the socio-political tendencies countering financial subjectivation?

With regard to the temporality of crisis, the cyclical character of crises of accumulation tends to instil less a sense of possibility than of repetition. This serves to reinforce the main form of temporal abstraction associated with the experience of commodities in capitalist societies: ‘the new’. The periodic character of crisis and the commodity-form each produce modes of experience of temporal abstraction that undermine or erode the historical experience of crises and, thereby, function to repress the political possibilities they contain. It is these structures and experiences that underlie the ontological generalization of crisis in Nietzsche’s concept of eternal return. Eternal return, we can say, following Benjamin, is an allegory of the experience of capitalism. Capitalism appears here in Benjamin’s work in the figure of ‘the torments of hell … “pains eternal and always new”’.  

Crisis, repetition, the new

‘Permanent crises do not exist.’ It is the tendency towards and potentiality for crisis that is permanent, not the crisis itself. The crisis is but a regular ‘phase’ in the process of capital accumulation (der Krisenphase), alternating with ‘prosperity’ – a phase that renews the conditions of accumulation. In the concept of modernity we find both a normalization and a valorization of crisis as a means of production of the new, at the level of pure temporal form, in which what appears to capital wholly quantitatively (a return to the production of surplus value) is experienced qualitatively, as newness itself. Modernity became the central category of the philosophy of history, after Hegel, via the extraction of the formal structure of temporal negation from the totalizing narrative of necessary development in Hegel’s philosophy of history. Modernity/Neuzeit (literally, new time) is a consciousness of time that is consequently simultaneously and paradoxically constitutive of history as development and de-historicizing, in its abstraction of the temporal form of the present as the time of the production of the new (negation). This valorization of the formal structure of temporal negation is the cultural correlate and psychic deposit of the real abstraction of labour-time as a measure of value.

Marx famously celebrated this experience of capitalism as modernity in The Communist Manifesto both analytically (as a ‘constant revolutionizing of production’) and performatively, in what was more or less his invention of the manifesto as a cultural-political form. However, this was prior to his analysis of the fetishism of the commodity form and the historical process of the commodification of novelty as the means for the capitalistic appropriation of desire. Under these conditions, the production of the new appears not only as a central part of the progressive historical function of capitalism – the development of human powers – but also a means for its eternalization. This is what Benjamin called ‘the new as the ever-same’, and about which Adorno wrote that it ‘represses duration’. In repressing duration, the new negates a condition of possibility of crisis generating actually qualitatively historical new social and political forms.

The fetishism inherent in the commodity-form represses the social labour of production. Crises seem, at first, to restore the historical temporality of capitalism – and the social temporality of labour – to experience; but, in their seriality and constancy, their subjection to the abstract temporality of the modern, crises threaten to negate it once again, at a higher level, through a normalizing repetition. It is this repetitive element in the temporality of crisis that is absolutized and thereby ontologized in the later
Nietzsche: history is reduced to a new ‘affirmative’ sense of pure becoming, the constant becoming of the new. In Nietzsche, every moment is a moment of decision. This is the philosophical basis of Negri’s self-undermining politicism. For in rejecting negation as the dialectical–logical means of giving determinacy to the new, each decision merely reproduces the transcendental structure of the new as the same: the nihilism that lurks within all modernisms – a negative nihilism of the new without significant differences, as opposed to the reactive nihilism of conceptual difference of the Hegelian dialectic, against which Nietzsche was reacting.

Nietzsche’s solution was to embrace – and thereby transvalue – the condition, in the doctrine of eternal return: the imperative that, when you will something, you will to do it an infinite number of times. Such a return is acknowledged to be ‘the most extreme form of nihilism’, but, in ‘completing’ nihilism, it is understood to break its connection to reactive forces, negating their function of conservation (‘the same’) and converting them into forces of active self-destruction. In this respect, Nietzsche is the prophet of a Schumpeterian ‘creatively destructive’ capitalism. In the eternal return, nihilism is, he writes, ‘vanquished by itself’. To will the eternal return was for Nietzsche to become active. The consequence, however, is that while ‘the new’ may no longer be ‘the same’, it is also no longer new, in the sense of being qualitatively historically new. In the eternal return, the new consumes itself, and with it time itself.

Both Hegel and Nietzsche, in their very different ways, absolutized the temporality of the new to the point of the dissolution of historical time, and with it the very notion of qualitative historical novelty upon which it depends. Yet the new itself, qua new, is abstract: ‘it gives no satisfaction’, as Marx put it. The notion of the ‘qualitatively historically new’ harbours a structural contradiction between the production of the qualitative heterogeneities to which it refers and the sameness of its own conceptual form. Yet it is in its very abstraction that the new is the emblem of the promise of a future, a future beyond the abstractly new, in which, on Marx’s imagining, wealth will have become the absolute working out of creative potentialities… the development of all human powers as such [as] the end in itself … [w]here humanity … [s]trives not to remain something it has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming. This is the Nietzschean aspect of Marx’s own image of a post-capitalist condition: the new freed from the historical conditions of its emergence in capitalism’s ‘constant revolutionizing’ of the instruments of production ‘and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society’. In this respect, the modern is a capitalist cultural form, even – perhaps especially – as it points beyond its current capitalistic conditions of existence.

The new, we might say, is the capitalistic form of the post-capitalist future. Benjamin recognized this in the 1930s when he interpreted Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence as the transformation of the historical event into ‘a mass-produced article’ on the model of fashion as ‘the eternal recurrence of the new’. He attributed the ‘sudden topicality’ of the idea of eternal return in the 1930s to the accelerated succession of capitalist crises, whereby ‘it was no longer possible, in all circumstances, to expect a recurrence of conditions across any interval of time shorter than that provided by eternity’, leading to ‘the obscure presentiment that henceforth one must rest content with cosmic constellations’.

For Benjamin, the political secret of Nietzsche’s eternal return was thus to be found in the anticipation of it by Blanqui in Eternity via the Stars (1872) – his last book, written in prison, which, Benjamin writes, ‘presents the idea of eternal return ten years before Nietzsche’s Zarathustra – in a manner scarcely less moving than that of Nietzsche, and with an extreme hallucinatory power’, but in which ‘the terrible indictment that [Blanqui] pronounces against society takes the form of an unqualified submission to its results.’ This is the ‘novelty as hell’ of the ‘Conclusion’ to the 1939 Exposé of Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century. We remain exposed to this ‘unqualified submission’ to the capitalistic terms of the crisis – restoration of accumulation through depreciation and the destruction of capital and the further disciplining of labour and everyday life – today.

Notes


5. Theories of Surplus Value, Part 2, p. 497.


14. See for example, Grundrisse, p. 416.

15. Marx, Capital, Volume 3, Penguin, p. 355, translation amended; Karl Dietz Verlag, p. 256. For an attempt to enrich and update Marx’s account of crises and the counteraacting tendencies through which they are resolved, with respect to, first, the post-World War II development of finance capital, and second, its geographical aspects, see Harvey, The Limits to Capital, ch. 10, section X, and ch. 13, sections V and VI, respectively.


18. As argued, for example, by Dick Bryan in his contribution to the panel ‘Derivatives’ at the Historical Materialism conference, London, 29 November 2009.

19. It is in the transition from the analysis of ‘Tendency and Contradiction in the Mode of Production’ to ‘History’ that Balibar’s ‘Elements for a Theory of Transition’ runs up against the internal limits of the Althusserian problematic, for which ‘history’ is not itself considered a concept of the theory of history, but rather only of its epistemology. Reading Capital, p. 302.


24. Critique and Crisis, pp. 11–12, 185.

25. Ibid., p. 127.

26. Ibid., p. 168.


28. Harvey, Limits to Capital, p. xii. Harvey is writing about the ‘widespread acceptance of the benefits to be had from the individualism and freedoms that a free market supposedly confers’, but his account neglects issues of subjectivation.


30. See note 5.


In June 1940 the French 10th Army was surrounded by invading German forces at Rennes. Among those captured was Emmanuel Levinas, mobilized as an officer/interpreter in 1939 and now imprisoned as an enemy combatant under the terms of the Geneva Conventions. Levinas passed five years in captivity, first at Frontstalags in Rennes and Laval, then at Vesoul, and from June 1942 until May 1945 at Stalag 11B at Fallingbostel near Magdeburg in Germany. He joined many other unwilling participants in the experience of mass internment during the Second World War, which was to have an enormous impact on postwar culture. Levinas’s 1947 *Existence and Existents* may be placed alongside other works created in the Stalag system such as Braudel’s *The Mediterranean* and Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time*. All of these works bear the marks of an intensified experience of time – at once compressed and distended, intense and empty; but in the case of Levinas this experience is both intensified and made into a theme or point of departure for philosophizing.

In his published work Levinas frequently refers to his experience of captivity. The articles ‘A Religion for Adults’ (1957) and ‘The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights’ (1975) among those collected in *Difficult Freedom* refer to events that took place during his detention.1 In the former he refers to the ‘long months of fraternal detention spent in a Frontstalag in Brittany with the North African prisoners’ and to his feelings ‘when, over the grave of a Jewish comrade whom the Nazis had wanted to bury like a dog, a Catholic priest Father Chesnet, recited prayers which were, in the absolute sense of the term, Semitic’; while in the latter he relates how the ‘last Kantian in Nazi Germany’ – the dog Bobby – enthusiastically greeted the Jewish prisoners as they returned from forced labour and in doing so recognized their humanity. The experience of the camp was also acknowledged, not without irony at the expense of Sartre and others, in the Preface to *Existence and Existents* where Levinas presents his book as the result of research ‘begun before the war’ and then ‘pursued and to a large extent written up in captivity’.

The Stalag is not evoked here as a guarantee of profundity nor as a right to indulgence, but as an explanation of the absence of any position-taking with respect to those philosophical works published with much acclaim, between 1940 and 1945.

Yet until now, with the publication of Levinas’s notebooks from his captivity, it had been impossible fully to assess the impact of the Stalag on Levinas’s thinking and thus the degree of continuity between his pre- and postwar work.

The publication of the first volume of the Levinas *Œuvres*’ not only allows such an assessment to begin, but also revives the embers of the debate around the sense and overall significance of Levinas’s work. The delay to the publication of his drafts, notebooks and correspondence was the regrettable result of the extended litigation between Levinas’s children Michael Levinas and Simone Hansel over the inheritance of the ‘moral right’ to Levinas’s authorship. This was settled in the French courts in June 2009, allowing Bernard Grasset/IMEC to publish this first volume of *inédits* in the autumn. The complex motivations and the rights and wrongs of the litigation are not entirely clear and in the end probably not of great public interest, but the delay in publishing the full extent of Levinas’s authorship certainly limited the range and depth of exegesis and discussion. As Olivier Corpet, the director of IMEC, aptly commented ‘The injunction on the publication of these writings deprived us of knowing the reaction to them of those who knew Levinas such as Blanchot, Derrida and Paul Ricoeur’.2

The now published first volume of the *Œuvres* is a rich source of material, notes and drafts from 1937 until the early 1960s, filling out some of the tantalizing allusions in the published work and introducing dimensions of Levinas’s work which are sure to surprise many of his readers. The overall effect of the volume is to increase the density of Levinas’s work, pointing to a level of political reflection and an engagement with literature.

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otherwise only hinted at in the published writings. It is the first of three planned volumes of _inédits_; volume 2 will be dedicated to unpublished conference papers and volume 3 to _Autres inédits_. Even so, Rodolphe Calin, the textual editor of the _inédits_, emphasizes that the published material constitutes but a partial selection of the archival material at IMEC. The first volume, edited by Calin and Catherine Chalier, contains the _Carnets de captivité_ (1940–1945), _Écrits sur la captivité_ and _Hommage à Bergson_, and the _Notes philosophiques diverses_ from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s.

The notebooks from the 1940s and 1950s permit access to the existential and intellectual sources of Levinas’s thought, confirming the significance of the prison camp experience for his rethinking of the axioms of Western philosophy. They underline the extent to which he saw his philosophy as constitutively anti-fascist, confirm the role of Judaism in his ethics, and emphasize, perhaps surprisingly to some readers, his perception of own work as the elaboration of a philosophy of socialism rooted in _jouissance_ rather than work. Indeed, the experience of forced labour in the Stalag, accompanied by a critical reading of Hegel’s _Phenomenology of Spirit_ in the prison camp reading room, led Levinas to an extreme degree of scepticism about the liberatory potential of work, an unusual posture in the socialist tradition within which he explicitly situates his work. The notebooks also confirm the importance of Bergson for Levinas, as well as documenting the sustained criticism of Heidegger, carried through from the prison notebooks into the notes of the 1950s.

**The experience of the Stalag**

The seven notebooks that make up the _Carnets de captivité_ do not adopt the form of a diary, but served Levinas as a space or interval for private reflection, thought and fantasy. These reflections on the reading and often the memory of literature and philosophy, punctuated by fragmentary episodes and characters from his planned novels, are nevertheless woven into oblique references to the daily sorrows and deprivations of captivity. The omnipresence of censorship, however, meant that references to the everyday life of forced labour in the Stalag had to be indirect or allusive. Levinas recorded a fuller picture of life in the Stalag soon after the Liberation in 1945 when he composed a group of writings (one of them a radio broadcast) on the captivity, and specifically on the Jewish experience of captivity. For while Levinas was detained as an officer of the French Army he was identified as Jewish, and as a Jew was set to work in a ‘Forestry Commando Unit’ specifically assembled for Jewish POWs. This meant that his experience of the camp was even more insecure and traumatic than that of his fellow non-Jewish POWs and intensified his response to it in his writing.

In the three meditations on the captivity written immediately after his liberation, Levinas provides a pendant to his last major philosophical essay from the prewar period, ‘De l’évasion’. He begins the short text ‘Captivity’ by evoking in a word image the predicament of the prisoner: ‘the grey of the barbed wire enclosure and, in the Commandos, the foggy mornings when one left for work. Abandon. Damp. Cold. The mocking of the spring sun. The lost count of days past and days to come’ (201). The experience of abandon, cold and the suspension of time and history (noted also by Braudel, a detainee in a severe Stalag for political prisoners in Northern Germany) nevertheless had its alleviations, although Levinas was punctilious in refusing to indulge in any romantic nostalgia for the camps: ‘even though the prisoners had not known the horrors of Buchenwald, there was great suffering in the stalags and oflags’ (201). Yet over five years the inhabitants of the camps organized themselves, and amid the inevitable conflicts there was preserved ‘a kind of fraternity’ among the detainees. With all due care and scruple Levinas describes the paradoxical emergence of ‘an unsuspected liberty’ under the eye of the guards.

Levinas distinguishes the ‘unsuspected liberty’ of the camps from the liberty of the bourgeois, one who is ‘in place’, whose ‘daily life is the true reality’ (202). In spite of appearances, Levinas is not mobilizing a quasi-Heideggerian appeal to the authenticity of camps against the daily routine of the bourgeois life. While the prisoner does indeed live ecstatically, ‘lives in the beyond’, living always on the point of departure, ‘his real destiny, his real salvation is being accomplished elsewhere. In the communiqué.’ The sense that one’s own well-being depended on the movement of fronts, battles and the courage and endurance of others outside, and beyond one’s control – also prominent in Braudel’s experience of history taking place elsewhere while in the Stalag – was joined to material privation in which the prisoner possessed few belongings, but was not mastered by property. Levinas ends his witness to captivity by evoking ‘a new rhythm of life’, the air of another planet that accompanied the suffering, despair and mourning. This experience of solidarity remained in view throughout Levinas’s subsequent writing, but it was immediately qualified in his reflections on the specific experience of the Jewish POWs.
In the text of the broadcast *L'expérience juive du prisonnier*, dated 25 September 1945, Levinas meditates upon the specific torments that captivity brought to Jewish POWs. He begins with the scruple that the experience of Jewish POWs was in a sense peripheral to the wider history of European Judaism during World War 2: ‘They did not live in the death camps’ (209). They were spared this horror by the French army uniform, which placed them under the protection of the Geneva Conventions, but while sharing the privations of their fellow soldiers, Levinas explains that they lived a further dimension of horror that was specific to their Judaism. Levinas reports that the news of the persecutions and the mass exterminations (*l'extermination en masse* in the radio broadcast; *chambres à gaz et des fours crématoires* in the written version) reached the camps very early on in the war, and this knowledge made the postal formula stamped on a returned letter – *parti sans laisser d'adresse* – into a death sentence. The day the Red Cross brought the post to the camps was a day of anguish for the Jewish prisoners, racked with anxiety about the fate of friends and families.

The Jewish prisoners of war were also painfully aware of the frailty of the protection offered by the Geneva Conventions: ‘In the face of a systematic will to extermination, what could be the value in the last instance of the Geneva convention, that leaf of paper’ (210). The sense of vulnerability afflicted the very grain and temporality of everyday life, with a sense of a deferred violent death continually shadowing the works and days of the Jewish prisoners. Even the Jewish *Sonderkommando* or labour brigade which was sent to work deep in the forest each day became loaded with sinister but not unrealistic intimations – ‘they found themselves separated at once from other prisoners and the civilian population. All this took place as if something was being prepared for them, but always deferred’ (210).

In the radio broadcast, Levinas moves from the sense of menace and helplessness faced by the Jewish prisoner of war to his experience of solitude before God. He is very careful to distinguish between the prisoner’s and the deportee’s experience of such dereliction. For the deportee, death ‘martyrdom’ is immediate, but for the prisoner there is an interval ‘which permits the taking up of an attitude to pain before being seized and torn by it’ (211). The theme of the interval as a space for ‘meditation’ both spiritual and philosophical becomes central to Levinas’s thinking in and after the Stalag. He later described the captivity itself in terms of an interval between the intimations of National Socialism in the 1930s and the mourning of its murderous course after the war. The interval is a space of horror and anguish, but it also sustains the frail possibility of escape or survival.

In the broadcast Levinas describes how the daily experience of this interval – the deferred death sentence – led many Jewish POWs, including himself, to an intensified understanding of Jewish liturgy and the central ideas of Judaism such as exile, persecution, justice and election. In the version written for *Le Magazine de France* but only partially published in 1945, Levinas spells out in more detail the different experience of the interval of captivity undergone by Jewish and other prisoners. While the others would speak of ‘reform, relief, liberation’ the Jewish prisoner knew himself ‘to be in a hard world, without tenderness, without paternity. He existed without any human aid. He assumed alone all the weight of his existence’ (207). Without diminishing the material deprivation and suffering of the other prisoners, Levinas nevertheless maintained that the Jewish prisoner could not experience captivity as ‘an adventure’ that would finally end ‘with the “liberation of prisoners” serenely foreseen by the Geneva Convention’ (207). For the Jewish prisoner, ‘no illusions in the case of a German victory’ and in the case of defeat, the fear of becoming the victim of a despairing vengeance. With death close, but always somehow deferred, the interval became a ‘crossroads of life and nothingness. The Jewish prisoner moved with his torments and secret wisdom by the side of his non-Jewish comrades who perhaps did not even suspect the landscapes he carried within him’ (207).

The notebooks testify to life in this interval, but more than this they also make the interval itself into a philosophical theme and locate its suffering at the outset of philosophizing. While they occasionally draw on specific events, the landscapes they describe are refracted through the memories and the reading of literature and philosophy as well as through the characters and scenes of Levinas’s fictions. The Jewish POW’s life in the interval of a suspended death sentence brought with it an intensified appreciation of Jewish belief and practice, and above all the daily experience of persecution. This is clearest in the stark second notebook, from 1942 to 1943, where the prisoner’s sense of dereliction and abandon is at its most extreme. After the first notebook, with its memories of a continuity with prewar life and its concerns woven into episodes from the life of the field prisons, the second notebook desperately tries to hold together a philosophical and literary memory against the onslaughts of sustained and indifferent persecution.
One of the ways in which Levinas attempted to maintain his thought was to rethink his relationship to philosophy and in particular to Heidegger and Bergson. In the second notebook, as the autumn of 1942 moved towards winter, Levinas frames the question of where to begin philosophizing against Heidegger: ‘To depart from Dasein or to depart from J.’ Departing from Judaism in these circumstances meant philosophizing out of ruin and hopelessness. The theme is picked up again in the postwar notes, where the difference is developed in a series of terse phrases:

Heidegger has the works of great philosophers play the role that religions attribute to scripture/Creation is to be opposed to Heideggerian liegen: the idea of foundation is to be reversed – the beginning is not a foundation, but a word/With Heidegger B and Time world of work and objects [Zuhandenes] in the later works. The landscape – the <mountain>, the forest, the sea

and finally

It is in this that I differ from Heidegger: it is not a matter of exiting from the everyday towards authentic experience, but of following the everyday man in his <suffering> <same>. (328–9)

Calling philosophy to bear testimony to suffering gradually emerges as a theme in the notebooks, linked with analyses of bodily states such as fatigue, cold, insomnia indebted to the early Bergson. The importance of Bergson to Levinas’s thought, suspected by many readers, is confirmed by the notebooks and by the elegant elegy of his 1946 ‘Homage to Bergson’ also included in this edition. Yet the debt to the phenomenological method is also respected, with the notebooks recording a material reduction, the removal of the comforts and alleviations of civilization and the literal entry into a winter landscape devoid of colour.

The landscape of persecution

The movement from the temporary field camps to Stalag 11B and the Jewish work Kommando is punctuated by thoughts on the literature available in the camp ‘library’ or made available by the Red Cross. In the Laval camp Levinas read (or recalled) Racine, Ariosto, Barbey d’Aurevilly, Poe, Dostoevsky (Notes from Underground); at Vesoul, Claudel and Vigny. But the notes begin to splinter with the transfer to Germany and the onset of forced labour: fragments from his planned novels combine with memories of film and a palpable chill passing through it all as the winter landscape, labour and fatigue begin to prevail over memory and fantasy. This is recorded in a stark sequence of notes spanning little more than four pages announced by the recollection of the scene from the Book of Samuel in which the prophet is called, but does not know who is calling.

Levinas enters the sequence by describing an experience of extreme detachment that struck him under conditions of severe physical deprivation while working with the Kommando:

Drunkenness is not only the effect of wine. There is a stage of detachment, of the exit from life which one can know in every kind of excitement. With the Kommando Sunday evening. The effortlessness of everything because one is detached from everything. (83)

The bleak ecstasy provoked by the winter forest, a very different experience of the forest from the pastoral strolls of Heidegger, becomes a landscape without history or future, without colour or tone:

Winter landscape – more abstract. White-black. Drawing rather than painting. Perhaps more moving for that reason. Simplified, one sees in it large lines. Drawing. Above all the foot of the trees, straight, black with a white line of snow, with a background of snow. (83)

The veins of the trees black against the snow inscribed in their turn by a line of snow prompts a series of evocations of land and seascapes in which it is unclear what is foreground and what is background. Just as the line of the tree becomes an interval between the snow surrounding it and the snow on it, so Levinas imagines other intervals or states of detachment from the surroundings, ecstatic states that do not transcend but are rather states of suspension.

Immediately following the play between black and white of the snow-covered trees in the snow, Levinas summons an image of the sea and the earth. Yet the recollection seems to reverse the characteristics of the two elements: ‘The sea and the earth – it seems that the earth appears as an immense flicker’ (83). The scintillation of the earth abruptly entering and leaving the field of appearances describes the land viewed from the sea, but also the intervallic condition of the earth itself. In the following note Levinas extends his revery by evoking the

Restful lassitude of the boat. Is it the sea or on the contrary the detachment from the earth. The insular character of existence. Paradise is a boat or an island. The paradisiacal moment is in Charon’s boat. (83–4)

The experience of frozen detachment during the Sunday work detail with the Kommando is here carried over to
existence itself, in the boat and the island, neither land nor sea, but more tellingly in Charon’s boat passing from life to death.

The description of the state of suspension or parenthesis between life and death as paradisiacal returns Levinas to one of the most insistent themes of the notebooks – work here allied with thoughts on animality. It is hard not to see the experience of direct forced and often futile labour informing Levinas’s ambivalence concerning the liberatory potential of work in the notebooks and his published writings. The moment of passage from life to death, where there is no more work to be done, is paradise. Levinas’s ambivalence with respect to work inclines towards hostility regarding work as fatigue and its traces – buildings, products, everything ready to hand – as erasing the costs of fatigue and violence involved in producing them. Yet Levinas’s next note brings together struggle and work, first in the definition of the human as the one ‘who does not fight for life. At least Christianity in Tolstoy’s interpretation of it. The notion of work replaces that of struggle. “The idea struggle or work” Animals do not work.’ The animal will soon return in this series of notes from the last days of 1942 and the beginning of 1943, but for now, having posed the terms of the distinction between struggle and work, Levinas returns in his last thought of 1942 to other classical philosophical themes.

Evoking once more the snowscape, he notes ‘In the white black vision – being the black. The absence of light <xxx> being’ (84). The severing of being from its association with light and then coupling it with black as the absence of light, with the trace made in light, is carried further by the reintroduction of the animal into the scenario. The animal remains at war, pursued by an adversary, but is placed by Levinas in the same snowscape that figures light and darkness as being and non-being: ‘Like the animal which in flight leaves precisely on the immaculate snow the traces that allow it to be found.’ The tracks of the escaping animal left in the snow betray it; the trace or ‘being’ here associated with deadly betrayal and part of an economy of struggle and war. The next note situates Levinas on the winter Holzweg or forest path contemplating the tracks of an escaping animal; the scenario is one of the captured human being force-marched to work in the forest contemplating the traces of a fleeing animal: ‘The march on a path where there is no trace of a human, only the trace of a deer’ (85). The snow obliterated the path, the trace of the work of the human, and left it to the trace of the fleeing animal. For the author of ‘De l’évasion’ the winter of captivity confirmed ‘being’ as the betrayal of flight.

The deduction of the past presence of an animal by the trace left in the snow is framed by two short meditations on politics and philosophy. The testimony to the tracks of the animal is followed by a brief note on representative democracy – ‘That way of counting men without seeing them’ (83). This evocation of the political trace picks up on a note from very early in 1943 on the nature of politics as the expression of a ‘mystical knowledge’ as opposed to an art or a science. Neither the object of science nor the expression of a general will:

‘The voice of the people is the voice of God.’ From this the essential thing in the election are the imponderables and not its clear moments. Number = statistical mystery. All the ‘ab-sences’ in the individual decision. Truly a mystical operation.

Levinas’s comments on the expression of the voice of the people links not only to the notion of the trace but also to the beginning of the winter sequence in the voice of God. The collective decision – the voice of people – exceeds in its effect the sum of individual decisions; this notion of excess begins to insist itself, in the comment on the philosophy of number – that ‘number is always reflection on at least the “two”’ (84) but more pertinently with the allusive definition of philosophy with which, after the short fantasy of a celebratory party, Levinas began in 1943.
Dated precisely 1 January, Levinas wrote: ‘Philosophy – real in as much as work. The role of work in the economy of being. Work rather than prophesy.’ The ambiguous statement of relation between philosophy, work and prophesy anticipates Levinas’s later introduction of prophetic excess into philosophy, in the context of infinity versus the totality of being, the face and the trace. The suspension between life and death, the frozen crossroads of being and nothing with which Levinas ended 1942 begins to thaw with the thought of excess, in particular prophetic excess. Later in the notebook Levinas will announce the advent of spring – ‘Light without warmth, clarity without being. And already like a caress, Spring.’ This contrasts with the last evocation of the winter some lines before: ‘The sense of nightmare. Immobile reality – absolute strangeness. Night in full day’ and his return to the question of Judaism, but this time not as dereliction but as salvation: ‘Js as category: where the salvation of the individual becomes collective, can only have a collective form. The “I” in the “we”’ (86). Taking up Hegel’s formula for the ‘spiritual daylight of the present’ in the Phenomenology of Spirit – ‘The I that is a we and the we that is an I’ – Levinas will later situate this community within the prophetic future as a thought of excess, jouissance, the future in the present. Emerging here from a complex matrix of thought, this line of reflection brings forward one of the very rare allusions to Zionism in the notebooks and postwar notes. After a discussion of nostalgia and return Levinas tersely notes: ‘Palestine for us, re-entry’ (87). This brief allusion remains undeveloped, even in the postwar notes, one of the surprises or disappointments of the inédits; the understanding of Levinas’s relationship to Zionism and later the State of Israel is not greatly enhanced by this first volume.

This reading of little more than four pages of the notebooks goes some way to showing the extraordinary conceptual and figural density of Levinas’s notes and their working through of themes that would become prominent in his postwar writing. But it is selective in so far as even in these few pages there are reflections on literature, fictional episodes along with reflections on Eros woven into the philosophical analyses that would need to be brought into a full account of Levinas’s thinking at this moment. These pages also represent the worst moment or the moment of the fullest despair in the notebooks, and even so they contain hints of exits from the predicament of captivity. They mark the point of extreme material reduction that Levinas would later evoke in a postwar note on the cold that seems to return to the Sunday afternoon work detail of late 1942 – cold is the state of ‘being exposed’, of ‘detachment from all sources of life’. With it there is no return: the danger of the cold is ‘its irreversibility, the death of the past, the nothingness of the past, the purity of the present’ (304). Yet even at this point of extreme deprivation there remains a possibility of escape and thus future. This realization becomes clearer in the following notebooks where Levinas begins the elaboration of what after the war he called his attempt to formulate an ‘anti-fascist or anti-totalitarian philosophy’, inseparable for him from a rethinking of socialism.

**Anti-fascist philosophy, socialist jouissance**

The winter of 1942–43 marks a point of transition in Levinas’s captivity, even if it seemed at the time to be a point of arrest and near despair. Earlier in the notebook, just before his transfer to Germany, Levinas drew up the balance of ‘All of this captivity’ to date, and could still look forward to future work and projects. The enforced leisure, ‘the readings one would otherwise have never made, like a period of College’ led to the discovery ‘that one had many superfluous things – in relations, in food, in pastimes. Normal life could itself be organized differently. The crisis of our prewar life appears in this simplicity’ (70). There is indeed a sense of catharsis informing Levinas’s understanding of his captivity, a liberation from a prewar condition that he will see as proto-fascist, and with this the opening to another form of life. This liberation first took the form of future projects. On arrival in Germany in the autumn of 1942, Levinas presented himself with a list of work to be done, divided into three sections: philosophical works, literary and critical. In the first Levinas lists ‘Being and Nothingness’, ‘Time’, ‘Rosenzweig’ and ‘Rosenberg’. In the second section he lists his two projected novels ‘Sad Opulence’ and ‘Irreality and Love’, and in the third a critical study of Proust. Apart from testifying to the diversity of the work Levinas set before himself, the list also shows the focus of his philosophical inquiries on the themes of Being, nothingness and time. The references to Franz Rosenzweig and Alfred Rosenberg point to his researches in the contrast of Jewish and National Socialist philosophy. The renewal of Jewish philosophy in the 1920s represented by Rosenzweig’s Star of Redemption is effectively opposed to the National Socialist philosophy of The Myth of the Twentieth Century. Levinas saw himself at this stage as continuing the critical engagement with National Socialist philosophy that he had begun in the ‘Some Reflections on Hitlerism’ of 1934.
The obligation to criticize fascist philosophy was purged by the events of the war. In the third notebook, a reference to the Russians and the date 25 July 1943 announce the end of the fascist masquerade ‘Good became good, evil–evil’ (106). With this Levinas announced the end of a prewar, fascist intellectual and cultural climate. With the same phrase a year later with the imminent military defeat of National Socialism, Levinas can allow himself to hope that ‘the last judgement is suddenly reality’ but also to ask ‘we see the dawn, but will we see the sun?’ (139). Yet the dawn was enough to dispel the phantasms of fascist philosophy that had haunted Levinas during the prewar period. The sense of relief at being finally liberated from the mediocre fascist philosophers of the 1930s, from having to breathe the air of a fascist climate, from having critically to engage with racist theory, is palpable. Time and again, Levinas returns almost with wonder to the sense of a burden suddenly lifted, the military defeat of Nazism bringing with it the dissolution of the fabric of ideas with which it cloaked itself. In the 1945 broadcast, to take just one example, the sense of relief is almost physical:

After so many years when good and evil changed place and one had begun to get used to it, after the years of Wagnerism, of Nietzscheanism, of Gobinism, which had penetrated even ourselves, the return to the truth of these six years, sight confirmed by world events, that took the breath away, that took you by the throat. Good became good again, evil, evil. The lugubrious masquerade was over. (214)

The liberation from the obligation to confront Nazism at the level of philosophy brought with it the new obligation to introduce positive aspects of the experience of captivity into philosophy and politics. The reconstructive ambition becomes most clear in the fourth notebook, written when Levinas was certain of the military defeat of Nazism, if not of his own individual fate. What is striking in this notebook is the conjunction, suspected by some readers of Totality and Infinity, between the ethical recasting of philosophy and the rethinking of the possibilities of socialism. In a sense it is at this point that Levinas's fiction and his philosophy come into close proximity, expressed in Levinas's attempt to build a theory of need on the basis of Eros. At the core of his project is an attempt to imagine a socialism based on jouissance rather than possession and material need.

The projected theory of need that Levinas worked on in 1944 and elaborated after the war is complex and multivalent, encompassing a theory of being, subjectivity and the interval. It departs from a attempt to broaden the concept of appetition, asking ‘is it the Appetition of things or of jouissance?’ (118). Levinas answers with a distinction that he will subsequently develop at length: ‘Appetition of things – capitalism. It is why one may possess without enjoying’ (118). Levinas proceeds to sketch out a critique of property and of work on the basis of jouissance – the realization that ‘appetition is another way of mastering being’ is, he says, ‘my central idea’. It was experienced almost ecstatically, with the bleak detached ecstasy of the winter of 1942 changing into a soaring experience of the freedom of the interval. This recurs in many forms, first of all as the experience of a threshold between dream and waking:

On the frontier between dream and waking. Sense of being equally distant from the one or the other with the freedom to plunge into sleep or to rise towards waking. Total freedom and joy of this freedom with respect to the world. Summit – vision – embracing a vast horizon. Depth – source of nourishment – abyss. Existential mystery – opposed to the light of vision. (119–20)

The bleak insight of the winter that paradise lay in the passage from life to death – Charon’s boat – is now inverted as the interval between death and life becomes the place of Eros and jouissance: ‘that which distinguishes need from Eros – is that need is the overcoming of an interval where duality is overcome. Assimilation of the exterior world by the subject.’ The relegation of need in favour of Eros, and with it of work as a relationship to exteriority and the dialectical structures of need and satisfaction, is directly addressed to Hegel and to the forced labour of the slave in the master–slave dialectic. In Eros, on the other hand, ‘the duality is jouissance itself. The interval is not simply overcome, it is always to be overcome’ (120). This opens the prospect of non-dialectical thought and
experience, one that privileges the avenir: ‘Time is always to come’ (120).

Levinas states explicitly that his philosophical project is a rethinking of socialism, or rather of the conceptual assumptions of some strands of the socialist tradition that emphasize the liberatory vocation of the interaction with nature that is work. He states programatically, ‘I oppose to the lack of the classical conception [of need] a jouissance that is socialist liberation’ (118). This is framed, once again, as a critique of the master–slave dialectic. The exteriority of need arises ‘from the fact that something is lacking in my being’. Referring then to the Platonic source of the need as ‘lack’, Levinas brings his reflection into a Hegelian register: ‘I am subjected to that which I do not have, which is my master?’ The struggle for recognition becomes a struggle with lack, for Levinas a ‘capitalist conception’ at the basis of the concepts of struggle and property. In its place Levinas imagines an interval, one that is not experienced as lack, and where it is possible to enjoy ‘a future in the present’ (118).

Levinas includes Heidegger in this critique of possession, singling out the Zuhandenheit of Being and Time for critique as a theory of possession. His often detailed critiques of Heidegger in the notebooks and in the postwar notes foreground one of the main motivations of his thought that is evident throughout his published writings. What is not so explicit is the way in which this critique emerges as part of Levinas’s rethinking of socialism on the basis of jouissance. This is clear throughout the notebooks and postwar notes, as on the occasion when Levinas claims in the fifth notebook from 1944 that ‘An essential element of my philosophy – that by which it differs from the philo. of Heidegger – is the importance of the Other. Eros as its central moment’ (134). The specific critique of Heidegger is developed at length in the postwar notebooks and postwar notes are striking for the evidence they give of Levinas’s efforts to make the transition. As an idea born and nurtured in the conditions of extreme material and moral deprivation of the camps, it was never conceived as a utopian fantasy but as a political and existential project. The critique of Heidegger just mentioned, for example, modulates into a contrast between puissance and jouissance. For Levinas, the immanence of jouissance is not ‘paradisiacal’ but of this world; it is no stranger to suffering, finding itself in ‘the necessity of working and the same impossibility of working – unemployment – the proletarian condition is always possible’ (246). Puissance is work and appropriation – oriented not towards the future but to the exterior, its future is the present. Its organ ‘is the hand’ and it is used ‘to appropriate, to shape, to cut, to manufacture’ (247). Yet even if the temporal mode of puissance is the reduction of future to present, it also possesses a strong orientation to the past: ‘My puissance is never alone – the tool pre-exists me. The work of others. Capital’ (248). In the train of argument that follows, jouissance is reduced to the consumption of commodities and puissance transforms itself into money. While the steps of the argument are far from clear, what is striking about it is the ambition to pursue the basic philosophical intuition concerning jouissance into the beginnings of a discussion of concepts specific to political and economic theory.

Levinas arrived at his philosophy of jouissance from a number of diverse directions. It is indebted to Platonic meditations on Eros, but these as refracted through Levinas’s fictional writing; to the critique of Heidegger; to the constant presence of Rabelais and most importantly to Judaism. The choice of departing from ‘Dasein or J.’ posed in the third notebook of Heidegger to a critique of Heidegger to a rethinking of socialism as a political project based on jouissance was by no means obvious and never effectively accomplished by Levinas. But the notebooks and postwar notes are striking for the evidence they give of Levinas’s efforts to make the transition. As an idea born and nurtured in the conditions of extreme material and moral deprivation of the camps, it was

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My existence does not float in the air. The ensemble of objects offered to my jouissance are for me, for my jouissance. Except for the earth on which I find myself. To be on the earth precedes all relationship to an object. (244)

Levinas describes this state of Je suis ici in physiological terms such as effort, fatigue and enjoyment derived from the early Bergson, and draws the conclusion that

It is immanence – the fact of staying here that is the event itself of the for-self, condition of jouissance. Transcendental philosophy in the strong sense: the earth is the condition par excellence. (244–5)
is answered in the arguments for *jouissance* against Heidegger. This is stated programmatically in a note from 1946 where Levinas states one of the results of his inquiry during captivity and its source: ‘My philosophy – is a philosophy of the face-to-face. Relation to the other, without intermediary. It is that of Judaism’ (186). This is a Judaism that is also understood (and this is elaborated in Levinas’s later published writings on the theme) as the source for the theory of human rights and justice that entered into the Western tradition, and, for Levinas above all, constituted one of the inspirations of the socialist tradition.

The editors of the *inédits* are to be thanked for bringing Levinas’s notebooks to the public discussion of his work. The edition is helpfully introduced and the notes infallibly helpful, with Levinas’s necessarily telegraphic references filled out and the phrases in Russian and usually individual words in Hebrew identified and translated. The notebooks serve as a reminder of the gravity of Levinas’s thought, its emergence under extreme conditions and its stubborn fidelity *de profundis* to philosophy and Judaism. They reveal clearly some of the unexpected motivations of Levinas’s thought, confirming known sources such as Heidegger and Bergson and revealing others – the critique of the ‘grand error’ of Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in the seventh notebook for example – that were unexpected. They are invaluable for disclosing the conceptual valencies of Levinas’s thought, showing the emergence of the complex links between concepts such the *il y a*, the subject and *jouissance* and others. The edition also serves to fill out allusions in published work, such as the importance of Shakespeare for Levinas’s philosophizing – above all Hamlet and Macbeth. In short it gives us a far more complex and interesting Levinas than hitherto, disrupting many of the assumptions about the development of his thought. The publication of these and the other *inédits* should serve as a salutary shock to a reception of Levinas’s thought that was in danger of lapsing into complacency.

Notes

2. *Le Figaro*, 25 June 2009. The same article identifies one of the salient points of the litigation to have been the destination of Levinas’s archive: Michael Levinas wishing to deposit it with l’Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine (IMEC), Simone Hansel with the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF).
Hey! Can’t you smile!

Women and status in philosophy

Babette Babich

What is the status of women in philosophy today? Before asking this question it is important to recall that when one speaks of status one speaks of prestige or value. Questions of status have nothing, by nature, to do with ‘truth’, objective or otherwise; at stake are matters of power and respect.

Who is the top philosopher today? How about the top three? To stay with living names, we might think of Charles Taylor or Alasdair MacIntyre or Stanley Cavell, or, to name a few continental philosophers, Jürgen Habermas or even, for the younger and edgier among us, maybe Jacques Rancière (maybe) or Alain Badiou (more likely); some might think of nominating Slavoj Žižek or Gianni Vattimo (or maybe not). Wondering about additional anglophone names, we may well be short of great thinkers these days, but surely Simon Blackburn or Hilary Putnam would count.

Folks with or without analytic tastes may have different lists, but I submit that candidates for such an accolade are typically men, with women added, as women tend to be, only for reasons of equity, if one thinks of it, or is asked to do so: as an afterthought.

For my own part, and not just because of my continental formation, I do not believe that the explanation for this is that men are inherently, essentially philosophical (empirically I know this is not so). Rather, men are in possession of power/status to start with. Thus I find myself in agreement with Louise Morley’s observation that ‘credentials and academic capital in women’s possession mysteriously lose their value.’

Years ago now, Deborah Tannen got a lot of attention for her linguistic studies of gender differences. Expanding on the work of Patricia Bradley Hayes and others, Tannen argued that such differences had to do with what social scientists called value expectancy. Put a male and a female lecturer having the same substantive things to say (with the same text) in front of an audience and it turns out that audiences interviewed regarding the competence, the fluidity, the clarity, the importance and overall the brilliance of the speaker (analytical philosophers will sum all of this up as ‘quality’) turn out to prefer the guys. Hands down.

Value expectancy corresponds to the ‘schemas’ that Sally Haslanger identifies favouring male above female, white over black, philosophers. Indeed, Haslanger’s most disquieting but ultimately plausible suggestion, given the bias observed in the profession overall, asks that one consider the possibility ‘that there may well be an ‘evaluation bias even in the peer-review process.’

So ask your own students. Worse yet, remember your own experiences, your own expectations, when you learned that your instructor in a particular university course would be male or female (never mind academic rank, race, age, and so on – though of course all these things too make a difference for men as for women). Hearing reports of disparate gender representation, academic philosophical associations, like philosophy departments seeking to make a gender hire, offer the strikingly simplistic remedy that women should come forward, as if this were the problem (and indeed when job searches fail to identify women, academic philosophers morph into Jacques Lacan and uniformly lament: there are no women!), as if there were no issues of political dominance, as if the status dilemma were no dilemma at all, as if the persistence of these professional issues were merely a matter of oversight.

The status of women in philosophy is and remains nugatory or weak, and most of the time, in the most important and everyday ways that matter, the question of the status of women is low or trivialized in the profession. And one of the best ways to trivialize any problem is to deny that there is a problem. Just think of the debate on continental and analytic philosophy. Isn’t it really all about doing ‘good work? Ditto for women philosophers. For, as I can tell you from my own experience, all-boy or old-boy socialization continues apace, usually covered over with a joke or a sneer. Men use such jokes to perpetuate the old sexist
standards and ideals, laughter works wonders at allowing one to have one’s insult and get away with it too, and women learn to tolerate or smile at the same. For, as in other instances, it turns out that it is the ‘quite systematic talk used by men, to and about women, to violate women’s credibility and professionalism’ that undermines both the position of women and their efficacy in academia. What is to be done? Revolutions? Marching in the streets? Writing book after book? This has been done.

I thus argue for a different tack (and because I realize that this is a subtle point, let me emphasize that I am being ironic in the spirit of Jonathan Swift’s ‘Modest Proposal’ – which was, you will remember, neither modest nor indeed a proposal, properly speaking). I argue, in case you have not noticed, for respect and a certain social freedom. Not in the way ‘respect’ is ordinarily claimed by women (will you respect me in the morning?) but the kind of regard that accrues to power. And although power can – and your political and social and cultural theorist and even social worker friends will tell you must – be claimed, such claims only work as claims if they succeed. Otherwise not.

I argue, then, for the perfectly professorial right for women in the academy who happen to be professors to be, as professors often are, preoccupied; the right, if one so chooses, not to smile at the men but to think and even to have (pace both Tannen and Haslanger) the same ‘poor’ social skills men have and not be penalized just as men are not penalized but often rewarded and lionized for the same.

Ladies not smiling. My word! Whatever will they propose next? And I cannot but imagine that I have lost the support of my readers just about now.

From the continental side, I agree with much of what Haslanger and Tannen take as their respective points of departure, and I agree with many of their conclusions (despite the fact that the ‘continental side’ is conspicuously absent in their worlds of philosophy). But I refuse Haslanger’s idea that the solution could be ‘to find ways to discourage antisocial behaviour’ in men, and not only because this sounds like the very sort of onerous obligation often ‘conveniently’ imposed on women. Women have a wretched track record, one-on-one, when it comes to changing anti-social or non-supportive behaviour in an intimate relationship where both parties supposedly have a mutual investment in the relationship. If women are less than good at changing their personal partners, why suppose they will fare any better with their academic colleagues? Unfortunately women are very good at learning not to mind; this is the paramount social skill, is it not?

Of course I am all for politeness and social skills. But being distracted is often the cost of being ‘lost’, as we say, ‘in thought’. So, rather than socializing men to be more sociable, my radically immodest (or unearest) proposal is that women too claim the right to be absent-minded, and my still more radical suggestion is that we celebrate and admire rather than make excuses for such women. Perhaps men’s putatively ‘poor’ skills advance rather than hinder rank and status? Or it may be that the having of rank and status entails that one need not bother with such ‘skills’? Some social actors are more equal than others: some can be rude and dishevelled (and get away with it on both counts), some not. Nor is this limited to academics, or limited within the academy to philosophy departments. Some with poor social skills suffer from socialization deficits while others are rewarded.

Sartor resartus

Simon Critchley, a T-shirt-and-jeans guy from way back, takes insouciance so far that both undergraduates and journalists can get carried away by his ‘style’ (for he does take a care for his shoes, albeit at levels of discrimination below the impeccable Alexander Nehamas, who wears, no matter his other excellences, simply wonderful shoes). Why does it seem to be pushing things a bit to talk about Simon Critchley’s clothes or Alexander Nehamas’s shoes, not to mention the distracted fallout of, say, Saul Kripke’s couture? For Kripke’s messiness is part of his reputation and constitutes, aesthetically, if paradoxically for some, no small part of his reputation for genius. Let’s take it to the street. Pass a man wearing a casual shirt and a casual pair of pants and you will not even notice his attire. What do clothes have to do with it? Put a jacket and tie on the guy and he’s dressed for the finest restaurant, and these days he can even lose the tie. Contrast this with women on a Friday evening in London or New York (indeed any evening might do).

Do a little ad hoc phenomenology, using your observations and your own variations, and hence with and on yourself and your judgement, as you wander down the street on such evenings (assuming you are not part of the phenomenon yourself, as you might well be). Look for the well-dressed young woman out for the night, ideally with a date for the evening. She may be wearing a little black dress or equivalent, high heels, stockings, have newly polished nails, newly coiffed hair – and then there is that make-up thing. If her companion is her own age, almost invariably he will be dressed as he was the whole day (though the more fashion-conscious young fellow may have switched the day’s T-shirt for

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a T-shirt for the evening). If he is an older man, he may be wearing the aforementioned jacket or a suit or he may have the Euro, I-am-still-young look. But, and especially if he is an older man ( alas, an almost quantifiable phenomenon): his attractiveness and height will nearly always be inversely proportional to hers. What is important is that however casually or formally he is dressed, he will get to have his feet – every last inch of them – on the ground.

Men are not objectified on the street ( save by other men), despite the commercial success of metrosexual products ( which I am all for; you will have noted my enthusiasm for men’s haberdashery and in general anything to do with male beauty). Men are so unused to being looked at appraisingly ( this is not the same as an invitation) that such an appraising look ( nota bene: without smiling) can bring a man to stumbling. Could it be me she’s looking at? And then it gets dangerous: How dare she? ( A word to women practising such a street phenomenology: do be careful. The point about power is all too real.)

The stuff about T-shirts and black dresses is a metaphor here. The same double standard holds for academics. The assumption is that ‘ a successful philosopher should look and act like a ( traditional, white) man’, but the kicker, for women, is that if one does look like a traditional, white, male philosopher one will look ( if one happens to be a woman) more rather than less unkempt and one will be judged accordingly ( as being ‘ unattractive’): quite apart from whether the traditional ‘ academic’ look is a T-shirt look, or a rumpled shirt-sleeve look, or a jacket-to-go-to-the-APA-in look. Men in society and in the academy not only do not have to dress to please a woman’s appraising eye but when they do dress up it is solely for the sensibilities of other men. One can argue that women do this too, but anyone who argues in this way argues tendentiously just because, as Beauvoir rightly notes, women sit in competitive judgement on other women’s attractiveness to men and this is not the same as men dressing to impress men.

With respect to desiring, and hence of desirability, the Austrian novelist Elfriede Jelinek observes that ‘ as long as men are able to increase their sexual value through work, fame, or wealth, while women are only powerful through their body, beauty and youth, nothing will change.’ Incredulous, her interviewer protested that surely this claim could not be said to hold for famous women – like the Nobel Prize-winning Jelinek herself – but Jelinek insisted that a ‘ woman who becomes famous through her work reduces her erotic value. A woman is permitted to chat or to babble but speaking in public is still the greatest transgression.’

So it goes for Jelinek, who mused that ‘ at best, people are afraid of her’. Thus Hilary Clinton spent a failed presidential campaign learning to deal with inherently sexist mockery and still struggles to this day for respect. In politics, as everywhere, a woman has to show her femininity in just the right way, just to be sure of esteem. But that can be tied to all kinds of conditions, and what is more sobering – this would be pant-suit or iron-lady politics – can be refused at any level.

What are the prospects for women in the safe and, one fondly imagines, reasonable field of philosophy? The immodesty of my proposal on the status of women in philosophy, as academics, as colleagues, as professors, proposes that we do not insist upon social solicitude from academic women, just where we do not and cannot presume it from academic men. Thus I suggest we let thinkers, male and female, be thinkers. Falling into wells ( like Thales), standing stock still in the midst of battle ( Socrates as reported by Alcibiades), failing to wear socks on principle ( Einstein) but also given to poorly socialized gestures ( Wittgenstein’s poker) and sentiments ( Adorno), let them all, women as well as men, be social ‘ misfits’. If we can not only tolerate but sometimes admire such things in men, we might well tolerate and ( sometimes) admire the same in women.

It’s a small thing if we can count both women and men. Failing that, it’s about power, about who gets to get away with stuff and who gets to be considerate. ( Hey! Can’t you smile!)

Notes

5. Troemel-Ploetz, ‘ Selling the Apolitical,’ p. 499.
Remake, the sequel


With Commonwealth, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri bring to a conclusion the trilogy they began a decade ago with the publication of Empire in 2000. Multitude, the second volume, was published in 2004. Looking back, Empire remains the most theoretically innovative of the volumes, the most surprising and productive, as it set out for the first time (in English) a series of post-Autonomia concepts – including ‘empire’ and ‘multitude’ – that attempt to provide an account of the globalized present and its prehistory. It has captured the philosophical and political imaginations of many. Multitude and Commonwealth extend, exemplify and slightly recode what was set out in the first volume – and thus at times drag, despite the often interesting materials deployed (historical, sociological, philosophical and cultural). In their repetitions, they become increasingly melodramatic, both politically and theoretically, culminating in the final section of Commonwealth on the politics of laughter (that is, the political fantasy of ‘instituting happiness’), the last two sentences of which read: ‘And in the struggles against capitalist exploitation, the rule of property, and the destroyers of the common through public and private control, we will suffer terribly, but still we laugh with joy. They will be buried by laughter.’ At what are, frankly, offensive moments like this, confronted with such a ‘we’, one cannot but think that the book might best belong in some kind of Ballardian nightmare.

There are a number of noticeable shifts in perspective and emphases in Commonwealth, when compared to Empire and Multitude. Most of these, however, although interesting in themselves, serve only to strengthen the political ontology that is set out throughout the trilogy. Since many of Hardt and Negri’s political concepts – such as ‘multitude’ and ‘exodus’ – are quite well known, I will concentrate below on the major changes and their significance. One change is Commonwealth’s abandonment of the post-9/11 Schmittian stress on sovereign exception that frames Multitude. Hardt and Negri now insist that the ‘excessive focus on the concept of sovereignty’ in recent political philosophy (including, it transpires, their own) has generated a misrecognition of contemporary – mainly republican – state forms and has taken on an ‘apocalyptic’ tone that undermines political engagement, which is the main focus of Commonwealth. The idea raised by Agamben that exception has become the norm is, in this sense, both mistaken and disabling. More surprising, perhaps, is that Commonwealth also abandons the idea of ‘post-modernity’ to describe contemporary forms of cultural experience (of technological developments, flexible accumulation, migration and transnational forms of sovereignty), replacing it with a combination of a very general, historically weak notion of modernity, on the one hand, and a very strong, political notion of ‘altermodernity’, on the other.

The composition of Commonwealth is marked by a distinct will to scan, rather than to delve – much like Google Earth. This means that the authors move quickly through the materials (concepts, issues, events) it brings into focus; Hardt and Negri pass through history and theory at speed to produce a biopolitical totalization of the globalized present. In order to provide their accounts of ‘modernity’, ‘antimodernity’ and ‘altermodernity’, for example, the authors travel far and wide, especially to Latin America. This is not surprising, because they correctly make the historical experience of colonialism and slavery internal to their concepts of capitalism and modernity, but the latter proves to be so all-encompassing a concept that the theoretical gesture threatens to remain devoid of historical significance: the contemporaneity of processes standing in for actual historical determinations. Modernity, they say, ‘must be understood as a power relation: domination and resistance, sovereignty and struggles for liberation’. In other words, it is whatever their position demands. Even though their idea of modernity presents itself as a periodizing concept, it is not clear what would not be modern. Hardt and Negri do, however, evoke the idea of the ‘coloniality of power’ (coined by the Peruvian Marxist sociologist Aníbal Quijano, whom they fail to mention) to give it some historical and political substance. However, their main purpose is immediately to biopoliticize (and re-baptize) it as ‘the coloniality of biopower’, incorporating it into their conception of modernity and preparing the conceptual way for introducing
both the ‘resistance’ that is its condition (and ‘anti-modernity’) and the concept that will sublate and replace it: ‘alter-modernity’.

The importance of Quijano’s rethinking of coloniality, which Hardt and Negri pick up on via the work of Latin Americanist critics Enrique Dussel and Walter Mignolo (a colleague of Hardt’s at Duke University) is that it is not confined to historical processes of colonialism, but embraces postcolonial nation-formation too; especially the ways in which racism became fundamental to what were to all extent and purposes ‘positivist states’ throughout Latin America – a neocolonial anti-colonialism. To transform the idea of such power to biopower (in a Foucauldian vein), and to generalize it beyond Latin American so as to include Europe and the USA, is an important conceptual step: colonialism, postcolonialism and anti-colonialism are constitutive of the whole of the modern world, in a variety of forms (in his original formulation Quijano tends to presuppose ‘Europe’ as an already given colonial subject). However, according to Giovanni Arrighi in *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994), Spanish colonialism in the Americas might be best conceived of as anti-modern (medievalist) recoil, a reaction-formation against emerging forms of accumulation and modern forms of territorialism. Albeit helpful at one level, Hardt and Negri’s concepts of modernity and anti-modernity are arguably too flat, abstract and overpoliticized to consider such historical complexity.

But what is altermodernity? As used here (rather than in its recent artworld manifestation, in Nicolas Bourriaud’s 2009 *Altermodern*), it is a concept that links three distinct forms of anti-modernity – a line of radical enlightenment thought from Spinoza via Kant to Marx, workers’ struggles that have been subordinated to ideologies of progress and development (including socialist ones), and anti-colonial/imperialist/racist resistance – so as to transform them into aspects of a new ‘multitudinous’ political project of social transformation that rests on the creation of a ‘new humanity’. (This is Hardt and Negri’s modified translation of Che Guevara’s notion of the ‘new man’.) Altermodernity is thus not an alternative modernity, in the sense of an exceptionalism, or a modernity or capitalism with, for example, ‘Japanese characteristics’, as in culturalist accounts. It is modernity ‘otherwise’, based on the history of resistance to modernity. ‘[T]he freedom that forms the base of resistance… comes to the fore and constitutes an event to announce a new political project’, we are told. In other words, alter-modernity is always already present as modernity’s critical counterpoint. It is here that Hardt and Negri envisage the role of the contemporary ‘militant’ intellectual, enlisted to translate ‘the practices and desires of the struggles into norms and institutions … embarked on the project of co-research aimed at making the multitude.’ As the sum of singularities, however, the multitude is also the subject of freedom and resistance (to modernity), of altermodernity, and thus of its own (biopolitical) self-production as event – in Hardt and Negri’s anti-Badiouian perspective.

To exemplify, Hardt and Negri again turn to Latin America, specifically to political developments – the emergence of the ‘multitude-form’ – in Bolivia; although they truncate their narrative to fit, so as to not include its coming to power under the leadership of Evo Morales and Álvaro García Linera, the new vice-president, whose writings they rely upon for their account. Again, it a question of appropriating and transforming concepts – here, once more, the concept of ‘multitude’ – so as to make them their own. The problem is that the idea of multitude is already doing so much philosophical and political work throughout the ‘Empire’ trilogy that it becomes overburdened with content, and begins to capsize under its own weight. It was because it failed to deal with this problem philosophically that the book *Multitude* was such a disappointment (see my review in *RP* 130, March/April 2005, pp. 29–32). For in Bolivia, according to Hardt and Negri, the multitude is not only subject and substance (the producing product or subject–object of political history), but also the organizational ‘means’: ‘a concept of applied parallelism’, the multitude-form politically unifies *without* hegemony along the axes of class and race/ethnicity.

Hardt and Negri are right in this aspect of their version of García Linera’s account of the new dominant organisational form of the working classes in Bolivia – the result of an expanded and recomposed process of proletarianization as a result of neoliberal globalization – but they are wrong to suggest it has a *non*-hegemonizing character. For García Linera:

> We … work with the *multitude* as a bloc of collective action that articulates autonomous structures organized by the subaltern classes around discursive and symbolic hegemonic constructions that have the particularity of varying in their origins within different segments of the subaltern classes (*La potencia plebeya/Plebeian Power*, 2008)

Hegemony is clearly fundamental to García Linera, as is the moment of ‘intersubjective’ unity that emerges in contexts of political crisis and resistance. García Linera produces his concepts in critical conversation with the late René Zavaleta, whose concepts of a ‘variegated society’ and ‘multitude’ Hardt and Negri also mention.
They dismiss the latter, again rather hurriedly, for its developmentalism, but deploy the former – a way of describing the uneven but un-combined development of Bolivia – to justify the use of their own concept of multitude. For Zavaleta, the notion of intersubjectivity comes into play to describe the moment of unity in a political crisis in such an un-combined context. As elsewhere in the ‘Empire’ trilogy, Hardt and Negri charismatically evoke ‘political love’ as their alternative.

The most obvious change of emphasis in Commonwealth is contained in the volume’s title. In the wake of recent discussions of neoliberal ‘accumulation through dispossession’ (by David Harvey among others), the history of forms of ‘constituent power’ (in Peter Linebaugh’s 2008 The Magna Carta Manifesto, for example), and Paolo Virno’s quasi-anthropological reflections on the social significance of the communal and natural-historical character of language, Hardt and Negri bring their own notion of ‘the common(s)’ to the fore – all the way into the title of the book. The idea of ‘the common’ has two main aspects. The first is recognizably classical, and refers to ‘the common wealth of the material world – the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all of nature’s bounty… the inheritance of humanity as a whole, to be shared’. The second refers to ‘those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledge, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth’. Life, in other words, begets common forms which beget life… This aspect is the most significant for the authors because it links the common to what they refer to as immaterial and affective labour and biopolitical production, the making and remaking of ‘life’ in both its objective and its subjective moments.

The ways in which contemporary forces of production put to work cultural forms, virtuosity and the means of communication and representation (virtual networks, etc.) is fundamental to their conception. This ‘common wealth’ is appropriated and accumulated as capital, via forms of property and state command.

From the point of view of theoretical procedure, such a view is arguably their re-vision – that is, their biopoliticization – of the well-known contradiction between the socialization of production and private appropriation, which is so difficult to unravel today in the context of the predominance of ‘high finance’ capital over industrial production, the model social form for classical Marxism. From this biopoliticized perspective, even finance capital represents and maps the commons negatively as appropriated accumulation. In other words, in the same spirit as the concept of ‘multitude’ (in a project already initiated by Negri in his Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the ‘Grundrisse’ of 1979), Commonwealth provides a subjectivist counterpoint to Marx’s Capital, reading the objective processes analysed there ‘from below’ – that is, from the perspective of ‘living labour’.

Commonwealth thus suggests the need for ‘a new theory of value’ to replace Marx’s, which it is judged surpassed by new forms of capital and, especially, new forms of labour that exceed capital’s abilities to either appropriate or overcode it (it is outside ‘measure’). Hardt and Negri refer here to the breakdown in the divisions between leisure time and work time, and between private space and spaces of work, associated with immaterial and affective labour. Production and life have, they suggest, become co-determinous: capital is really a social relation, they insist, and now the social relations of production produce social relations. Skirting the spectral, but equally actual, existence of capital as form of value, Hardt and Negri thus ‘prove’ that there has been a biopoliticization of production. In such a context the account of value on which Marx’s theory of capitalist exploitation is based has been historically surpassed, and what Negri and others have referred to as ‘self-valorization’ (now, the biopolitical production of common wealth), comes to the fore. Such a rethinking of exploitation could have proved a very
useful contribution – indeed, it promised to become the highlight of the book – but instead it remains scattered and without focus. In privileging the idea of ‘living’ labour over commodified labour (variable capital), for example, it refuses to take Marx’s industry-centred conception into the streets, dwellings, fields and so on, where the new forms of labour – and of value – foregrounded here are to be found. In this regard, Hardt and Negri have very little to say about ongoing processes and experiences of primitive accumulation, industrialization and high finance capital in China, and its transnational effects – areas in which Marx’s theory of value still seems applicable and pertinent. Rather, the authors simply assert the subjective dimension of the labour theory of value, categorically, reading Marx/Engels’s ‘technical composition of labour’ from Volume 3 of Capital as ‘living labour’, against the notion of the technical composition of capital. As a result, they bypass both value as a critical concept and the well-known problems, insufficiencies and ambiguities of the labour theory of value itself. (The debate about the work of Chris Arthur, for example, in the journal Historical Materialism, is one port at which Hardt and Negri have yet to call.)

All three volumes of the ‘Empire’ trilogy thus present themselves as works of post-Marxist communism, founded in a common theoretical and political insistence: to render positive the concepts of ‘the common’, ‘the multitude’ and ‘biopolitical production’, and to hegemonize the field of theoretical production from which they derive, through survey and synthesis. Put succinctly, ‘the multitude’ is the political embodiment of ‘the common’, whilst ‘biopolitical production’ is what mediates them – the common as multitude, the multitude as common – in creative practice (conceived predominantly from the perspective of non-alienated or, more positively, ‘living’ labour) qua ‘freedom’. In Commonwealth Hardt and Negri finally address the concept of freedom, absent in both Empire and Multitude, as the ground of their deployment and description of multiple acts of ‘resistance’ – an idea which, up until now, has been abstractly (even enigmatically) posited as somehow logically existing prior to the very forms of domination resisted. Unsurprisingly, such a concept of freedom is derived from Foucault, who by now has clearly become the authors’ master-thinker. Having outlined Foucault’s account of biopower and discipline, Negri and Hardt proceed to rescue and transform – that is, endow with subjective historical substance – his ‘docile bodies’, quoting him as follows: ‘Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free…. At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom.’ Hardt and Negri then draw their own conclusions: ‘Biopolitics appears in this light … as a tightly woven fabric of events of freedom … [that] should be understood not only negatively, as rupture, but also as innovation, which emerges, so to speak, from the inside.’ This productive freedom – the biopower (potenza) – of the multitude, which capital and state negate, provides Hardt and Negri with a historical logic, in a quasi-Hegelian form they philosophically disavow (spirit is materialized, not as capital, as for Marx, but as biopower), in which social emancipation is always already guaranteed.

There is no doubt, then, that Commonwealth attempts to reformulate what Badiou refers to as ‘the communist hypothesis’ at its core with regard to its original focus on property and the state – clearly an important theoretical and political task – via the ‘biopoliticization’ of all concepts. But, as a work of synthesis, it moves much too quickly, stumbling on the way, and arguably missing (as Žižek has recently suggested, in First as Tragedy, Then as Farce, 2009) what is really new within the new, despite the impression of relentless conceptual innovation. However much Hardt and Negri may grasp difference, for example, via the still-underdeveloped concepts of ‘singularity’ and ‘multiplicity’, as well as criticize identity-thinking as ‘corruption’, they remain blind to the new forms of non-synchronicity and unevenness within transnational capitalist development; and however much they may attempt to reformulate the concept of exploitation for new times, in their rush to consolidate a political ontology of the multitude they persistently miss the reconfigured persistence of the old (as new). In this they remain conventionally developmentalist.

Commonwealth is a work characterized primarily by an onward movement, rather than a reflective or constructive thought, as it takes readers on a world-historical tour of past and contemporary events and their reflection in theory and philosophy. It synthesizes at speed and so flattens concepts as they are either dismissed or quickly emptied out and reappropriated. When compared to the relative slowness of the intellectual labour, conceptual production and criticism that characterizes the works of those authors with whom Hardt and Negri are generally compared – Badiou, Balibar, Laclau, (Negri himself?), Rancière, Virno, amongst others – this work reads, with its prequels (Empire 1 & 2), like a generic work of literary or cinematic narrative: a Hollywood remake.

John Kraniauskas
Junk utopia


At the time of writing the Copenhagen Climate Change negotiations are in full flow, with stories of breakthroughs and breakdowns circulating in equal measure. Whatever the final outcome of these talks – which, in a real sense, cannot be evaluated for years to come, in so far as any substantive action will require an ongoing process of industrial, economic and indeed cultural restructuring – it is worth noting that the most optimistic ambitions of the negotiations are to achieve an ultimate reduction in CO_2 which will, according to the stated aims of the summit, give the planet a 50/50 chance of avoiding runaway global warming. (Although many leading scientists, including Dr James Hanson, director of NASA's Goddard Institute, and Professor Kevin Anderson, director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at Manchester, have cast doubt on these assumptions, arguing that much steeper and faster emissions reductions than those hoped for at Copenhagen are needed to reach even a 50/50 position.) Of course, we should remember as well that the issues being addressed at Copenhagen – reducing industrial carbon emissions and disseminating renewable energy technology – represent just one part of the environmental question confronting global culture more broadly. Workers in almost all arenas of human production are increasingly having to confront the demands placed upon their professions by both emerging and acute systemic stresses in our energy, food, material, waste and water flows, as the ecosystems across the planet upon which we feed and shit are degraded, with some already in the final stages of terminal collapse.

In recent years we have become increasingly aware of the sheer scale and irreversible impoverishment of our environment, an effect of what Marx described as the ‘metabolic rift’ between global capitalist growth and the broader web of ecological relations within which we are suspended. As the patterns of uneven development by which capitalism produces itself – and indeed large parts of nature – are played out as and through social relations, it is the world’s poorest and weakest who suffer the most from environmental degradation. It is thus incumbent to reflect and act upon the very real problems posed by the socio-ecological crisis of capitalism, even whilst we also recognize the importance of, for example, T.J. Demos’s observation that there is, today, a need to ‘denaturalize the rhetoric of sustainability’, recognizing these buzzwords as deeply political, contentious and ideological.

It is against the background of this range of issues that Adrian Parr’s new book Hijacking Sustainability is published. Whether considering the ecobranding of consumer products, the greenwash of multinational corporations, or grassroots political activism, for Parr the re-emergence of environmental issues in political and popular cultural space over the last decade defines a new social discourse: sustainability culture. In much of Parr’s analysis, the logic of sustainability culture is therefore found to be already active in contemporary culture and production, and in these situations she generally executes a reasonably sensitive and informative critique. However, elsewhere in her text Parr seems to refer to, or call for, a new and critically radicalized sustainability culture. There is an antagonism between these two different conceptions: one emerging at the leading edge of capitalism, supported by all kinds of innovative technologies, commodities and ecobranding ideologies; the other formed out of oppositional social structures and technologies.

Parr’s thesis is built around this dual conception of sustainability culture, defining and describing it as a contradictory nexus of relations between production, ideology, state and society. This is often productive and useful. Equally, however, it is not always clear which conception of sustainability culture she is referring to, and, as a result, the text can at times seem both confused and confusing. It is not that conceiving of a set of relations as internally contradictory is a problem in itself. Indeed, the conception of a unity of relations as internally constituted through a network of contradictory internal relations and tendencies is a key moment in any process of dialectical thought. And although she lacks any explicit theory of dialectical process, Parr does, at times, make suggested moves in this direction – for example with a reference to the useful work of John Bellamy Foster. Overall, however, Hijacking Sustainability suffers from Parr’s lack of any conscious acknowledgement and theorization of the fact that she is precisely working with such shifting and contradictory aspects of sustainability culture. More generally, it is a shame that Parr does
not position her work rather more clearly in relation to broader critical and historical conceptual work, perhaps drawing upon some of the theorizations that have emerged around, for instance, the intersections of political ecology and critical geography – thinking in particular of David Harvey and Neil Smith’s theory of uneven development or Eric Swyngedouw’s conception of urban metabolism.

Nonetheless, Parr does generate some important new research into the way that the cluster of ideas and practices referred to as sustainability are operative within and around capitalism today. Hence, for example, she explores how sustainability culture is providing a discourse through which contemporary capitalism is playing out its inner contradictions, even whilst this same sustainability culture provides a new discourse of power. As she reminds us, ‘sustainability culture is inherent to the logic of late capitalism.’ She is particularly interested, in this regard, in exploring the practices and ideologies of the strands of ecological thinking that are able to engage with, or indeed are directly produced by, those sectors of capitalist production that are able to see potential for capital accumulation and investment as a result of shifts in environmental consciousness. Still, at times Parr can seem rather naive, as, for example, in her apparent post-autonomist faith that ‘in the US it is not ideology that is turning sustainability into a cultural hegemonic: it is a socially and environmentally conscious multitude whose investment and consumption patterns are prompting multinational corporations … to develop a new image of corporate social responsibility.’

Parr begins the book by suggesting that there has been a shift in the meaning of sustainability: ‘gone are the days when the word conjured up images of unapologetic veganism, dreadlocks, and mud brick homes. From eco-hippie to eco-hip, sustainability is the new buzzword.’ This kind of formulation is a real problem, and typifies the weaker side of the book. Whilst we can certainly discuss the recent popular growth of ideas around sustainability in terms of ‘eco-hip’, it is surely a mistake to ascribe the term ‘sustainability’ to the hippies of the 1960s. The ecological movements of the 1960s certainly fed into contemporary conceptions of sustainability, but the two moments also represent two distinct social and historical forms of cultural engagement with the environmental question. The word ‘sustainability’, as Parr herself notes, only really emerges into mainstream environmental discourse following the 1987 UN Our Common Future report, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, which defined sustainability as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.

It is a shame that Parr opens with such a lazy statement, as she soon progresses to a more sophisticated analysis of the matter. She notes that the Brundtland commission report has a distinctive multinational agenda, in which emphasis is given to a new international economic structure that fosters long term co-operation, one that assigns an important developmental role to multinational companies and multilateral financial institutions especially in respect to initiating sustainable development in developing countries.

As Parr observes, there is a ‘stark contrast’ between the top-down macro-approach of the Brundtland version of sustainability, and the bottom-up micro-form (and ideology) of most local environmental grassroots movements. It is in moments like this that it would have been useful to consider the contradictions inherent within sustainability culture in the context of the contradictions within modern environmentalism more broadly. As David Pepper has, for example, shown, ecology has, as a discipline, from its inception combined arcadian, commercial and imperial concerns. We surely need to see in ‘sustainability culture’ the latest unfolding of the historical contradictions within ecological thinking more broadly.

Hijacking Sustainability develops through a series of chapters which to some extent stand alone. Notable among these is a study of the way in which the White House itself has mediated different approaches to thinking about the building in the environment. This starts with an analysis of the original design, which featured basic strategies such as working with natural lighting and ventilation. Jimmy Carter installed solar panels – although, as Parr notes, these functioned primarily within a discourse of global energy resource control rather than an ecological systems approach, and, importantly for Parr, functioned within a militaristic logic – which Ronald Reagan then famously removed, a move that made little environmental sense, even whilst it contained a further clear military signal. Parr also deploys in some interesting ways Rem Koolhaas’s concept of ‘junkspace’, using it to unpick different tendencies within sustainability culture (specifically working through the differences between eco-branding, greenwashing and sustainability culture proper). For Koolhaas, ‘if space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue mankind
leaves on the planet.’ Koolhaas’s key insight for urban thinkers is that the built ‘product of modernization is not modern architecture but junkspace’, or, as Parr puts it, ‘the spatial patterning of consumption is junkspace’. Parr wonders whether, in so far as sustainability culture is progressive with respect to processes of modernization, it too must organize its production according to the logic of junkspace. She is concerned that, today, ‘junkspace arises not so much from the values and actions of multinational corporate culture than as the effect of the multitude’s green consumption habits.’

Culturally, one of the most interesting characteristics of contemporary environmental thinking is the way in which it frequently articulates its ideas through a utopian imaginary. This claim for Parr concerns not simply the many forms of environmental thinking that can be loosely described as anarcho anti-capitalist or eco-socialist, which she deals with, up to a point, in an analysis of the urban forms implied by both gated communities and ecovillages. (Here she would have benefited from some of the broader material that Carolyn Steele reflects upon in her recent book Hungry City: How Food Shapes Our Lives, notably, her reflections upon Marx’s well-known critique of Cabet’s utopianism: ‘a few hundred thousand people cannot establish and continue a communal living situation without it taking on an exclusive and sectarian nature’.) For Parr, rather, culture as a whole contains a utopian impulse, which ‘arises when culture registers our current conditions (such as global climate change, militarism and capitalism) but then transforms these in the process’. This has been commented upon by several recent environmental thinkers. Indeed, as Steele has perceptively observed, ‘utopianism represents the nearest thing that we have to a history of cross disciplinary thought on the subject of human dwelling.’ Ultimately Parr claims that culture can promote a sense of dignity and care for the environment in ways that institutions, bureaucracies and governments cannot. This is because culture is an especially utopian practice … not in the sense that it creates an imaginary ideal; rather it exposes, develops, questions and abstracts the potential and concrete specificity of our present circumstances, all with a look to creating a future that is critically different from what currently is and has been.

Whilst the utopian impulses of sustainability culture can no doubt ultimately be subjected to the kind of ideological analysis articulated in, for example, Manfredo Tafuri’s critique of modern architecture’s broader relation to capitalist development, it remains refreshing that something can still be said on the matter. In this regard it is a pity that Parr does not take the opportunity to think more about the (anti-)utopianism of junkspace itself.

Parr is writing from a distinctively North American cultural viewpoint, and, it would seem, from a pre-banking crisis and recession perspective. Whilst as a non-North American I feel partly unqualified to assess developments in this region’s culture, one can’t help but wonder at the accuracy of some of her more enthusiastic accounts of the widespread popular support for sustainable thinking. Parr is also writing from an academic position within a school of architecture, and no doubt her concern is partly to shift the dominant discourse around sustainability in architecture onto a cultural rather than technical basis. Hence, she states, for example, that ‘the benefit of looking to cultural production in the context of sustainable development is that culture is not simply ideological … culture not only promotes social awareness of environmental issues; as a practice it has the power to also put sustainable living to work’. Here Parr seems to advocate – although she does not spell it out clearly enough – a restructuring of production into something like what William McDonough and Michael Braungart call ‘cradle2cradle’ metabolic cycles (in which production would have to be systematically reorganized such that there is no waste, and where all matter is conceived as a part of either the biological or technical nutrient cycles). For Parr, the concern is that existing multinational corporations are increasingly organizing themselves into pseudo-sustainable entities operating according to a militaristic logic which is fundamentally in contradiction with what we might describe as the possibility of a democratic metabolics.

Hijacking Sustainability is finally a useful, though at times frustrating, contribution to the slowly growing new body of thinking around the environmental question. It does consider in detail how a cluster of conceptions of sustainability are currently producing a cultural discourse defining our relations to our environment. However, Parr leaves the reader with a lot of work to do in resolving both the contradictions within and as revealed by her text. Nonetheless, she reveals moments when real progressive and even utopian potential can be found to be at work in environmental politics today, even as an ideology and culture of sustainable development has given shape to new forms of accumulation at the leading edge of capitalism.

Jon Goodbun
With The Philosophy of Improvisation, Gary Peters has constructed a sprawling book that runs through numerous issues and philosophical references as it attempts to think spontaneous, unscripted, extempore production. He claims to have written the book in improvised fashion: producing half a page per day. As he notes, ‘improvisation is by no means a guarantee of quality or an excuse for its absence.’ Peters’s solo gamble is to set off without reference to what improvisers think:

the practice of improvisation is itself unable to invent a concept of improvisation – why should it, such a concept would not guarantee good improvisations. No, the task is for philosophers, not practitioners, and what is more, it is a task that requires invention and creativity, not discussion – philosophers and practitioners do not need to speak to each other.

His polemic has three main targets:

1. the view that improvisation can only represent a ‘hack’ (a temporary, makeshift response when the exigency of real-time response cannot be avoided);
2. the ‘ideology’ which celebrates the humanistic pleasures of jamming with friends and being absorbed in the moment;
3. the valorization of group improvisation as a site of authentic dialogue, autonomy and empathy.

For Peters, these approaches understand neither ‘the real situation of the improviser [nor] the ontological significance of improvisation’. A telling contrast is provided when he refers to Ben Watson’s book, Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation (reviewed by David Cunningham in RP 128).

Page after page … is devoted to detailed accounts of specific improvisations, tracing over and over again, with the obsessiveness of a true fan, the microcosmic disasters and triumphs of an endlessly shifting personnel caught up in the trials and tribulations of these little dialogues. This makes for engaging reading, but for all its promotion of and enthusiasm for its subject, never quite manages to bring to the fore the real ontological force of free-improvisation, which is its incomparable ability to present the beginning of art and its glorious failure to hold this beginning before our eyes.

Peters sees it as his contribution to identify this ‘real ontological force’ (a force which has escaped the improvisers themselves, not just Watson). It is here that Peters recruits the ontological hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger to address the ‘real predicament of the artist at work’. An understanding of improvisation begins here in what Peters privileges as a ‘tragic task’: the performer does not aim at the production of works – outcomes are not heralded; instead, improvisation plays out the necessary sacrifice of originary freedom in the unfolding production. Heidegger combines with Kant, as this beginning is glossed as the occluded but ‘never lost’ sensus communis, which art helps recall to us. The ‘double’ tragedy of the performer would then be that art is ‘rooted in a common sense that is universal but incommunicable … the tragic silence of its beginning is forgotten in the working out of the artwork: the tragic loss of tragedy’. Peters argues that this approach rejects any vanguardist attitude to improvisation: ‘it is not a question of being original that is essential but the manner in which the origin of art can be kept in view.’

Peters has no interest in providing improvisers with a theory that would help produce better improvisations, defend the merits of improvisation against composition, or frame judgements about particular improvisations and improvisatory practices. No actual practice is discussed: his ‘model’ of improvisation models the abstract moment of aesthetic production. He refuses to discuss recordings of improvised performances, since this would consider a produced work not the performing.

Let us pause. Surely it is impossible to say anything further philosophically without consideration of actual practices and productions. Peters writes of musical free improvisation that it is the ‘exemplary aesthetic form because it manages to offer a glimpse of this double tragedy and it does this to the extent that it resists the work of art being destroyed by the artwork’. How does one judge or espy such resistance without familiarity
with the ways works work or not? Peters offers regular
asides about poor improvisation: for example, ‘there is
a good deal of work that could barely be described as
innovative or improvised’. The categories supporting
these judgements cannot be developed from out of
his theory; his attenuated criterion cannot distinguish
‘proper’ improvisation from any garbled racket or
hackneyed jig. Nothing would entitle one to say, or
decide, one way or another whether or not ‘we held
the beginning before our eyes’. ‘Proper’ improvisation
cannot be determined this way.

The concluding suggestion is that the aim all along
was ‘to arrive at a concept of improvisation that,
if nothing else, would allow Derrida himself … to
recognize his own improvisation’. This hope is dashed
by turning to Derrida’s parodic demolition of a similar
structure in the essay translated as ‘At this Very
Moment in This Work Here I Am’ and recalling his
repeated opposition to any such use of ‘origin’ to
determine the ‘proper’.

The use and abuse of individual philosophers is
justified to the extent that something valuable is pro-
duced and the charge of dilettantism avoided. It is
possible to quibble over the interpretations of Kant,
Heidegger, Derrida and Benjamin, but Peters’s mistake
is of a different order. Philosophy is not simply about
neat ideas and inventions (conceptual or otherwise);
it is concerned with how it generates the resources
to back up what is written. Philosophy is written and
composed – its authority is to be demonstrated by
virtue of the procedures it evinces and the form it
adopts. Peters ornaments his pages with philosophers
in a manner that fails to distinguish itself from the
scholastic invocation of figures of authority. Since
there is no reference to actual improvisation, one is
left only with a *bricolage* whose applicability to the
phenomenon it is meant to model is nowhere justified.
We are offered a kind of pseudo-philosophy.

As a supplement to the abstract theories of Peters,
*Noise & Capitalism* devotes six of its eleven contribu-
tions to concrete discussion of ‘free improvisation’ in
music. It treats both the complex relation to jazz and
its reaction to the dominant forms of musical space
and experience. Peters is opposed to the valorization
of jazz as an interstitial political practice dreaming
of communion and empathy. However, by explicitly
positioning free improvisation as a deliberate attempt
to create an environment ‘free from the tradition of
bandmasters, composers and notation as well as the
emerging spectacular culture through which popular
music was beginning to circulate’, this collection is
better able to assess the stakes, successes and failures
of that attempt and its continuation into the present
day.

Eddie Prévost summarizes well the position he
has developed in other publications. He presents free
improvisation as an alternative cultural form (marked
by working relations between the musicians, which
‘counter the ethos’ characterizing capitalism). Two
key features of ‘normal music’ are emphasised, against
which improvisation is distinguished: the score as the
notation determining performance; composition and
rehearsal as the point at which the technical problems
of musical production are resolved in advance of
performance. Improvisation eschews both, with the
corollary that the hierarchical relations of produc-
tion are displaced – performance is then a dialogical
process of discovery for all participants. No longer
hidebound to the creative genius of the composer,
‘we have to decide on the meaning of the practice’.
In this way, its politics can be seen in its opposition
to authority and celebrity: the marketing of named
composers is resisted. In the ‘Social Ontology of
Improvised Sound Work’, Bruce Russell produces a
theoretical supplement to Prévost. He too rejects the
figure of the composer, the place of the score, and the
dominant modes of production and reproduction in performance. Unlike Peters, he is keen to assert that a coherent theoretical understanding of the activity can boost the practice; he mediates the claim through the tradition of radical thought, so we have discussions of Lukács, Lefebvre and Debord rather than Heidegger. It is heartening here to see a considered reclamation of ‘praxis’ as the relevant term.

The translation of Matthieu Saladin’s ‘Points of Resistance and Criticism in Free Improvisation’ opens a different perspective on the supposedly oppositional or resistant techniques of free improvisation. The article investigates how the contemporary, corporate desire for ‘hyper-flexibility’ combines with the new fondness for ‘horizontality’ in structures to mimic the practices of self-organization championed by Prévost and Russell. Indeed, the gathering of a changing bunch of musicians at Derek Bailey’s Company Week series looks to a certain perspective like the manner in which management consultancies rotate their staff on ‘projects’. Saladin underscores the point that the political positions or opinions of performers do not prevent their practices being the forerunners of contemporary capitalist practice: form abstracted from historical conditions is apolitical.

David Toop has noted that it would be possible to listen to freely improvised performances and not hear it as music. In this way, improvisation is part of the confluence understood as ‘noise’. There is little head-on consideration here of the other components: volume, cacophony or noisiness; resistance to signification; the incorporation of non-art materials into art; field recordings; production of new compositional elements free from traditional instruments and their techniques; dissonance; splicing, sampling, and so on. What is meant by ‘Noise’ varies across texts assembled without editorial oversight. The title is recognized to be an afterthought and there is a general feel of opportunism and pistonage. Several of the contributions are very slight: Martín offers a loose anecdotal discussion of recording copyright and the commodification of improvised music; Matthew Hyland, in a recycled review of Watson’s Derek Bailey, expresses some surprise that Bailey ‘of all people’ was involved in founding a record label, Incus. Both are idealists, failing to appreciate the centrality of the record as commodity to the history of improvisation in the twentieth century.

Jessica Rylan, who builds her own commercially available synthesizers, is hardly the female pioneer Nina Power presents in her short essay – originally an interview. The history of electronic music includes figures such as ‘Bebe’ Barron, Delia Derbyshire, Eliane Radigue, Pauline Oliveros and Wendy Carlos. Rylan does not stand comparison with them; she records for Thurston Moore’s Ecstatic Peace label and I suspect she would count as one of the hipster, ‘noisemaker muffins’ whom Ben Watson targets in his essay, ‘Noise as Permanent Revolution’. Roused into comment by an overblown article in The Wire about great gigs, Watson is acutely aware of the manner in which noise can come to operate as a fashionable, niche category to be sold to poseurs. He persists in disputing The Wire’s insistence on neutral description, so as not to upset advertisers and big names or alienate purchasers. For him, music’s value lies in its ‘refusal to play the subservient role of ornament or divertissement: authentic music’s relation to truth, its antagonism to a merely pleasant night out’. Much noise fails this test – Watson seeks criticism that explains why particular efforts can be held to be radical as a ‘reasoned response to an unreasonable situation’.

Ray Brassier offers this form of sustained engagement with two case studies in his essay, ‘Genre is Obsolete’ (an earlier version appeared in Multitudes). He is also alert to the dangers:

Like the ‘industrial’ subculture of the late 1970s which spawned it, the emergence of ‘noise’ as a recognisable genre during the 1980s entailed a rapid accumulation of stock gestures, slackening the criteria for discriminating between innovation and cliché to the point where experiment threatened to become indistinguishable from platitude.

He presents a brief, but illuminating discussion of Tom Smith’s activities such as To Live and Shave in LA and the performance actionism of Runzelstern & Gurgelstock, where the discrete sonic events ‘leaven the freakish with the cartoonish’. Although Brassier opposes ‘genre’, what is really at stake is the transformation noise effects on our understanding of music and its relation to other arts and media. Do Runzelstern & Gurgelstock organize crazed Gesamtkunstwerke? I expect such a question would produce a bristling response, but Brassier’s insistence on the ‘unprecedented’ density and complex structuring of Smith’s The Wigmaker in 18th Century Williamsburg prompts the further question as to whether this form of composition (and the manner in which it challenges modes of reflection) places it at the edge of a different trajectory, extending Mahler’s Romantic conception of the symphony as the musical form which endeavours to encompass everything.

Philosophical terrain is opened up between Watson and Brassier through the concept of ‘experience’. Brassier rejects it as a commodified category which
is here disrupted; Watson, following Adorno, sees such ‘system-breakdowns’ as experience, ‘the concept-busting crisis which allows idea to change and new concepts and production to flourish’. Good editors would have spied this fruitful conflict and asked for more, perhaps at the expense of Csaba Toth’s essay, which bombards the reader with citations and names, often without concern for syntax or structure. It would be nice if this had a performative dimension, but I fear it is just another manifestation of bad academicism.

Brassier hesitates to connect to the titular theme of capitalism, since socio-economic factors ‘are easier to invoke than to understand’. Howard Slater’s ‘Prisoners of the Earth Come Out! Notes Towards “War at the Membrane”’ would have benefited from such reticence. He delights in the word ‘abreaction’, and at times seems to suggest that a daily, cathartic dose of noise boosts our modes of resistance towards ‘endocolonial capital’. It must make life more exciting to think one’s listening habits are per se engaged in a war over instincts and perception:

Our willingness to abreact en masse, to decathect the ‘bad objects’ of capital and sift through affect, in order to take control of our own becomings as we counter the use of ourselves and our desires as bio-productive materials of an anthropomorphised capital, is the most pleasurable music there is.

This is a fantasy.

Noise & Capitalism is a little too improvised, in the slapdash sense, to come together as a coherent book. As a symptom of what is produced by the new school ties of virtual circuits, one might worry that this is as good as it gets, intellectually. Though the articles by Brassier, Watson, Prévost and Saladin are worth reading, the remainder, often recycled without warrant or acknowledgement, is poor. It is available freely as a download so it cannot be judged too harshly, though Cox and Warner’s Audio Culture (which I reviewed in RP 133) is far superior. Regarding improvisation, Derek Bailey’s own book, Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music (1980), is still the vital reference.

Andrew McGettigan

Liquid paths


On 15 November 2008 the supertanker MV Sirius Star was seized by Somali pirates, making it, so far, the largest ship ever captured by pirates. It was carrying a full load of 2 million barrels of crude oil worth an estimated $100 million, and was released in January 2009 after a ransom of $3 million was parachuted onto the deck of the ship. Pirates were back, no longer confined to the realm of popular culture – Johnny Depp channelling Keith Richards to portray Disney’s Captain Jack Sparrow – or to the more sober field of historical studies, best exemplified by Marcus Rediker’s reconstruction of pirates as proto-proletarians in works such as Villains of All Nations (2004).

This makes Daniel Heller-Roazen’s The Enemy of All a particularly timely work. It is not, however, concerned with either the history of piracy or, directly, with the post-Cold War return of the pirate. Instead, it is a work of what Heller-Roazen calls ‘philosophical and genealogical’ investigation focused on the definition of the pirate as archetypal ‘common enemy of all’ (communis hostis omnium). This definition, made by Cicero in his work On Obligations (De officiis), thought to have been completed in early December 44 BCE, is reworked in modern law to define the pirate as ‘the enemy of the human species’ (hostis generis humani). The result, contends Heller-Roazen, is that we can reconstruct the ‘piratical paradigm’, which consists of four characteristics: (1) the definition of a space of exceptional legal status, commonly the sea and the air; (2) the construction of the pirate as a legal agent hostile to all; (3) the collapse of the distinction between the criminal and the political, with the pirate at once figuring a common criminal, but one who exceeds the category of ‘lawful enemy; (4) the transformation of the concept of war that results from battling the pirate, such as in the blurred concept of the ‘police action’. What most concerns Heller-Roazen is how the pirate, as ‘the enemy of all’, has become ‘a crucial contemporary figure’, and particularly the resonance of the pirate with the figures of the ‘terrorist’ or ‘enemy combatant’.
His chapters trace this paradigm across a dizzying range of historical moments: from Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which even Odysseus is suspected of piracy, to the seizure of the *Achille Lauro* by the Palestinian Liberation Front on 7 October 1985 off Egypt. There is no doubt that much of this ‘genealogy’ is fascinating. Heller-Roazen has a talent for probing Greek and Roman sources in particular that provokes envy in the non-Classicist. The discussion of the debates around submarine warfare, for example, moves elegantly from the mythical descent of Alexander the Great beneath the waves in an ‘iron cage’, to Carl Schmitt’s justification of the U-boat as a political, and therefore not piratical, weapon. On the other hand, this kind of ‘Plato to NATO’, or perhaps ‘Cicero to the UN’, inquiry arouses suspicion. With its lack of any substantial methodological warrant, the obvious conclusion is to regard this work as a coda or pendant to Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* (1995), of which Heller-Roazen was the translator. Heller-Roazen indicates the unstable position of the figure of the pirate in Cicero’s expanding circles of obligation, at once human and so supposedly within the widest circle of obligation to ‘the immense fellowship of the human species’, but also outside that circle as the ‘enemy of all’ to which no obligation need be paid. And, here, the echoes of Agamben’s *Homo sacer* defined by ‘inclusive exclusion’ are deafening. The pirate makes an obvious addition to the gallery of figures of ‘bare life’ (*nuda vita*) that concluded *Homo Sacer*, alongside what Agamben terms the neomort (left brain-dead on life-support to be harvested for organs) and the Muselmann (the concentration camp victim reduced by hunger and mistreatment to the status of ‘living dead’). What is more remarkable is that in his discussion Heller-Roazen coyly makes no reference to Agamben’s work.

If, despite this disavowal, Heller-Roazen owes a heavy debt to Agamben, then his work suffers from some of the same problems as the latter’s ‘genealogy’ of ‘bare life’ itself. As in *Homo Sacer*, Heller-Roazen establishes a strong historical continuity and teleology through a philological inquiry into particular legal and political concepts. There is no doubt that there is a striking continuity in legal formulations concerning the pirate, but the relation of these formulations to particular historical realities requires more attention to historical differences. This is rendered ironic because, in the hands of Nietzsche and Foucault, genealogy was an anti-teleological ‘method’, which through a philological nominalism tried to inscribe a counter-history of ruptures and reversals posed against the usual Whig narratives of history. In contrast Heller-Roazen tells a sweeping story of the concept of the ‘pirate’ emerging from an initial historical and political confusion, the continuing struggle to render this concept distinct, before the ‘pirate’ plunges into a contemporary ‘zone of indistinction’, to use Agamben’s phrase. With the emergence of the legal concept of humanity in the twentieth century, as in ‘crimes against humanity’, the pirate, as ‘the enemy of all’, gains a new salience in terms of generalization. We are all (potential) pirates. The difficulty of such a narrative, which extends to Agamben, is that this world-historical narrative of indistinction and dispersion can appear self-serving. Is it really true that our contemporary political moment is more disoriented than any other?

Certainly while Heller-Roazen remains close to the Agamben play-book – classical references to Roman law, erudite philological reconstructions of classical sources, rapid transit to contemporary resonances and political debates, usually authorized through Carl Schmitt – he fortunately remains somewhat more sober in style. He at least refuses the epochal-messianic gesture so prevalent in Agamben, one which combines the worst elements of Heidegger and Benjamin, in which the figure of the worst, of absolutely denuded life, becomes the site of reversal and messianic ‘saving’. Also, unlike Agamben’s narrative of the multiple figures of ‘bare life’, Heller-Roazen’s focus on the more precise figure of the pirate does allow him to engage with historical, technological and political shifts. The difficulties of teleology remain, however, as does the question of the privilege of this particular figure of the pirate as the key to contemporary geopolitics. While not doubting Heller-Roazen’s deftness in bringing the pirate into focus as a site of philosophical and political inquiry, we might well question why this is the figure of the political today.

In question here is the desire to provide a ‘figure’ of the political. The narrative of indistinction and dispersion incites a desire for stabilization, even in a figure that summarizes the supposed instability of the present. Here Heller-Roazen rejoins, in an uncomfortable fashion, the work of Carl Schmitt. The unstable status of the pirate, as the enemy who cannot be a worthy enemy but only an ‘unjust antagonist’, is parallel to Schmitt’s distinction, articulated clearly in *Theory of the Partisan* (1963), between the ‘real enemy’ and the ‘absolute enemy’. In Schmitt’s work this was an attempt to account for the figure of the partisan who, he argued, disrupted the usual friend–enemy distinction which defined politics and warfare. This distinction preserved the enemy as one who defined political conflict, while the partisan disrupted this security and raised the
spectre of the ‘absolute enemy’ who respected none of the usual contours of the political and warfare. Schmitt engaged in a rearguard operation by distinguishing between the ‘good’ partisan, linked still to the telluric and the national, and the ‘bad’ partisan, delinked from the earth. Displaying his typical reactionary views, the ‘good’ partisan was identified with the Spanish resistance to Napoleon and with Raoul Salan, one of the organizers of the OSS and of resistance to the decolonization of Algeria. The ‘bad’ partisan was, of course, the Leninist or Maoist militant, beholden to the international form of the party and with a limited or attenuated connection to the national political space.

Of course, Heller-Roazen is not endorsing Schmitt’s overt politics. The pirate, Heller-Roazen notes, disturbs even more radically Schmitt’s tellurian politics, which tries to hold the partisan apart from the pirate. In the liquid element of the sea the distinctions Schmitt held dear threaten to dissolve. This would become even worse with the arrival of aerial piracy, and the divide between pirate and partisan can no longer hold good. The difficulty is that Heller-Roazen’s closing invocation of a state in which Kant’s perpetual peace is indistinguishable from perpetual war, a planetary state of indistinction of ‘mobile zones of transitory violence’, again risks conceding to the quasi-Schmittian desire to re-establish the integrity of the political. What goes missing, in Schmitt, Agamben and Heller-Roazen, is any real consideration of capitalism as a global horizon of ‘real abstraction’ as that which threatens any stabilized figure of the political. Refusing to really think any counter-politics of abstraction, say in terms of a radical politics of equality, we are instead encouraged to cling to increasingly ambiguous figures of politicization. While the ‘liquid paths’ of the pirates make for a fascinating journey, the elevation of the pirate to world-historical figure drains any real consideration of the relation of the pirate to the circuits of capitalist accumulation, and to any real grasp of the political coordinates of the present.

Benjamin Noys

Emergent emergency


*The Liberal Way of War* responds to two events: one political and one philosophical. With its attention to the paradoxical necessity of war within the liberal ethos of universal freedom, the book offers a genealogical reflection on the current war on terror and on the ongoing interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, the study is also one of the first to respond fully to the philosophical challenge of Foucault’s recently published late seminars, *Security, Territory and Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics*, delivered at the Collège de France, in 1977–78 and 1979–80 respectively, which offer important challenges to current political thinking on liberalism, security and war. While most responses to these seminars have focused, for obvious reasons, on Foucault’s prescient insights into economic neoliberalism, Reid and Dillon offer up a powerful reflection on the twentieth-century mutations of the liberal way of war. Their work is particularly illuminating on the period of triumphant liberal universalism that has followed the end of the Cold War. The ‘global governance’ of freedom celebrated by liberal international relations theorists has certainly enabled, although not exactly coincided with, the rise of neoliberalism as a dominant economic discourse (Reagan’s Star Wars programme was the last bang of Cold War belligerence). Dillon and Reid’s work goes some way towards explaining the necessary relationship between the global diffusion of neoliberal economic doctrines and the proliferation of humanitarian wars, ‘complex emergencies’ and other mutations of military intervention over the same period.

More than one critic has commented upon the relative elusiveness of biopolitics as a site of investigation in Foucault’s later work. Foucault introduces biopolitics as the guiding theme of his following years’ lectures in the last two courses of *Society Must Be Defended* (1975–76). The thematic recedes somewhat in *Security, Territory and Population*, where power relations are articulated through the prism of event–circulation–security, and appears only fleetingly in the promisingly titled *Birth of Biopolitics*. For Reid and Dillon, however, the elusiveness of the term only calls for further elaboration. The political theorization and institutional organization of liberalism, they assert, ‘has always revolved around some understanding of the human as species being’. Unlike the ontopolitical
theologies of medieval Europe, liberalism wages war in the name of life; its strategic calculus of necessary killing is predicated on the notion that certain forms of life must be destroyed in order for life to flourish. Having established this point of departure, Foucault’s genealogy of ‘biohumanity’ is relatively narrow in its historical focus. Closely informed by the work of his teacher Georges Canguilhem, the French philosopher and historian of the life sciences, Foucault’s historical horizon extends as far as the neo-Darwinian synthesis between the statistics-based science of population genetics and the probabilistic methods of Mendelian genetics in the first decades of the twentieth century, but offers very little analysis of the multiple developments of post World War II science. His genealogy of public health points toward the mid-twentieth-century welfare state, in both its liberal-democratic and its national socialist forms, as the culminating event of a long series of experiments in actuarial approaches to population. Only briefly (although compellingly) does Foucault address the question of neoliberalism’s challenge to the political ideals of the Keynesian–Fordist alliance. The question of contemporary liberalism (or economic neoliberalism) and its ‘strategic calculus of necessary killing’ remains to be thought through.

In order to grasp fully this evolving configuration of liberalism and war, and thus to pursue Foucault’s problematic beyond the later Foucault himself, the authors suggest that we must also develop an understanding of the mutual exchanges between the contemporary life sciences, the new digital technologies and complex systems theory. As Reid and Dillon pertinently argue:

The story of the life sciences … including not only the biological sciences but also … the information sciences, computing, digitalization and the so-called sciences of complexity as well, has … not only changed substantially during the course of the last three centuries. It has, in particular, changed dramatically during the course of the last 50 years. We do not simply live in the age of information, as military strategic thinkers of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) of the last 20 years, along with so many other management and social scientists, have proclaimed. We have entered the age of life as information.

Responding to the challenge of these multiple developments in the life sciences, Reid and Dillon offer an incisive account of the epistemic shifts brought about by molecular biology, post-World War II systems theory and the complexity turn of second-order cybernetics, while also exploring the ways in which these various sciences have contributed to, challenged and enabled the evolving forms of liberal interventionism over the same period. Here, *The Liberal Way of War* significantly displaces Foucault’s problematic by suggesting that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, biopolitics has shifted from a focus on individual species and the vertical logic of hereditary transmission to the transversal processes of circulation that animate genetic recombination across species boundaries and the systemic conditions of life’s emergence. As they put it: ‘contemporary liberal biopolitics is necessarily drawn to the generic conditions of life production and reproduction – the heterogenesis of morphogenesis – independent of the individual features of specific forms of life.’ There has been a correlative shift in the ways in which liberalism configures the terrain, methods and scope of legitimate violence: attention moves away from the specific forms of life rooted in the biological nation to the generic conditions of life as such, represented for example by transnational networks of vital or ‘critical’ infrastructure. The figure of enmity also undergoes a subtle change in shape, taking on the abstract form of ‘the emergency of emergence’. Lest this interpretation of Reid and


Dillon’s work suggest too linear an intervention into the historical problematic of biopolitics, it should be noted that their argument, while departing from the perspective offered in Society Must Be Defended, resonates strongly with Foucault’s reflections on the politics of circulation, event and security within early modern urbanism (Security, Territory and Population). It also enters into productive conversation with contemporary political philosophies of the ‘event’, particularly those that identify Machiavelli’s theory of Fortuna as a turning point in modern conceptions of state strategy. The liberal way of rule, they assert, does not simply govern through freedom but through contingency. With its startling proximity to notions of contingency in the contemporary life sciences, risk analysis and biometrics, the aleatory materialism of the later Althusser here appears as much a diagnosis of the contemporary as historical method.

The force of Dillon and Reid’s theoretical manoeuvre is particularly compelling in their account of the ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ or RMA. Initiated by the US military in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War and later pursued by the Office of Force Transformation, the Revolution in Military Affairs prescribed a far-reaching internal transformation of US defence extending to the logistics of military operations, long-term strategy and the organizational structures of defence. Taking its lessons from the management dogmas of the Clinton era, the RMA brought the precepts of flexible organization, innovation economies and outsourcing to the traditional defence establishment. It also followed the example of Santa Fe school economists in applying the logic of complex systems theory (particularly adaptive ecological systems) to military planning. In the doctrine of ‘network centric warfare’, the field of battle came to be conceived of in the same terms as a complex adaptive ecosystem. The influence of such complex systems models on military strategy, civilian defence and counter-insurgency was most evident during the years of the Bush administration, when the vital conditions of urban life (critical infrastructure protection) and their ongoing ability to adapt and regenerate (‘resilience’) came to be figured as key elements in the war against terror. The specific form of terror, Dillon and Reid insist, is less important than the systematicity of its threat to the complex order of liberal rule – the ‘emergent emergency’ is as likely to arise from an extreme weather event as from an ideologically motivated terrorist attack.

This is a book of great historical and philosophical complexity, as well versed in the transformations of liberalism’s rule as in the contemporary languages of complex systems theory, biology and military strategy. It is symptomatic of the book’s conceptual effervescence that it raises as many questions as it satisfies. The issue, for example, of the ontotheological challenge to liberalism, both as that which early liberalism defines itself against and that which it re-encounters in the late modern age, runs throughout the book, and seems to be crying out for further investigation. It is surely not incidental that Foucault was writing about the political challenge of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the very year in which he delivered his lectures on the rise of neoliberal economic doctrines in North America and Western Europe. Today the question of the relationship (both antagonistic and complicit) between the neoliberal doctrine of freedom, risk and security, on the one hand, and the neo-religious appeal to fundamental value, on the other, seems to demand as thorough a study as the one Dillon and Reid have accomplished here.

Melinda Cooper

No communicating left


In Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies Jodi Dean pulls few punches in her critique of the American Left, for both its complacency and its limited capacity to (or even lack of awareness of the need to) offer a stand of political resistance to power. This is how she concludes her book:

The eight years of the Bush administration were a diversion. Intoxicated with a sense of purpose, we could oppose war, torture, indefinite detention, warrantless wiretapping, a seemingly endless series of real crimes … such opposition keeps us feeling like we matter…. We have an ethical sense. But we lack a coherent politics.

Dean brings out clearly here the disintegration of the collective Left and its simulacra in the individuated lifestyle politics of today’s depoliticized radicalism, where it appears that particular individual demands and identities are to be respected but there is no possibility of universalizing them into a collective challenge.
to the system, no possibility of a Left which stands for something beyond itself. Indeed, she argues that rather than confront this problem, the Left has instead taken refuge in the fantasy that technology will itself overcome its inability to engage and that the circulation of ideas and information on the Internet will construct the collectivities and communities of interest which are lacking in reality. For Dean, this ‘technology fetishism’ marks the Left’s failure: its ‘abandonment of workers and the poor; its retreat from the state and repudiation of collective action; and its acceptance of the neoliberal economy as the “only game in town”’. In this, she uncovers the gaping hole at the heart of the Left, demonstrating that US radicalism today is based less on changing the world than on the articulation of an alternative oppositionalist identity: a non-strategic, non-

instrumental, articulation of a protest against power. In a nutshell, the Left is too busy providing alternative voices, spaces and forums to think about engaging with mass society in any organized, collective attempt to achieve societal transformation.

For Dean, this is fake or hollow political activity, pursued more for its own sake than for future political ends. It is a politics of ethical distancing, of self-flattery and narcissism, which excuses or even celebrates the self-marginalization of the Left: as either the result of the overwhelming capacity of neoliberal power to act, to control and to regulate; or as the result of the apathy, stupidity or laziness of the masses – or the ‘sheeple’ – for their failure to join the radical cause. Unsurprisingly, Dean thus suggests that the Left needs to rethink its values and approaches, and her book is intended to be a wake-up call to abandon narcissistic complacency. In doing this, she highlights a range of problems connected together around the thematic of the Left’s defence of democracy in an age of communicative capitalism. She argues that the Left’s focus on extending or defending democracy by asserting its role in giving voice and creating spaces merely reproduces the domination of communicative capitalism, where there is no shared space of debate and disagreement but the proliferation of mediums and messages without the responsibility to develop and defend positions or to engage, and no external measure of accountability. Communicative capitalism is held to thrive on this fragmented, atomizing and individuated framework of communication, which gives the impression of a shared discourse, community or movement but actually leaves reality just as it is, with neoliberal frameworks of domination, inequality and destruction continuing unopposed.

Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies is not, however, merely a critique of the US Left; it is also a powerful demolition of its claims for a collective existence. Dean suggests this most strongly in her chapters on ‘technology fetishism’ and on the ‘9/11 truth’ movement, in which she analyses how individuals come together not on the basis of a collective political project, challenging power, but on the basis of an invitation for individuals to affirm their alienation from power and to produce, or to ‘find out for themselves’, their own personal ‘truths’. These are not projects to change or to transform the external world but mechanisms whereby individuals can find meaning through their ethical individual actions and beliefs. She describes powerfully how ‘9/11 truth’ movements are all about individual affirmation rather than collective engagement. In this they can easily be equated with the mass anti-war demonstrations where individuals marched under the banner of ‘Not in My Name’, seeking personal affirma-
tion in distancing themselves from politics rather than
taking responsibility to engage in political struggle by
the building of any collective movement.

The same atomization of left politics is analysed in
Dean’s critique of the radical individualism at the heart
of the displacement of politics by ethics in much recent
theory. Here Judith Butler stands in as the exemplar
for a Left which is alleged to have given up on conviction
and political struggle and instead retreated into
emphasizing ‘generosity to difference and awareness of
mutual vulnerability’ so as to focus upon ‘micropolitical
and ethical practices that work on the self in its
immediate reactions and relations’. Dean argues that
such an ethical turn appears as a reflection of political
dispair and celebrates both a denial of political struggle
and strong subjectivity. She also, correctly, links
this defeatism to a misconstruction of Foucault’s work
that understands power as operating free from politics.
Using Butler, again, as an example, she argues that the
latter ‘reads governmentality as replacing sovereignty’,
rather than as a discursive framing for the operation
of political power. The intimation is that in seeing
power as having shifted to the global level, free from
states, political opposition is merely expressed in the
ethical terms of engagement in ‘discourses that shape
and deform what we mean by “the human”’. This
strongly resonates with the technological fetishism
of the ‘global politics’ of networked communication
which encourages the transformation of politics into
the ethics of virtual participation.

So far so good. As a description of post-political
radicalism Dean makes some fine points regarding
the dead end that has been reached. The psychological
framing of the responses and problems of the Left
is, however, the book’s fundamental weakness. Dean
focuses here on Lacanian analysis, typically laced
with a bit of Žižek, and includes a repetition of this
methodological framing across the chapters (which
were originally penned as self-standing journal arti-
cles). This does the argument no favours and appears
both as evasive and as unnecessarily abstract and
distancing. At the same time, Dean’s principal target
of what she calls the US ‘academic and typing Left’
seems too vague and its material too thinly spread,
from the ‘9/11 truth’ campaign to Judith Butler to
advocates of Internet freedom. The deeper problem
is that the vague and abstract target of the ‘US Left’
appears to be merely a stand-in for a psychologized
critique of US society itself.

In providing a psychological analysis of the attraction
of the self-centred communication of left protest,
opposition or awareness, Dean neither politically
grounds the collapse of externally orientated collective
struggle nor indicates how or why this collapse
may be only a contingent rather than a necessary
one. She seems to hint that prior to communicative
capitalism and the expansion of networked informa-
tion technologies there was a possibility for the Left to
take up a democratic politics based upon open, shared
engagement and contestation, whereas today critical
intervention in the public sphere is asserted to be no
longer possible. In fact, to engage publicly appears, in
itself, to engage on the terrain of the enemy:

The ideal of publicity functions ideologically,
serving global capitalism’s reliance on networked
information technologies and consumers con-
vinced that their every blog post, virtual march,
or YouTube upload is a radical act rather than an
entertaining diversion. Communicative capitalism
mobilizes the faith in exposure animating democ-
ricy as the perfect lure. Subjects feel themselves to
be active even as their every activity reinforces the
status quo.

Dean seems keen to argue that the Left achieved only
its own defeat in its ‘victory’ in the ‘Culture Wars’,
which established the basis of neoliberal communica-
tive capitalism, and which shares the Left’s assumptions
regarding ‘assertions of difference, singularity, and the
fluidity of modes of becoming’ and the politics of con-
sumer choice. We thus seem caught in a double-bind,
whereby the very success of the Left has resulted in
the hegemonic ideological discursive practices of com-
municaive capitalism, while communicative capitalism
has undermined the possibilities of the construction
of a public sphere and possible radical or universal
collectivities capable of democratic contestation.

However, if there is no public sphere in which col-
lective identities can be formed, it would appear that
‘radicals’ have little option but to engage in ‘global’
individuated ethical protest. Dean’s own ‘technological
fetishism’ and abstract psychological framing appear,
ultimately, to close down possibilities rather than
open them; installing communicative capitalism as
the agency of power rather than as an ideological
framework which reflects the vacuum remaining after
the demise of the political Left. In which case, she
could take a leaf out of her own book and consider
whether her thesis ‘erases its own standpoint of enun-
ciation’ in its dismissal of our public and democratic
capabilities. In the end, it seems she has no way out of
the double-bind beyond making one more contribution
to the information overload which is her communicative
capitalism.

David Chandler

As I write this on my laptop, a robot from Earth which has spent the last six years roving the deserts of Mars feeding on sunlight is struggling to escape from the quicksands of Troy, just north of Husband Hill in the Gusev Crater, while age-related amnesia erodes its flash drive. Meanwhile, back on Earth, scientists have restored the sight of a blind man using stem-cell technology, and a team of scientists led by a Puerto Rican ex-space shuttle pilot has made a major breakthrough on the VX-200 ion-plasma drive. If scheduled tests on the International Space Station in 2013 prove successful, the VX-200’s successor will reduce travel time between Earth and Mars from nine months to thirty-nine days. One could easily have made this stuff up, because, like New York to a first-time visitor, it’s already somehow vaguely familiar; nevertheless it is all actually happening, and it is in this context that the current rebirth of science fiction – not as retro-styling but as a current and expanding field – has now to be addressed. One has only to reflect upon SF’s periodic submergences and re-emergences over the last century to begin speculating on what might be at stake for a genre with such ambitious stakes in a specifically *historical* account of futurity. In many ways, this interesting anthology of essays, edited by two established voices in the genre, could scarcely be more pertinent.

Assessments of SF as a historical form are of course back in vogue, epitomised for many by the 2005 publication of Fredric Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future*. Yet one would scarcely expect serious Marxists to view treatment of a genre as historical form as a point of closure, and, thankfully, Mark Bould and China Miéville do anything but. SF has long made an *ahistorical* object of science, whilst at the same time being the historical site of what Miéville aptly calls ‘capitalist science’s bullshit about itself’. Given this, the predominant fictions of science inevitably give rise to a sense of urgency and precipitous opportunity on the Left. Imminent catastrophe has a natural home in the imaginary of any once-and-future avant-garde: the formulation of inestimable but pressing tasks that, on the one hand, pain the imagination and, on the other, are called to account, ever more urgently, at the bar of reason, conflate the ethics of the *Augenblick* and the aesthetics of montage in a sort of neo-Leninist sublime. This is reflected in a fine chapter here by Philip Wegner on Ken McLeod’s *Fall Revolution* novels, but, more generally, it would seem to be in this spirit that Bould and Miéville have assembled a collection of essays which collectively recoups SF historically whilst, at the same time, robustly reinscribing an aesthetics of futurity for the Left.

Nonetheless there are traces of something less strident also. Writing in 1980, in an introduction to William Morris’s *The Wood Beyond the World*, Tom Shippey highlights two useful points here: first, the sense in which Morris introduces ‘a note of baffled yearning’ to even his most escapist fantasies, epitomised by Morris’s lines about an ‘ancient glimmer’, seen from a distance across ‘the waste that has no way’ (i.e. history), and, second, Lukács’s argument that what is distinctive about the historical novel, namely ‘derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age’, is equally applicable to science fiction. Unsurprisingly, then, there are several notes of such baffled yearning elsewhere in this collection, not least, for example, in the recuperative labours undertaken by John Rieder and Iris Luppa, in their respective essays on Wim Wenders’s *Until the End of the World* and Lang’s *Frau im Mond*.

The anthology is split into three sections, the title of each being taken from cinema: *Things to Come, When Worlds Collide* and *Back to the Future*. Nevertheless, around three-quarters of the book focuses on the literary rather than cinematic, with, sadly, no space given either to television or to other contemporary forms such as gaming. Nor is the key role illustration plays in the genre covered. This is in part because the authors remain focused on Darko Suvin’s groundbreaking literary criticism in the field, but it is also perhaps indicative of a lack of confidence to go much beyond the legitimizing sphere of literature and feature-length cinema. What the authors refer to as ‘the Suvin Event’ – effectively a series of defining essays by Suvin on what, by any other name, would be science fiction’s modernist moments – is impressively dissected by an exchange between Carl Freedman and Miéville. Suvin’s definitive description of SF as ‘cognitive estrangement’ through the advent of a *novum* becomes the point at which a distinction is made between Freedman’s revised ‘Suvinism’ of how a text ‘does’ the ‘cognition-effect’ versus Miéville’s bit-too-quick-off-the-mark point that the text-as-object does nothing, it’s all in the social.

This might seem to be a debate of two halves. In the first half it is about the specific claims of genre, the demands this makes on its reader–author, and the contracts which genre offers to the amateur imaginary,
and is no less important for that. If scientific as well as political revolutions throw up demands, then SF is about the yearnings of the ‘weekend radicals’ of the natural sciences, their loves, fever dreams and half-baked reveries. At its best, science fiction does this by responding to the language and purview of science by pairing mimesis with montage. Whether of the left or the right, SF’s suspensions of disbelief tease and excite in so far as they lead us through the apocrypha of speculation with fleeting promises of transformation. What Jameson has termed ‘piquant montages’ in fact point to a peculiar ocularity in SF, which is exemplified by the literary yearning for a visual account, through description, or, cinematically, by the disastrous current obsession with CGI effects in place of conceptual ambition or narrative complexity, as well as, of course, by the significant presence both of illustration and of the graphic novel form within the genre. Yet, at the same time, much of the radical capacity of science fiction is to be found in the ‘piquancy’ as much as the montage. This is what, on occasion, gives SF’s often mediocre prose its transcendently disruptive descriptive visualization and ostranenie effect.

Compelling aspects of this montage effect – ‘the coded presence of an almost unimaginable reality’ – is ably explored by Matthew Beaumont in his fine essay ‘The Anamorphic Estrangements of Science Fiction’, which takes Holbein’s double portrait The Ambassadors as its starting point. As Beaumont observes, Holbein, a contemporary of Thomas More, whose Utopia is widely seen as a progenitor of science fiction, lived, like More, precipitously under the same conditions of paranoid Tudor tyranny and intrigue. Yet, potentially, the link goes further than that. As Suvin observed in his 1974 essay ‘Science Fiction and Utopian Fiction’, utopian fictions, characterized by an interest in sociopolitical constructs, fall within the form and tradition of ‘anatomy’ (dealing more with states of mind than people per se), a characteristic element that continues across into science fiction itself, albeit combined with semi-novelistic aspects typical of romance. This argues, then, for a closer look at the particular role ‘envisioning’ description plays in science fiction – the tendency, in Suvin’s words, to create a ‘vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern’. Such unifying framings are often the necessitated corollary of rupture and juxtaposition. Yet, curiously, for such an erudite collection of essays as this – and despite Beaumont’s starting point in Holbein – such ocularity is not explored to any great extent here, even though, arguably, it is a constitutive element in a genre in which, even in its literary form, things are constantly being glimpsed, gawped at, coolly regarded or, via negativa, in which lacunae and descriptive blindspots build dramatic effect.

The second half of the debate described above might be identified as SF’s epistemological justification, its right to call itself science fiction, and it should perhaps be no surprise, but is welcome nonetheless, that Marxists should focus on such a question. Still, perhaps another avenue could have been explored further here – namely, what is at stake in the ‘fiction’ part as much as the ‘science’. On occasion this imbalance seems to give rise to confusion over purpose. For example, Darren Jorgensen, in his chapter ‘Towards a Revolutionary Science Fiction’, argues, understandably, that an alternative to the long critical shadow cast by the failures of 1968 is long overdue, but, curiously, in reviewing the role of right-wing SF authors in driving Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative during the 1980s, goes on to ask ‘could left wing SF writers also be taken seriously, and consulted on the direction of the world?’ This might seem akin to Victor Serge hoping he’d get a plum role as a UN goodwill ambassador. It also begs the question of what can be expected of engagements with popular forms by critical art or literary practices which, unlike the Freedom-lovin’ conservative popularizers who lobbied Reagan, aim to be disaffirmative of capitalist culture by working radically with one of its most widely consumed forms.

John Timberlake
In November and December 2009 – responding to the signal from Vienna, where the University's main lecture hall was occupied – buildings, lecture theatres and seminar rooms in fifty West German colleges were occupied. The number of participants in these occupations, some of which lasted several weeks, was never huge in total and it rarely reached more than 200 or 300 students at any one university. What was remarkable, though, and new, was that some of these actions took place at the smaller universities. On 17 November 2009 around 80,000 people took part in demonstrations. An important characteristic of these protests was that they were not spontaneous and, also, they did not immediately collapse. They were drawn out of an alliance that was already in place from an earlier wave of protests. This means that the latest wave is not simply a reaction to an immediate provocation, as was the case in previous student protests – largely a response to the introduction of student tuition fees. The new wave picks up on things that were set in motion last Summer.

In the week of 15 June, school and university students engaged in an ‘educational strike’. Surprisingly large numbers of students were involved, though there were more school than university students. Many university students kept their distance, lukewarm and uninterested. The high point of mobilization was on 17 June, when around 265,000 demonstrators took to the streets in cities and towns across the BRD. But the movement goes back further. In November 2008 about 100,000 school students took part in demonstrations and actions. The phenomenon of the educational strike is not confined to Germany. There are mobilizations in various European countries in response to a neoliberal reorganization of the institutions of learning, from nurseries to schools to universities: for example, in Greece, Italy, Croatia, France, Austria and Switzerland. Universities or individual research institutes are under occupation. Teaching has been cancelled for weeks or even months. In France, the large demonstrations have included teachers and lecturers. Ruling politicians have reacted to these protests in a variety of ways. In Italy and France certain paragraphs in the planned reform laws have been excised – though even those concessions have been unable to pacify the movement. In Germany those responsible for education policy seem especially hard-nosed. Even so cracks and contradictions can be seen.

University lecturers, many of whom have happily gone along with all the nonsense about ‘the entrepreneurial university’ – third-stream funding, rankings, excellence, accreditation of courses of study, tuition fees, BA and MA, external assessors, and so on – have realized that their ability to operate as scholars is now increasingly circumscribed. There does not appear to be an end to the expanding workloads attendant on ever more benchmarks and the like. If lecturers were able to live quite comfortably for a period with the attacks on students, it is now clear that they cannot remain unaffected by the new situation: low wages, performance agreements and the formation of hierarchies – which means that those who work in the pockets of excellence get less teaching, more support services and higher wages. The conservative German Lecturers’ Association has decided not to adopt the second phase of the Bologna process (2010–219) as passively or, even, as approvingly as they did the first. After the latest protests and the extensive criticism of the Bachelor model – which has been newly introduced in Germany and elsewhere – the organization has recommended that university lecturers no longer participate in the accreditation of courses of study. This is not unimportant, as part of the process of accreditation means that the various disciplines are split up into the smallest specialist areas. It becomes very unlikely that a student would then be able to change their place of study. In addition, accreditation processes occasion excessive bureaucracy, and deny students the ability to take decisions about their own course of study.

Politicians are split on how to respond to these developments. This summer some of the regional politicians, such as Jürgen Rüttgers, warned about the
danger of ‘semi-education’. In contrast the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic, which has little time for debates with parents, school students or university students, does not consider ‘Bologna’ to have failed, or, if it has, then only in small rectifiable areas. On the other hand, the most important representative of the neoliberal strategy of restructuring the universities into entrepreneurial and elite institutions, the former president of Berlin’s Free University, Dieter Lenzen, declared that he supported the protests and requested that lecturers at his university be sympathetic to those students who were missing classes. Clearly he has spied an opportunity to instrumentalize the protests for his own aims: to gain more money for the pockets of excellence, of which the Free University Berlin is one. Others, in contrast, such as the rector of Heidelberg University, allowed the police to take action against the students on campus and students were sanctioned if they missed lessons. In November and December 2009 there were similar contradictions: at many universities the management remained cautious, as long as the occupiers accepted some of the rules of engagement and the business of study was not disturbed. In contrast, at the University of Frankfurt – another model of the neoliberal type of university – there was a rapid and large-scale break-up of the occupation by the police, which was justified by alleged damage to valuable pictures and rooms. In June, Annette Schavan, the minister for education and research, labelled the protesters ‘yesterday’s people’. It may not be surprising that, as a prominent Catholic, she has her issues with science and scholarship, and she would certainly not count as one of the staunch defenders of enlightened thought. She deployed the age-old trick of writing off the protests as outmoded. According to her, the transformations of European education are irreversible.

The autumn strike has also met with contradictory responses. There have been expressions of sympathy from politicians. Yes, some of the bureaucracy and demands on students should be reduced. There should not be so many exams. There should be more money for student grants. Attendance registers for students should be limited or even abolished. Chancellor Merkel’s summit on education in Summer 2009 promised more money. Politicians also accepted that there should be more university lecturers. One of the consequences of underfinancing the education system is that there are too few teachers and school classes are too large. The number of students has gone up fivefold in the past thirty years but the number of lecturers has remained roughly the same. A large part of teaching and research is now carried out by those working under precarious conditions: two-thirds of teaching and 80 per cent of research. The wily argument states that this proves how much can be achieved with fewer means. If only university lecturers were not so lazy and the structures of the universities could be finally organized according to shiny new neoliberal principles.

Despite several vague admissions, the culture minister, university managers and a number of university lecturers have made it clear that there is to be no tampering with the essential features of university reform. The distinction between BA and MA programmes is sacrosanct, students’ role in the co-determination of study will not be increased, and new teaching assistant and university lecturer posts will remain largely temporary. Teaching, learning and scholarship will be trammelled by the rigid Bachelor system.

The protests are hopefully not going to die down. The number of students in Germany is about to increase drastically, given that at the end of 2010, with the reduction in the number of years spent at school, two age groups will begin studying at the same time. School and university students have taken on themselves the responsibility for the continued existence of scholarship, neglected by many established university lecturers and politicians. Among the current protesters are those who will be the researchers and teachers and strategists of the next forty years. They are yesterday’s people in a positive sense, because they will not accommodate themselves obediently to the dynamic of capitalist valorization and will not let themselves be fobbed off with a cheap, devalued programme of study.

Unlike previous protests, where the accent was often on rejecting tuition fees and criticizing the social exclusivity of the universities, today’s protesters demand better conditions for knowledge and education. They object to the ways in which university is being turned into something much more like a school. They object to constant surveillance. They want to abolish the new BA and MA. They reject the elite university, demand free access to study for all, internal democratization of the entire education system and the implementation of alternative modes of education. In so doing, they turn against those who want to hold on to their academic positions of power and their salaries, for whom broad intellectual competence, education for all and critical knowledge have always been anathema. The demands of the students are historic and rational: they stand for the uncompensated, for good education beyond the valorization imperative, for all that has been
demanded, again and again, over the years, in order that the universities might, finally, become places of genuine research, teaching and learning.

The protests and strikes of the past months are a response to a significant shift in education policy. For years the idea has been that through education everyone can improve their prospects and work their way to the top. The middle class reproduces its class position through schooling and gaining qualifications. It might have expected that its own children would get the chance to ascend into the professions through their schooling and university education. The restructuring of the educational apparatus could have been an opportunity to improve things; inequalities could be further reduced – for youth from the migrant milieu and the working class. Instead, the middle classes have discovered that the ever-higher investments demanded of them are bringing ever lower returns: school education is more compressed as it runs for a shorter period; leaving qualifications are now delivered by a centralized body; university entry is made more difficult for numerous reasons; universities are now able to select the students that they want, tuition fees have been introduced, university courses are reduced in length (BA in six semesters), and, at the end of it, the students receive qualifications whose market value is opaque; and those condemned to school and universities that fail to reach the top-ranked spot receive qualifications that are devalued, irrespective of the students’ individual achievements, affecting future career and income. All of this proves to the middle classes that the ruling class is no longer that interested in an alliance with them. Inasmuch as the elite is itself reliant on scholarship and learning, they have the resources to send their children to international schools and foreign universities, or they buy the necessary knowledge cheaply on the world market. Knowledge has become a commodity that can be valorized on the global market; education and knowledge are also cut adrift from the bearers of capitalist domination. For left social movements, this is a good opportunity to appropriate it. The educational strike is one step towards that and it is taking pace on a European-wide stage.

Alex Demirović

Violence and the University Sanctuary law in Greece

Shortly before one of the demonstrations commemorating the first anniversary of the death of Alexis Grigoropoulos in Athens – the event that triggered the December revolt in 2008 – a group of two hundred anti-authoritarians broke down the door of the rector’s office at the central University of Athens and attacked and injured the rector. This was one of several reported physical attacks against members of academic staff on university premises in 2009, one of which took place for the first time during a class, at the Economics University of Athens. The public debate that followed revealed a conceptualization of the university as a space of abjection, where ‘raw’ violence is endemic, alongside deviance, anti-social behaviour, drug use and other forms of criminal activity perpetrated by the familiar abjected others in Greek society: koukouroi (hood-wearers), anarchists, anti-authoritarians and other unknown and unknowable entities. This dystopian transformation of the university was widely assumed to be a result of the protection from the police that the University Sanctuary provides to those within the university.

The University Sanctuary was formally established in 1982 (Law 1268/1982) by the socialist Pasok government in order to guarantee academic freedoms and freedom in the dissemination of ideas within the university in post-junta Greece. The law stipulates that police can enter university grounds only in cases of serious crime, or on the basis of a formal university summons or permission. In 2007, the right-wing New Democracy government reworked the Sanctuary law (Law 3549/2007) in the context of legislation mandating neoliberal educational reform, so that the guarantee of these freedoms is now limited to the academic community, academic tasks and university work, and to related spaces; removing, for example, the guarantees to freedoms in spaces where political activity takes place and for anyone on university premises. In practice, however, the university has rarely called upon the police to enter. As a result, so the argument goes, violent entities operate unhindered on university premises.

Exactly what they do, the extent of the violence, and where they are supposed to be within the university
The common-sense solution to the problem of violence, understood in these terms, was presented as the removal of the obstacles to police entry into the university. One suggestion was to abolish the Sanctuary altogether. Those who called for this claimed that, since the provisions for summoning the police by the university were rarely used, the Sanctuary should be lifted completely. This would allow free and timely access of the police to university grounds without practical complications or controversy. Several commentators also claimed that the Sanctuary is anachronistic: a ‘Third World’ institution unnecessary in a European, democratic society. This type of claim has a long history in Greek public discourse and is part of a persistent misrecognition/idealization of Greek and Western European institutions, fixated on an imagined ‘Europe’ rather than being connected to current realities.

However, the solution which predominated in discussion was the full application of the Sanctuary law; in other words, universities should make use of the provisions to summon the police, in order to deal with the violence in question. This was the position of the recently elected Pasok government, which promoted adherence to the Sanctuary law, rather than its abolition. The promotion of the entry of police into the university in the context of the government’s focus on eradicating anomie and establishing rational and ethical administration also reflected its ‘zero tolerance’ policy on ‘violence wherever it emerges’. This phrase emerged in response to the December 2008 revolt, in effect shutting down an emerging debate on the events in the mainstream media. Calls for a continued and even greater revolt, which included the cry of ‘where are the artists, where are the intellectuals?’, were met by moral posturing against ‘violence from wherever it may emerge’ by politicians, representatives of the arts and letters, and media celebrities. This position in effect denied any distinction between different forms or types of violence.

To facilitate the process of summoning the police, the minister of education, Anna Diamandopoulou, pledged extra measures to facilitate the entry of police into the universities, suggesting for example the establishment of a system of rectors on call and on rotation, prepared to summon the police onto university grounds at any time of the day or night. Although the debate concluded with what was presented in the media as a growing consensus within the university community on the necessity of summoning the police force to deal with violence, it was never made clear what kind of violence the police would be entering to address; which practices or phenomena would constitute grounds for summoning them to the university. However, the debate did show that violence was understood as an essential property of the ‘abjected others’ referred to above. The Sanctuary status of the university has thus given rise to a phantasmatic space from which these abjected entities, and the threat they pose to order, can be imagined. This works as a strategy of containment. With this in place as the basis of the debate, the issue of violence in the university focuses on its sanctuary status, or on how to further contain, defuse and obliterate the threat of violence at its source. There is little contextualization of violence in relation to political, social or historical realities, so the debate cannot engage with the practical implications of applying the law, and using the police within the university as discussed.

A similar logic is at work in representing Exarcheia, the central Athenian neighbourhood where Alexis Grigoropoulos was shot in December 2008, as another space of abjection – a ‘no-go zone’ or anarchist ghetto. The efforts to contain and defuse the threat to order posed there by what are in fact more or less the same abjected others have involved periods of militarization of this neighbourhood. The new government’s ‘zero tolerance’ policy led to this immediately after the elections in October 2009, which led residents of Exarcheia to protest in a march on 12 November 2009. With a banner which proclaimed ‘the no-go zone is in your consciences’, they demanded an end to the persistent and provocative presence of police, riot squads and special forces; random pre-arrest detention;
the unwarranted use of tear gas; beatings, raids and the practice of forcing people on their knees in the street with their hands behind their head, in arbitrary stop-and-searches.

Furthermore, since the amended version of the Sanctuary law guarantees only what are specified as academic freedoms in teaching and research – protecting the right to ‘knowledge, teaching and work’ for all members of the academic community, within designated spaces of educational and research activities – violence can now be claimed to arise whenever teaching, research and other university work activities are disrupted. It goes without saying that this opens the door for institutional and police repression of long-established forms of political activity, such as strikes, occupations and other forms of protest undertaken by students, academic staff and any other university employee. In addition, the enforcement of the amended law also means that freedoms of expression and the dissemination of ideas within the academic community itself are also by definition restricted, as the Sanctuary does not guarantee such freedoms outside formal university activities and the designated spaces within which they take place. This has implications not only for political activism but also for cultural production and other activities which can take place within the university but outside the classroom and laboratory. Finally, the enforcement of this law lifts the protection previously extended to non-university entities on university premises. It is in the context of these changes to the Sanctuary law that the rector of Athens Polytechnic has been criminally prosecuted for ‘housing’ the Indymedia website on the institution’s server. As the Polytechnic also ‘houses’ the websites of student branches of Pasok and Nea Dimokratia, the socialist and right-wing parties, it seems that the prosecution concerns the content and ideological orientations of the Indymedia site, as freedoms of expression do not extend to this activity under the current Sanctuary law.

This expanded understanding of violence not only creates new occasions for the repression of dissidence; it also forecloses the possibility of understanding why particular forms of violence against the university itself have proliferated. This needs to addressed in ways that acknowledge the context of a wider crisis of institutional legitimacy in Greece. This crisis has emerged from the exploitation of institutions, including representative politics, by elites both within and without them, in the name of power, privilege and enrichment for themselves, cronies, families and supporters. Although such practices have always been present in Greek society, the adoption of neoliberal policies in governance which promoted the enrichment of the few over the many to the detriment of the public interest, and which diminished the issue of social justice in governance, appeared to create even more opportunities for undermining public institutions and their mandate, for personal and group gain. Crucially, these practices have taken place in a context where those with institutional power, or access to it, have been immune from justice. In this context, a divide has emerged in everyday discourse between those with institutional power and those without it; this is a form of ‘anti-systemic’ thinking from below, which has been increasingly adopted by those who see themselves as outside, or without access to, institutional structures of power and privilege. This was alluded to in the many slogans that appeared in December based on a divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’, such as: ‘Let’s eat them before they eat us.’ It is within the context of this anti-systemic thinking from below, or in everyday life, that the December events are meaningful. Although the recently elected Pasok government has aimed, through both policy and discourse on ethical and rational administration, to restore institutional legitimacy, the logics of the divide and of institutional delegitimization persist. Arguably, this is a factor which has played a role in the increase of certain forms of violence, both within and outside the university.

The university community itself has not been immune to the criticism that practices promoting partisan logics and advantages have undermined the promotion and achievement of institutional objectives and priorities. These practices may have precluded the establishment or defence of organizational and political cultures and procedures that could limit or at least address violence, without the kind of police force currently proposed. Similar partisan and exploitative logics by student representatives who participate in structures and relationships of power have led many students to reject representative politics within the university, along the lines of the divide previously discussed, and to respond with either atomization or acceptance of anarchist and anti-authoritarian logics and practices.

The parties of the parliamentary Left have always called upon the university community to defend the Sanctuary from instances of both blind violence and the police repression which will ensue if the amended law is applied. However, in the present context, it is unclear whether this is possible.

Krini Kafiris
The damned disunited

Trouble at the University of Leeds

At the time of writing (January 2010), members of the University and College Union (UCU) at the University of Leeds are about to vote on a call for strike action and action short of a strike in protest at recent developments, which could have serious repercussions for the entire university sector. Student groups are organizing a campaign in support of their lecturers using the model of the general assembly, and aiming to build a movement across all universities in the north of England. Blogs and social networks have been established. (See www.leedsucuwordpress.com for detailed and up-to-date information from the Leeds University UCU and the students’ open-content group ‘Defend jobs at Leeds, defend education’ on Facebook.)

It’s still early days, and the situation is not (yet) on the scale of actions seen internationally, but there is a growing anger towards the management and, more generally, towards the entire marketization of higher education. The mood of fatalism that accompanied the onset of neoliberalization and has beset the labour movement since the 1980s is beginning to fracture. In Tower Hamlets, lecturers staged a successful strike by withdrawing their labour indefinitely – a type of action not seen in colleges for a long time. South Yorkshire firefighters won their dispute overnight. But most impressive has been the protracted, and widely supported, all-out strike by Leeds refuse workers against the local council’s efforts to cut pay, under the guise of equal-pay legislation. With such precedents, there is now something palpably different about the landscape of expectations and hopes.

At the beginning of autumn, management at the University of Leeds discovered a high-level accounting error of gargantuan proportions. One of the first things to trickle down to staff was a reassurance not to worry, as the figures were ‘only virtual’. Fictitious entities, as readers of Marx well know, have a way of metamorphosing with all-too material effects. The UCU estimates that the University’s ‘Efficiency Exercise’ – £35 million cut on the annual budget, devolved down to departments to ‘identify’ – translates as between 450 and 700 academic and academic-related jobs (depending on where one sets the average salary), and, without doubt, will mean a significant intensification of workloads. In the meantime, the University continues with its building projects and to take on fresh capital loans.

Equally disturbing, however, has been the way this budgetary problem has intersected with another (apparently) local issue to suggest that, far from facing an unexpected crisis, recent developments fit into a larger pattern, not necessarily deliberately designed, but certainly used to shape an expedient ‘opportunity’. Months before the spreadsheet surprise, attacks had started on the School of Healthcare and the Faculty of Biological Sciences (FBS). Under the remit of a ‘review’, sixty jobs (since expanded to seventy) were put under threat. One aspect of the restructuring has been that the majority of FBS’s 48-strong professoriat must reapply for their jobs, jobs that have been redefined under much narrower and more rigid terms, all of which raises questions of legality as well as having grave implications for academic freedom. Colleagues outside Leeds – as well as those inside – recognize the possible consequences. As do the universities’ employers. The vice-chancellor of the University of Leeds is currently chair of the Russell Group. If little has been done by this body to argue against either the government’s plans to cut higher-education spending or the recent announcement that instrumentalized education will be the way forward for UK universities, then we might wonder quite what the group could be mustering its energies for? Employers’ eyes – and not just those of the elite Russell Group – are on Leeds, which now occupies the unenviable position of being in the vanguard of a new phase of managerialist testing.

Formally the collective dispute at Leeds is being invoked on the following grounds: the breaching by university management of Section 188 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act, which requires meaningful negotiations to find ways to mitigate and avert job losses; breaching the Employment Rights Act and the University’s own charter and statutes (requiring fair and transparent processes when selecting staff for redundancies); ignoring the University’s systems of governance (attempting to sack employees in advance of the negotiations and in contravention of conciliation processes); imposing inflexibly tight job descriptions on academics in FBS and putting under threat academic-related and other posts.
To many, this will all sound terribly procedural and bureaucratic, but such, in part, are the parameters within which trade unions in the UK have operated – especially since the anti-union legislation introduced by Margaret Thatcher’s government, which, shamefully, Labour did nothing to revoke. Employers’ attention will be focused on the attempts by the University of Leeds to reconfigure what constitutes acceptable practice during internal reviews and to test the scope managers have for breaking their legal obligations (either that, or the Leeds management really don’t understand what they are doing). In short, the call for strike action and action short of a strike is over the ‘unprecedented attack on jobs, terms and conditions and academic freedom; taken in totality... an affront to the idea of the university, its collegiality and a threat to its future’, as asserted on the union blog. There is little that is ‘local’ to the situation in FBS within the context of the University; and little that will remain local to Leeds. The student campaign argues that ‘History is in the making at the University of Leeds.’ The question now is whose history will be made and written, and whether universities will be ‘theirs’ or ‘ours’. The answer will come down to our commitment to collective action.

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The French intellectual twentieth century ended at the precise moment when Claude Lévi-Strauss passed away on 31 October 2009. Not because Lévi-Strauss had won the hollow race to become the ‘most influential’ of a certain generation of French thinkers, nor because, born in 1908, he was the only thinker of his generation to stretch the thin thread of his life long enough to count out a full hundred years, a unit we associate more easily with historical epochs than with individual trajectories. We must understand the word ‘century’ here in the sense that Foucault used it when he predicted that ‘perhaps, one day, this century will be known as Deleuzean’. Contrary to what the English translation suggests, Foucault didn’t mean that this hundred-year period will be recognized as having been marked by the work of Deleuze in the same way that another period is known as Victorian: he meant that a philosophy which at the time was still wheeling around in the frictionless blue sky of metaphysics now had the means to realize itself in the world of politics, arts, sciences and forms of life – in short, the means to transform our practices. We must understand the sentence and the word in French: un jour peut-être le siècle sera deleuzien, meaning that one day, perhaps, the world will be Deleuzean, in the sense that the secular is opposed to the regular (clergy), actions to prayers, human beings to their theologies. Foucault meant that the philosophical reworking of concepts like difference, repetition, sense, sign, event, structure, play, order and things had come to acquire precise stakes for the transformation of non-philosophical practices.

If Foucault’s claim has any historical purchase, if such a project of transformation holds out any promise, it must number first among its conditions the reworking performed by Lévi-Strauss, over the course of his life, of the word invented by Roman Jakobson in 1929: structuralism. This word designated a transformative programme potentially traversing all the domains of knowledge, as well as the arts, a programme which implied nothing less than a change in the very conception of rationality. But it was Lévi-Strauss who managed to expand the paradigm out of its field of origin – linguistics – and demonstrated that it was indeed a truly general way of approaching human life, since it could be applied to all aspects of ‘culture’ (kinship, myth-telling, arts, sexuality, etc.). Structuralism isn’t only a set of techniques to study languages (synchronically rather than diachronically, in terms of systems rather than rules, functioning by oppositions rather than computations, etc.); nor is it simply the hypothesis that all cultural phenomena should be studied as languages (for which the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure coined the term ‘semiology’ at the start of the twentieth century). It is rather the idea that symbolic practices cannot be constituted as scientific objects without introducing new kinds of entities which traditional metaphysics was reluctant to acknowledge, as Saussure’s famous adage, ‘in language there are nothing but differences’, had already indicated.

Structuralism prompted philosophers to develop a new ontology – that is, to redefine what it means to be different and identical, unique or multiple, successive or
contemporary. Structuralism also obliged philosophers to reconsider the very nature of meaning and subjectivity – the former dethroned from its position as an aim of every signifying act, to end up as a mere effect, and the latter displaced from its position as origin, to be analysed as a function. And this task did not merely amount to questioning the internal coherence of the constructions inherited from one particular philosophical tradition: it also had the potential to reorient the practice of a whole range of activities, in history, literary theory, sociology, linguistics, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and so on.

Whether we think of Lacan, Barthes, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, or even Badiou, and no matter what philosophical resources directly inspired them, they all inherited problems (and often concepts) set up by Lévi-Strauss. More importantly, they also inherited the terrain upon which their daring speculative constructions could be deemed to touch directly on practices, in particular scientific ones. However, while the reputation of all these authors is now well established in philosophical circles, Lévi-Strauss remains comparatively little known and little read. This neglect, regrettably, contributes directly to the increasingly marked tendency to ‘normalize’ these practices and speculations and to confine them anew in somewhat solipsistic dialogue within a philosophical tradition that is once again locked within itself, taking away from them not only their specificity but also a great deal of their intelligibility and interest. It is symptomatic that the English-speaking academic world (which prides itself so much, relative to its French counterpart, in ‘taking seriously’ these subversive thinkers, both as a source of inspiration and as objects of interpretation, if not veneration) has remained largely silent about Lévi-Strauss, while more and more works are devoted to him in French.

Admittedly, Lévi-Strauss’s work is not easy to digest. The reader must be willing to learn about the marriage arrangements of some obscure Australian tribes, or to follow odd stories of scattered and sometimes extinct Amazonian peoples, in which philosophers, however post-colonial they pretend to be, may have trouble recognizing the worthy concerns of their own discipline – be they the foundations of knowledge, the guiding values of humanity, the impenetrable ways of the Revolution or the secret drives of existential tragedy. Lévi-Strauss proposed no small number of new philosophical constructs – take, among many others, the concept of ‘floating signifier’ which has had such a long career from Lacan to Deleuze, Derrida, Badiou, Spivak, Žižek, Laclau… He insisted, however, that such constructs were to be treated as nothing more than ad hoc tools to solve particular anthropological or ethnographic problems, a strategy which did little to win over some of his philosophical colleagues. Others asked familiar questions about the agenda itself: didn’t structuralism rule out history, subjectivity and politics in its account of human life?

More important than these debates, I think, is a more general difficulty, one that applies to the very characterization of what philosophy’s ‘secular’ world should be. It may seem that Lévi-Strauss contents himself with defining this ‘outside’ of philosophy merely as ‘science’, as if the only thing that mattered was the acquisition of some posi-
tive knowledge, with every way of thinking assessed according to its capacity to open us to its sheer outside, to ‘objective reality’ as such. Lévi-Strauss, who was trained as a philosopher but who was always uncomfortable with any self-contained conceptual play, tends to oppose inward-looking thinkers who dream freely of logical coherence, and anthropologists who confront themselves with demonstrable facts. This attitude raises at least two series of issues. The first is that it obviously relies on a very debatable concept of science, which is not even consistent with the premisses of semiology, for which signs do not refer to an external reality but function by opposing themselves imma-

In the second place, it seems to exclude from the ‘world’ everything which is not scientific knowledge, such as arts and politics, depoliticizing in the same move the practice of science itself, as if it were possible to take an impartial view over and above the chaotic play of human experience and opinion. It should be recalled that Lévi-Strauss’s first published text was on Gracchus Babeuf and the idea of communism, and that he was an active member of the Socialist Party for many years before the Second World War. Nevertheless, Lévi-Strauss’s lack of confidence in May ‘68, and his resistance to the tendency to ‘ideologize’ theoretical problems which was common at that time, seem to confirm the diagnosis: even more than his critic Louis Althusser, Lévi-Strauss has often been dismissed as guilty of scientism.

It was the point of Derrida’s deconstruction of Lévi-Strauss (which seems to have had such an impact on its English-speaking readers that it encouraged them to stop reading him at all) to show that these categories of fact, science, positivity, experience (and all the oppositions by which he characterized the efficacy of his move away from the philosophical way of thinking) were themselves entirely determined by the very metaphysical tradition he was trying to escape. Far from being the ‘outside’ of phil-

osophy, Lévi-Strauss’s world would then have been fully anticipated within that which he sought to evade. Rather than follow a laborious detour through the ascetic acquisition of anthropological knowledge, Derrida suggested that we should try to put into play the internal heterogeneity of the metaphysical tradition, the equivocity of its concepts, not so much in order to find a way out, but rather to make it once more capable of inven-

Whatever one may think of the merits of deconstruction, it has the unfortunate consequence of limiting another sort of heterogeneity, one that Lévi-Strauss had tried to confront us with, in remarkable ways: the heterogeneity of forms of thought different from ‘ours’. It is true that there is an ambiguity in Lévi-Strauss’s discourse, but it happens to be the ambiguity of anthropology itself. One only needs to read The Savage Mind to realize that Lévi-Strauss doesn’t believe in the capacity of the modern Western scientific tradition to enunciate from within itself the conditions of its own operations, as Kant urged philosophers to do. One will only know what it is to know if one is able to recognize that practices apparently very remote from scientific knowledge, like myths and rituals, are in fact determinate variants of it. Anthropology is a very special sort of knowledge: it makes of the diversity of forms of knowledge the critical instrument to characterize both what is distinctive about the kind of knowledge we perceive as obvious (as the relation to some external reality) by clarifying its difference with other knowledges, and what is at stake for all rational subjects of knowledge in this activity. Lévi-Strauss defined anthropology as this kind of knowledge which makes of differences (between forms of knowledge) the unique tool to produce particular truths. I know no other thinker who pushed further than him the concern with decolonizing thinking, to evoke an argument defended by the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who may be Lévi-Strauss’s most creative follower today.

Structuralism defined itself by opposition to evolutionism, according to which human societies and minds could be ordered along a unique series going from the primitive to the civilized: such a schema notoriously justified colonialism as an enterprise of
education, if necessary through extermination. But Lévi-Strauss did not favour any kind of universalism which would claim to possess from within itself the standard of reason (and then ‘charitably’ ascribe it to all human beings). Nor did he accept ‘differentialist’ perspectives, which hypostatize cultures as monads of sorts and, as a consequence, make differences indifferent to one another. His concern was always the same: to make us understand that ‘we’ are not at the centre of anything, not even of our own identity (whether we call it ‘humanity’, ‘reason’ or ‘culture’). Hierarchy, generality, distinction are three ways of denying this fact. To which we must oppose: equality, comparison, transformation. This is why Lévi-Strauss once wrote that ‘anthropology’ is nothing other than a ‘practice of decentring’.

This point also answers to the objection of Lévi-Strauss’s alleged indifference to politics. He certainly never embraced the somewhat neo-Zhdanovian conception of the social sciences which tries to see in them an instrument of domination or resistance of one group or class over another. But he never separated his scientific endeavour from its sharp critical-political edge. He warned us against a conception of human action as necessarily reducible to the paradigm of history. He saw in the idea whereby human beings make history (without knowing it) a mere ethnocentric projection, inadequate for people who do not share in a certain modern conception of subjectivity. He carried as far as possible the criticism of the idea of progress, as in Race and History, while trying to redefine a form of ‘progressivism’ capable of learning some lessons from many centuries of brutal violence, ignorance and sheer stupidity. He refused all forms of humanism which would rely on any determined conception of the human essence (even a negative determination, as in the case of existentialism), suspecting it as a new way of making of one figure of humanity the norm and truth for all other ones. He was able to see the conceptual links between an attempt to constitute humanity as an isolated dominion and the ecological threat with which we are now all too familiar, advocating a ‘generalized humanism’ which would make not any identity the source of all value but rather favour the practice of difference even beyond the boundaries of species. In short, Lévi-Strauss made of the effort to conceive oneself as a possibility among others (an ‘other among others’, as he says in his homage to Rousseau included in Structural Anthropology, volume 2) the instrument both of a new kind of knowledge and of a demanding ethical and political attitude.

True, Lévi-Strauss’s work is ambiguous and difficult. But its ambiguity is that of our world itself, and its difficulties have, compared to some others, the merit of being real. They also explain why Lévi-Strauss has been at the centre of the French intellectual siècle or century. An advocate of the concept of structure (because he saw in it the instrument of a way of thinking which would make of transformations its sole resource), a scientist eager for the empirical diversity of worlds (who did not hesitate to show how the acquisition of knowledge required a willingness to pass through daring speculative constructions), Lévi-Strauss has been at the intersection of all the great movements which agitated the French scene, from his debates with the phenomenologies of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur to the triggering of the various sorts of ‘post-structuralisms’ that dominate the field to this day. Nowhere more than in his texts can we perceive the truth of the general point that a great intellectual event is always something in which an epoch tackles the excess of what it has to think over its available means of thinking. I don’t know whether the next century might one day be recognized as Deleuzean (or Badiouian, or anything else), but if it is, I’m sure that it that it won’t be so without us first realizing that the one which ended so recently has been Lévi-Straussian. It is time to start rereading his work, if we seek to find new ways to allow philosophical constructions to accomplish their real and most fundamental promise: to act upon the world they confront.

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