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The myth of preparedness

Claudia Aradau

Look at this place! It’s buzzing… [Bomb explosion. People screaming. Chaos] Were you caught off-guard? That’s the problem. Can you imagine life without the places where we congregate? These are convenient places, places where we want to go, are free to go. In airports and stadiums you can monitor access, they are contained. Public spaces are not contained. You have a part to play to ensure that freedom doesn’t make you vulnerable. When people are freely collected together, it presents an opportunity to those who want to cause mayhem. You not only have the skill and knowledge to cope with a terrorist attack, but help prevent it. Maybe you don’t realize it yet. Until then we’re back to anxiety, confusion, fear: just what they wanted’.1

Thus starts one of the DVDs shown as part of preparedness exercises across the UK. In a shopping centre, an urban square, a nightclub or a hotel, a bomb explodes. All preparedness exercises start from the moment of the unexpected event: the screen goes blank, the sound takes over and the action reverts to the ‘real’ participants in the exercises. These are not fragments of disaster movies which effectively modulate an excitable public, but the very opposite of mediatic representations: they are modalities of expert knowledge mobilized anew as part of extensive emergency preparedness plans in the UK. Rather than faded memories of the Cold War civil defence drills or the much derided ‘duck and cover’ rituals, preparedness exercises have remained at the centre of emergency management knowledge and practice. More recently, they have been reinvented and have increasingly proliferated, their practice required by law and their knowledge taught in dedicated institutions for emergency planners: the UK Civil Contingencies Act requires emergency responders to hold regular exercises to prepare for future potential emergencies, while the government’s Emergency Planning College provides expert knowledge for the growing profession of emergency planners. Every local police force, every local council, every NHS body, every fire service, electricity supplier, gas supplier, train, airport, railways operator and so on is required to hold regular exercises to test emergency preparedness.

From floods and other weather disasters to the ‘next terrorist attack’ as a potential CBRN emergency, preparedness exercises create worst-case scenarios as ‘[t]his helps the emergency services and all those who respond to incidents of this nature to prepare for similar events of smaller scale, which are more likely to occur, as well as for worst case scenario.’2 As potential disasters appear now as indeterminate, unpredictable and unexpected, preparedness exercises are placed at the heart of a new ratio which challenges or replaces statistical calculability. In this sense, the future of unexpected events cannot be known or predicted; it can only be enacted. Uncertainty becomes an opportunity to ‘speculate not just about “the future”, but about a range of possible futures that might arise from the uncertain course of the forces of change’.3 This is what futurists have concerned themselves with since Herman Kahn’s work on ‘thinking the unthinkable’ at the RAND Corporation, through the Schell scenarios in the 1960s and 1970s, to the
more recent governmental scenarios by the National Intelligence Council in the USA or horizon-scanning projects in the UK. Preparedness proposes a mode of ordering the future that embraces uncertainty and ‘imagines the unimaginable’ rather than ‘taming’ dangerous irrruptions through statistical probabilities. The archival knowledge of the past is replaced by the enactment-knowledge of continual rehearsal of the performance to come.4

Project Argus, a series of counterterrorist exercises organized by the National Counter-Terrorism Security Office (NaCTSO) is ‘exploring ways to aid you in preventing, handling and recovering from a terrorist attack’. Exercise Osiris aimed to test the operational response to a chemical attack on the tube. Atlantis considered London’s response to a scenario where four areas of London were flooded at a result of a river breach. Exercises simulate an emergency situation and aim to prepare organizations to withstand disruptive challenges. Yet these exercises do much more (or much less, in a sense). Despite their claims of embracing radical uncertainty and openness, exercises do not prepare subjects to imagine the unimaginable or even a more limited range of different futures. Preparedness exercises do not imagine an overturning of the present social order. They also don’t exactly engage in performative enactments of neoliberal speculation or in fostering entrepreneurial subjects willing to bet on the future. The ratio they act out has more in common with myth.

Exercises like Argus, Griffin, Osiris, Kali, Demeter, Atlantis, Agni or Enki have resurrected the ancient names of deities and other mythological or legendary beings. ‘Enki – the Sumerian God of Fresh Water and Wisdom. Associated with the intellect and medicine, creation and fertility’ notes the Major Incident Exercise Report from Barking and Dagenham. ‘Agni is a Hindu deity. The word Agni is Sanskrit for “fire”’ explains another exercise. Argus, the hundred-eyed giant of Greek mythology appears to be the aleatory result of acronymed ‘Area Reinforcement Gained Using Scenarios’. Although many exercises have more mundane names (such as Domino, Herald, Avon Express or Willow), the mythical references are symptomatic of the return to myth in the confrontation with the unexpected, the incalculable and the unpredictable. As Adorno and Horkheimer have formulated the mythical tendencies underpinning Enlightenment rationality, both myth and rationality are responses to the fear of the unknown and attempts to devise strategies of ‘mere self-preservation’ and resisting radical change.6 Rather than shattering scientific certainty, the unexpected and the catastrophe return the ratio of preparedness to the mythical process of rite in which the possible consequences of unexpected events are suppressed. The futurity of unexpected events cannot be sustained and subjects–players inhabit the future as a mythical space of inevitable fate, inconsequential activity and mimetism.

Mythic inevitability

After 9/11, organizations, bureaucracies and intelligence services are required to expect the unexpected and replace the improbable with the mere possible and imaginable.7 Preparedness entails modes of organization not based on the past or the present but in relation to a radically uncertain future. Yet the limits of scientific calculability do not break the mould of enlightenment knowledge but revert back to ritual enactments of factuality. With the ratio of preparedness, as with Enlightenment, there is a return to mythology as ‘[f]actuality wins the day: cognition is restricted to its repetition; and thought becomes mere tautology.’8 While exercises appear to set out an unexpected event in the future, this unknown possibility is not new but harks back to an inevitable necessity. ‘The next terrorist attack is a question of when, not if’12 repeat the counter-terrorism security advisers at the beginning of Argus exercises. Or ‘What happens abroad is replicated domestically’, so there will be a next terrorist attack as in Bali, Mumbai or Kandahar! The principle of fatal necessity rules preparedness as it had ruled rationalistic science and the destiny of mythical heroes.
Preparedness exercises do not create something new, they do not organize subjects with a view to radical change, but rehearse in a ritual play that which has already been set out as inevitable: the ‘next terrorist attack’ which will differ from previous ones only in the intensity and/or extensivity of destruction. Mythic time replaces the temporal indeterminacy of the unexpected future event. Exercises function in the modality of the future anterior, not as a wager made in the present for changing the future, but as the continuity of a pregiven future back into the present: the next terrorist attack will have been. The future anterior of preparedness allows exercises to function in a time of certainty, of tautology and of a ‘foregone conclusion’ in which the unexpected is always expected as it will already have been.9

The anterior futurity of preparedness suspends argument and debate about truth and falsity, meaning and representation. What matters are not distinctions between true and false but those of credible and incredible, between plausible and implausible. Project Argus depicts a scenario, through audiovisual media, which takes place in real time, and asks players to make decisions in the event of a terrorist attack. It combines a series of video and audio materials to develop a credible terrorist attack scenario to which participants are expected to respond. Credibility is the result of artifice: realistic but inconsequential details need to be included as part of scenario planning and delivery. Thus, exercises start with clear indications of time, space and weather, incorporate maps and other visual representations of urban spaces, flows of people, traffic and materials which create a ‘false clarity’ of the event. The future event will have been at ‘16:15 hours, Wednesday 16th February 2005. It’s a cold and dry afternoon, with a temperature of 7°C. There’s a light east, south-easterly breeze of about 5mph.’

Exercises establish a sensorial regime of inhabiting the future in which indeterminacy and uncertainty revert to mythical inevitability. Historical time is withdrawn from detailed spatial representations and replaced with the cyclical time of weather patterns or the linearity of clock time. Inevitable is not only the disruptive event but also the response to a disaster. Response unfolds according to predetermined clock time: each time interval requires predetermined actions and processes. The first 5 minutes are about communicating with those around, 15 minutes about ‘taking control’, 40 minutes about reassuring those around, 2 hours about working together with the emergency services; longer times are about business continuity and return to normality. Clock time unfolds to allow the planning to reach the conclusion that the exercise authors wanted and ‘tames’ the unexpected event under the linearity of response. The exercise ultimately ‘imprisons human beings in the cycle objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects’.10

Deactivation

As The Odyssey combined myth and rational labour giving expression to the dialectic of Enlightenment, preparedness responds to the mythical inevitability of fate not by avoiding it but through cunning and artifice. Preparedness does not try to find a rational way to avoid the ‘next terrorist attack’ or to confront it with superior knowledge, but to use artifice to avoid its consequences and ensure the self-preservation of atomistic individuals, the entrepreneurs who have taken precautionary measures. Artifice allows exercise players, like Odysseus, to lose themselves in order to save themselves.

According to manuals for emergency planning, the goal of exercises is to test plans, train staff and validate existing emergency procedures. The injunction to act entails not a series of goal-oriented actions, but a state of activation in which one ‘expects the unexpected’, is alert, ready for action, vigilant. It means to be able to read signs and interpret omens: detect the potential terrorist behind the ordinary neighbour, the bomb in the anonymous bag, the explosive in the white van, the chemical device in the innocuous garbage bin. It is to be ready for ‘pseudo-activity’ as the spurious and
meaningless activity reflecting the impossibility to change social relations. Activated subjects both recognize artifice and use it for self-preservation.

What matters is not the content of action, but the ways in which one makes use of artifice and cunning to present one’s actions visibly as something different. Exercise players accomplish standard gestures and fulfil a ritual that is subsequently reflected in the media coverage of the event. As with all rituals, activity is a ‘determined process’ which can be influenced by magic (i.e. expert knowledge). The subject of exercises takes on automaton-like qualities. Following expected procedures, performing the right gestures, the subject withdraws from historical action and relinquishes political responsibility. ‘Who is to blame? Architects who designed the buildings’ notes a post-emergency imaginary BBC broadcast shown as part of an Argus Professional exercise. Argus exercises reduce blame to mediatic shaming and legal procedures. Not to be blamed can only be therefore to be seen as acting responsibly, visibly following emergency protocols, enacting the artifice of contractual responsibility. Responsibility is artifice, appearance rather than substance, and the response to an unexpected event is ordered at the level of appearance. Setting up connectivities, finding alternative means of communication, is the answer out of the emergency situations; causes and pre-evental circumstances are immaterial.

The artifice of activation is not without dangers: activated subjects can become unpredictable, disruptive and unruly. To activate is to create potential exposure to excitable reactions. Therefore exercises need to channel activation through pastoral care. Pastoral care is the form that leadership takes rather than a goal for action; it is directed at irrational, emotional and suggestible crowds whose activated alertness needs to be channelled and managed. What is needed in emergency times, exercise wisdom teaches, is a ‘strong leader’ who can assuage panic and fear among the crowds. From a concert stadium to a demonstration or a shopping place, there is no difference, as fickle crowds and their unstable affects need to be channelled by a leader. The economic subjects who congregate in shopping centres and other public spaces can dangerously morph into potentially destructive crowds that could disrupt the socio-economic system. Nominating key individuals as leaders can help tame the potential violence of crowds and de-collectivize their power.

The collective subject of unexpected events is individualized, reduced to lists of business employees whose names are to be called out in the event of a disruption. Activating subjects to anticipate the future through preparedness exercises is not to inhabit a future where failings of the present would be overcome. Activating subjects is also not to train them to become more alert or imaginative – but to accustom them to artifice as the essence of what they have always been. ‘You already have the knowledge and skill to cope with a terrorist attack’ repeat all the Argus DVDs. Exercises return subject to the myth of the atomized individual, deprived of collective power and its potentially destructive capacity. Activation becomes a form of political disactivation and disarray, as innocently noted by an exercise on emergency evacuation after an aircraft accident:

Passengers in the forward end of the cabin were uncertain what to do when the ‘accident’ started, many staying in their seats for some time without attempting to evacuate. The ‘dead’ status of the two cabin staff was not clear to the passengers; this was confusing because they were waiting for a lead from them.
Mimetism

While experts never tire of emphasizing the unpredictability and indeterminacy of disruptive events, their possible activation at any moment and catastrophic effects, preparedness exercises ultimately rely on mimetism. The mimetic faculty, as described by Benjamin, is ‘the compulsion to become or behave like something else’.\(^\text{14}\) It entails both the cognitive capacity to see resemblances, correlations, patterns and the expressive capacity of imitation. In that sense, preparedness exercises are both semblance and play. The semblance or correlative function of mimesis re-emerges in preparedness exercises as a replacement to the function of probabilistic calculation. At the same time, similarly to children’s mimetic play, exercise players enact themselves as others, from the safety manager to the business manager.

The players’ perception of correlations and similarities is structured by the sensuous images replayed on the DVD. The white van, the garbage bin, the suspect rucksack, these are all instant triggers of possible correlations that spell ‘danger’. Yet sensuousness can be deceiving and emergency planners need to create habits of decoding nonsensuous similarities. The mimetism of exercises is reinforced through mnemonics: each stage of the response has its easy-to-remember constructs. During the first 15 minutes, security managers are required to take control of the situation by simple action words such as ‘survey’, ‘assess’, ‘disseminate’. When contacting the emergency services, the mnemonic CHALET contains all the indications for information needed: C (casualties), H (hazards in the areas), A (access to the location), L (location of the incident), E (emergency services required), T (Type of explosion). In the event of a Mumbai-type shooting, four Cs encapsulate the exemplary behaviours: C (cover), C (confirm), C (contact) and C (control).\(^\text{15}\) By privileging semblance, exercises replace genuine cognition and thinking with automaton-like stimuli and correlations.

As the worst-case scenario is taken as the object of mimetic adaptation, any disaster becomes equivalent to any other and universal interchangeability is made possible. Exercises activate habits of preparedness to a whole array of events, from terrorist attacks to climatic disasters, as set out by the 2004 Civil Contingencies Act, which lists together under emergency events serious industrial strikes, disruptive political protests, terrorist outrages, disasters arising from storms or epidemics, and incursions on national infrastructures such as computer networks. No protest or mobilization can be safely outside the list of emergencies. By repressing the conditions of the emergence of catastrophe, preparedness exercises become exemplar for any disruption businesses can be confronted with and where the mythical gestures of survival and continuity are at stake.

Through the compulsion of mimetic similitude, players can simultaneously be self and other, leader and led, worker and managed, disciplined and flexible. Thus, players simultaneously establish rituals of command and leadership while undertaking an adaptation to nature understood as complex, adaptive, non-hierarchical. Players are required to make themselves similar to the threat environment through affinity and adaptation: ‘The whole community has a part to play in devising and implementing measures that are dynamic, flexible, agile and adaptive.’\(^\text{16}\) As threats are virtualities which can be activated at any moment, they need to be tackled in a similar modality of activation which allows mimetic adaptation to external changes. Preparedness aims at modelling the social world on ecological systems analysis and its theories of resilience and complex adaptive systems. As ecological knowledge is increasingly concerned with the persistence of ecosystems in the face of abrupt change, preparedness replicates this rationality and attempts to sustain a desired state in the face of any possible and unexpected disruption. Through adaptation, systems do not remain exactly unchanged, but, as definitions of resilience suggest, they absorb disturbances and reorganize so as to retain essentially the same main functions.
Stabilizing identity and retaining the system’s main functions is at the heart of ecological knowledge about adaptive systems. Disruptions can be absorbed through increased adaptability: by creating diversification of tasks, redundancy, co-management, communication channels, ‘social memory’. Yet, the non-sensuous similarity assumed by the ratio of preparedness is constantly subverted by the sensuous similitude between social world and hierarchical systems. If the adaptive capacity to withstand disruption and absorb it is to work on the model of ecological systems, order, hierarchy and leadership are needed. Unlike ecologically adaptive complex systems which can also reorganize in a new state, social systems cannot be allowed to morph into a new identity. At the same time, in line with ecological systems knowledge, preparedness exercises do not enact unchanged recovery (it is not physical survival that is the main aim of preparedness), but the continuity of a commodified environment of business survival and continuity. ‘Nearly 1 in 5 businesses suffer a major disruption every year. Yours could be next. With no recovery plan, you have less chance of survival’ ominously warns a preparedness document offered as supplementary reading with the Argus exercises.

A stark rendition of the goal of preparedness inadvertently appeared in a scenario by the National Intelligence Council in the USA. The ‘Caliphate’ scenario uses a fictional letter written by a fictional grandson of bin Laden to a fictional relative in 2020 about Islam’s struggle to wrest control from traditional regimes. ‘Oh, what confusion did we sow with the Crusaders’, exults the fictional character. ‘An almost forgotten word reentered the Western lexicon and histories of early Caliphs suddenly rose to be bestsellers on Amazon.com.’ This final sentence is revealing for what is implied in the new preparedness myths: every disruption, however catastrophic, is ultimately absorbed by a system which preserves its identity as a capitalist system above anything else. While the CIA conjures images of a spiritual caliphate, we will still have Amazon.com.

Notes

1. Notes from Argus Retail, 9 June 2009, Doncaster.
8. Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 27.
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What is – or what is not – contemporary French philosophy, today?

Éric Alliez

The question that serves as the title of my lecture, the question that motivates this lecture, is sustained by a negation that is absolutely necessary to the construction of the problematic I aim here to open. For I have found no other means than the ‘labour of the negative’, in the most literal sense, to submit my claim to the order of reasons that has led to the absence in France of chairs of philosophy defined in this way – such that the phrase ‘Contemporary French Philosophy’ be immediately understood, as we currently understand it here in the UK. The theoretical field implied by this phrase invites a problematization of both the philosophical and the contemporary from which a certain French otherness may be deduced. Contemporary French philosophy is not simply the philosophy produced in France (or in the French language), by and in the institution of the university, according to a diachronic line whose moments and diversity could be gathered up in a calendrical present/presence, whose variable dimensions stand for the ‘contemporary epoch’.

More generally, and more academically, in the distribution adhered to by the French university system for defining chairs of philosophy, ‘contemporary philosophy’ is wedded to the official chronology of the contemporary used by historians, and it begins in… 1800. This poses a number of amusing problems when it comes to studying Kant, who is split in two by the turning point of the French Revolution, which is said to complete the modern period (opened, as everyone is supposed to know, by the taking of Constantinople). One is thus constrained and forced to adopt, by convention and by consensus, the most philosophical date for the inauguration of the contemporary: that of the publication of the Critique of Pure Reason (1781). It is almost unnecessary to say that in an institution whose destiny has long been negotiated between ‘traditionalists’ (privileging the study of the texts of this tradition), theorists of knowledge (with whom the first generation of French ‘analytic’ philosophers began by allying themselves) and the tenants of moral and political philosophy (the very name is something of a manifesto…), the most contemporary French philosophy (in the sense of a philosophical actuality that it will be necessary for us to define better below) is superbly ignored.

The contemporary could, according to a reading heavily guided by the 1970s, also encompass the entirety of twentieth-century French philosophy, but it would analyse less the ‘1900 moment’ or the ‘rupture of the 1930s’ (two objects of recent study) than the passage from the generation of the three Hs (Hegel–Husserl–Heidegger), so-called after 1945, to the generation of the three ‘masters of suspicion: Nietzsche, Marx and Freud.¹

We must point out straight away that the game and the philosophical stakes of the second half of the twentieth century would make at least these six (Germans) intervene – along with several others, pushed back by this analysis into the nineteenth century, before being returned to favour as a somewhat precious and regressively ‘Franco-French’ anomaly. I am thinking here inevitably of Bergson (who published The Creative Mind in 1934) and of the conceptual machination that Deleuze was able to extract from him, in order to emphasise the speculative principles of a superior empiricism, shattering the disjunction between the ‘philosophy of life’ and the ‘philosophy of the concept’, whilst singularly complicating the relationship between philosophy and science. One may also recall here the iconoclastic reading of Bergson proposed by Michel Serres in his Eulogy to Philosophy in the French Language. Bergson reconstructed an unexpected bridge between the intuitions of the mathematicians Hadamard and Poincaré at the start of the twentieth century and the contemporary theories of chaos, which also infuse the Deleuzo–Guattarian

¹ This is a revised version of an inaugural lecture for a Professorship in Contemporary French Philosophy in the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Middlesex University, delivered on 22 May 2008.
plane of immanence. This is a Bergson (not unlike Gabriel Tarde, an author to whom I have applied myself, reinscribing the contemporary debate between philosophy and the social sciences) caught up in the ‘total forgetting of the properly French traditions of the start of the century’, evacuated by the total domination of German thought framed by the background of war (and the century is presented as a between of two world wars), which made logicism return in mathematics, determinism in history and psychology (and also in psychoanalysis), and imposed dialectics as the philosophy of war. And so Serres concludes his argument by evoking the ‘obligation to think the tangled multiplicities of the new contingency’, an exigency which appears in real time as an anarchonism cut by the thread, if not the iron hand, of history.²

Contemporary French anti-philosophy

It is also possible – and this concerns my own proposal more directly – to make ‘contemporary French philosophy’ begin with the caesura of the postwar period and its traumas (thinking ‘after’ Auschwitz, Stalinism, colonialism), traumas that would give birth to the philosophical generation of the 1960s – animated as it was by the deconstruction of the metaphysics of modern democratic reason implicated or enveloped in the catastrophe. This generation would culminate in ‘68-Thought’, before giving way, after the marketing episode of the New Philosophers of Anti-totalitarianism, with their concepts as big as hollow teeth, in the 1980s (those years which Félix Guattari called the ‘winter years’), to a new generation – I’m citing Alain Renaut – ‘marked by a powerful re-evaluation of the values of intelligibility of modernity and of the democratic idea’. This would (supposedly) allow ‘France’ to rejoin ‘the state of the philosophical and political problematic dominating everywhere else’.³ What has, on the plane of political philosophy in the strict sense, been called ‘New French Thought’ – and which, in reaction to the anti-humanism of 68-Thought, varies in form between a liberal-conservative neo-Tocquevillian paradigm, an allegedly progressive ethics of communication and its traumas (thinking ‘after’ Auschwitz, Stalinism, colonialism), traumas that would give birth to the philosophical generation of the 1960s – animated as it was by the deconstruction of the metaphysics of modern democratic reason implicated or enveloped in the catastrophe. This generation would culminate in ‘68-Thought’, before giving way, after the marketing episode of the New Philosophers of Anti-totalitarianism, with their concepts as big as hollow teeth, in the 1980s (those years which Félix Guattari called the ‘winter years’), to a new generation – I’m citing Alain Renaut – ‘marked by a powerful re-evaluation of the values of intelligibility of modernity and of the democratic idea’. This would (supposedly) allow ‘France’ to rejoin ‘the state of the philosophical and political problematic dominating everywhere else’.³ What has, on the plane of political philosophy in the strict sense, been called ‘New French Thought’ – and which, in reaction to the anti-humanism of 68-Thought, varies in form between a liberal-conservative neo-Tocquevillian paradigm, an allegedly progressive ethics of communication and a republican philosophy of universal human rights – would in this way mark the time of a pacified dialogue between contemporary continental philosophy (at the categorial outset, phenomenological, but more broadly of a hermeneutic spectrum) and the Anglo-Saxon analytic tradition (which, it must be said, has been broadly represented in France by this generation).

In this way, in France, the new contemporary French philosophy, the contemporary French philosophy of today – I’m still paraphrasing Alain Renaut – would give itself the means of ‘rediscovering a place at the heart of a global philosophy which is, in any case, in the process of surmounting its ancient splits and succeeding in its unification’.⁴ Less academic than institutional, this highly consensual response to the question ‘what is contemporary French philosophy, today?’ would thus have as its primary characteristic the closing of the parenthesis of 68-Thought. The modalities of this foreclosure have been stated successively in two books that have incontestably translated the forces at work in this period of restoration into philosophical terms and produced long-term effects in the whole of the French academic field.

Published in 1979 by Vincent Descombes, The Same and the Other: Forty-Five Years of French Philosophy (1933–1978), was originally commissioned by a British publisher, and not just any old publisher, but Cambridge University Press, for a series called Modern European Philosophy. It was published in English as Modern French Philosophy, prefaced by an English philosopher, Alan Montefiore, who restricted himself to recalling the project of the collection: to deepen the dialogue that was establishing itself between the analytic tradition and the European continent. Descombes concluded his opus on the stakes of the ‘so-called’ (sic) philosophical discussion thus: ‘in France today’ (that of the 1960s and 1970s), that is to say, in his eyes, in the ‘philosophy that was part of the climate of the time [dans l’air du temps]’, the sovereign subject that one claimed to criticize had been multiplied into a ‘myriad of little underlings each one attached to a perspective’.⁵ Minimally, one could argue, along with Étienne Balibar, that none of the major ‘structuralist’ philosophers limited themselves to disqualifying the subject: on the contrary, all undertook to throw light on this blind spot set up by classical philosophy in a founding position, that is to say, to make the subject pass from a constitutive function to a constituted position. But that is not the determining point – because the question is more political than philosophical. Who does not sense the resonances between Descombes’s critique and the thesis of Daniel Bell on the individualistic hedonism of neo-capitalism (published in French translation in the same year, 1979), along with its French extension, The Era of the Void (1983) by Gilles Lipovetsky, which makes 1968 the year of the birth of post-modern individualism? This is a work praised by Luc Ferry as the most illuminating political-philosophical analysis of recent years.

Before becoming the Minister of National Education for Universities and Research (2002–04), Luc Ferry had, together with Alain Renaut, been the
author of *French Philosophy of the 60s: An Essay on Anti-Humanism* (1985). This is the second work to which I was alluding. In it, our two accomplices oppose a ‘post-metaphysical humanism’ to what they analyse as a Nietzscheo–Heideggerian critique of the philosophical values of democratic modernity. This humanism endorses the Heideggerian thesis of the completion of metaphysics in an ego-onto-theology (understood as the closure of ‘speculative philosophy’) the better to justify the belated opening of contemporary French philosophy to rationalizing the defence of the conditions of reality (which one may dare to call ‘empirico-transcendental’), conditioning the becoming-adult of the secular democratic universe of Western societies (thus purging it of the cultural relativism which, between ‘race’ and ‘history’, is borne by the critique of ethnocentrism). This cannot work without the transformation of philosophy into a practical philosophy, qualified today by Alain Renaut as ‘applied moral philosophy’, but at the outset largely inspired by the communicational turn of Habermasian thought. As is known, the latter was able to rely on the ‘pragmatic’ version of the post-analytic mutation of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the better to dissolve the last glimmers of Critical Theory in the elucidation of the conditions of universality necessary to every language. Nevertheless, the ‘historicist’ objections of Hegel or the ‘critical’ objections of Horkheimer are still valid against a linguistically reformulated Kantian ethics (i.e. *after* the linguistic turn).

Here again one discovers the dialogue between philosophical cultures matched up by a double condition. It will be enough for me to recall this double condition briefly in order to motivate my principle of negation – that which contemporary French philosophy is not, no more today than yesterday – by affirming that which menaces philosophy tout court with extinction, today more so than yesterday, on the fortieth anniversary of May 1968, which would have us believe that there is no other alternative than to choose between the ‘ethical turn’ (with a liberal/libertarian connotation) of which the events of May 1968 would have been the secret bearer *in thought* and the post-philosophical restoration of the most reactionary of Republican ideals. Here and there, between the ruse of reason and a reason with no ruse at all, the disaster for thinking is absolute and the profits as certain from the point of view of universal capitalism and the democratic-economic consensus – a consensus that Jacques Rancière is justified in qualifying as ‘post-democratic’, if democracy is nothing without the mode of subjectivation that animates *dissensus* – as the ‘refiguration of the field of experience’ of all.  

In the first place, there is the veritable watchword for the 1980s’ generation: the announcement of the end of a philosophical (and not doctrinal) history of philosophy, calling into question an authentic opening up of the history of philosophy to a becoming, animated by the excess of philosophy over its own history. The latter is what all French philosophers have practised intensively since the Second World War, between deconstruction and reconstruction, archaeology and
1. The history of philosophy arises from the duty towards truth in general (as historical truth and scientific exactness).

2. Critique is a response to the duty of probity without any specific relationship to philosophical writing.

3. Specifically philosophical truth only exists in the research into the conditions of thinkability of any problematic fact whatever.

To which one will object by affirming precisely what is denied by this reduction of philosophy to a form of logico-social expertise, whose insistent affirmation without any kind of expert mediation could be valid more than ever for French otherness: namely, that the idea of philosophical truth bears within itself the always singular auto-determination of philosophy in the concepts that it creates (beginning with the concept of truth, or the critique to which one submits it). This is supported processually by an idea of 'system' abandoning its classic modern form of the 'systematic totalization of knowledge to the profit of a 'system of effective intervals and possible displacements' (according to the highly Foucauldian formulation of Jacques Rancière). This is a system ontologically invested from the point of view of our actual becomings (the heterogenesis of the Deleuze-System), or by the fidelity to an event subtracted from the rules of the situation (according to the axiomatics of the Badiou-System), or it is submitted to the most systemic de-ontological and/or de-ontologizing critique (Derrida or Laruelle, Levinas or Henry).

In the second place (and we have anticipated this point by virtue of the logical historicism that supports it), there is above all the declared end of philosophy as a singular zone of thinking where 'concept and creation are related to one another' (Deleuze): because it is thought as such that is propositionally submitted to the intersubjective requirement of clarity and to control by public criteria without which all consensual possibility of rationality would be lost. We might say that the contemporary French antiphilosophy that we are denouncing here is nothing other than the hexagonal adaptation, inevitably mediated by a Habermasian Germany, of Rorty's idea that 'democracy [liberal-parliamentary democracy] is superior to philosophy'.

Yet we should recall its politico-institutional domination, borne as it was by the generation of the 1980s, who had the power to make us pass from a situation marked by the resonating statement of Jacques Bouveresse 'Why I Am So Very Un-French' to the alarm bells of Jacques Derrida five years later: 'I believe that the identity of French philosophy has never been put to the test in such a harsh way.' It is this French philosophical otherness that is returning, in France itself, twenty years later, under the impulse of French Theory and the transdisciplinary theoretical practices that it has inspired on the basis of a conceptual 'transversality' affirmed (by French protagonists on the margins of the institution out of which they arose) the better to be negated (by the French university). This is so to the point that, in France, a refreshing of a style of thought now more than thirty years old can be proposed, a style of thought that has metamorphosed into 'poststructuralism', via a practice of concepts (which one re-creates rather than creates) evaluated and reanimated as a function of those other practices with which it interferes.

We could discuss the intra-philosophical interest of this 'Fresh Theory' to which I am referring (with its three hefty tomes published since 2005, at a sustained annual pace, along with the multiplication of seminars to which they have given rise), but not its value as a general symptom. The return of the repressed is manifest here in the form of what has been called, not without reason, an over-politicized image of contemporary thinking, philosophically associated with the Event-World of 1968. 'Poststructuralism', an improbable philosophical notion from a continental point of view, historically signifies 68-Thought – that is to say, post-68-Thought – in the paradoxical sense that it was only able to make the critical and clinical effects of 1968 reverberate for structuralism, the thinking of difference, and for thought tout court, by the deterritorialization of philosophy that had preceded the singular political experience of May 1968. This was a deterritorialization as much of the self-identity of philosophy, with regard to the schema of the experience of modern Reason, defined as it is by a thread stretched out between a subject and an object (or indeed in the revolution of the one around the other), as it was of its new relationship to a (non-philosophical) outside. Because this outside was working philosophy from within to the point of renewing its very meaning, it showed that philosophy, in the space of its contingencies, was not limited to the repertoire of recognizably philosophical questions, and that it could no longer simply abstract from a distribution of discourses sedimented by the existing distribution of power. Here, French philosophy discovered itself to be the contemporary of the putting-back-into-play of politics, by a direct problematization of the relationship between life and thought, which would go on radicalizing itself under the sign of May and would alone be able both 'prospectively' and 'retroactively' to give meaning to the notion of 68-Thought. Failing this, the notion of such a thought remains more operative for its
detractors than for the actors of an aftereffect (après-coup) whose multiple circulations are too numerous to be reunited positively under the unifying label of a school of thought.

So, I must define this deterritorialization of the subjective and objective identity of philosophy, which bears within itself the contemporary French otherness affirmed by the ‘long’ generation of philosophy before 1968 – an otherness which thus passes through the 1960s before crystallizing in 68-Thought, and which continued to develop beyond this first plane of immanence and its institutionalized exhaustion in France, in subsequent processes, in terms of resistance (otherness resists because resistance of inside and of outside thought is, in a philosophical and non-philosophical sense, ‘primary’) and persistence (that is, of ‘re-insistence’): the persistence of a force for rupture and experimentation. ‘Persistence’ is the word proposed by Peter Hallward in his Introduction to the 2003 special issue of Angelaki entitled ‘French Philosophy Today’. But such persistence is precisely difficult in France for the generation that came afterwards (from the selection and definition of the topic of a thesis, and the choice of a supervisor, both of which open up or close down the possibility of a university career even before it has started…). It can only be opposed to the academic ‘transistence’ of the reception of French thought in the Anglo-Saxon world and abroad more generally (our ‘finest export’), wherein under the guise of French Theory it is directly or indirectly hybridized and ‘trans-nationalized’. It has also been remarked that, in any case, the French generation of 1968 or post-1968 has only ever produced ‘underlings of variable talent and more or less original followers’ of the generation before 1968, as result of the ‘priority given to the political dimension’ in the form of a ‘critical orthodoxy’ – the oxymoron here is de rigueur. In short, ‘intellectually speaking, the generation of 1968 [children included] do not possess a distinct identity.’

It is this affirmation that I wish to take up again here and develop in the direction of a brief genealogical elucidation of the persistence of a contemporary philosophical otherness for which ‘contemporary French philosophy’ up to today offers the proof, such that this otherness can and should be philosophically defined. This will be the occasion for a final and most philosophical variation of the figure of negation that haunts my discourse on ‘What is NOT Contemporary French Philosophy, Today?’ Here, ‘today’ designates a hyper-contemporary time that aims to shelter the difference of the now in the dialogue between continental and Anglo-American philosophical cultures, long opposed according to the division of the philosophical world into two blocs, the phenomenological and the analytic, at long last reconciled from both theoretical and practical points of view, as the adult image of contemporary thought.

The historical novel of philosophical formations

And yet… by following the principle of the deterritorialization of the discipline taken by a French philosophy rupturing the articulation of the subject–object reference (invested in opposed and hence complementary senses by the two traditions issuing from Husserl and Frege), the same story can be told very differently – to the point that twentieth-century philosophy would find a properly contemporary orientation, irreducible to its situation at the junction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in radical excess with regard to the chiasmus that makes us evoke the ‘phenomenology’ of the failure of logical formalism and the ‘analysis’ of the rupture of phenomenological intentionality in its Husserlian guise.

The first point to make with regard to the renewed dialogue between the positivist and phenomenological traditions, characterizing an international philosophical community and a global academic philosophy in which French philosophy is at last taking part, is that this dialogue makes the examination of the historical novel of their formation the order of the day. It is a story oriented by the ‘race for reference’, for the objectivity of reference (exterior in relation to representation), supporting the project of a philosophy providing the object in the element of meaning (or ‘sense’). For it is really this finishing of Kantianism (in the two senses of the word ‘finishing’, which also presides over the divergences between the two traditions) – Kantianism understood here as the making explicit of the relationship between the subject and the object in a theory of knowledge – that would determine the inaugural constitution of twentieth-century philosophy. This is a constitution that needed to ‘claim the rights of the empirical at the level of the transcendental’ (following Foucault’s expression in The Order of Things) in order to accomplish the destiny of philosophy as a ‘rigorous science’ (according to Husserl’s guiding expression) and to realize scientific rationality as the generative telos of a new humanity (according to the tropisms of positivistic intentionality/anti-intentionality).

‘To claim the rights of the empirical at the level of the transcendental’ means either that one tries to reduce all transcendental reflection to the analysis of the formalisms of the object and to the project to
formalize the concrete, or that one seeks to uncover the grounds of possibility for all formalism, and the implicit horizon of all empirical contents, in transcendental subjectivity. An ‘empirical’ description of the transcendental or a ‘transcendental’ prescription of the empirical: it goes without saying that the ‘transcendental’ emerges from these disjoined coherences profoundly disfigured. However, to the extent that the reference remains here that of an object ad extra, which founds a common although diversely shared realist ambition, the notion of ‘phenomenological positivism’ given primacy by Merleau-Ponty could be a valid expression for a properly French critique engaged with this disjunction, and included in the same episteme. In this way too, Merleau-Ponty’s critique could have been informed, at the two extremes of the philosophical spectrum – the existential and the epistemological – by Immanuel Levinas and Jean Cavaillès.

Merleau-Ponty’s critique could have been informed by Levinas’s texts on Husserl and Heidegger, which condition the discovery and understanding of phenomenology in France in the 1930s (beginning with Sartre and Blanchot), starting out from Husserl’s critique of objectifying representation. This led – in Levinas’s *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology* (1930) – to the ‘minoring’ of the concept of reduction by virtue of the link between intuition and ‘all the vital forces defining the concrete existence of man’, confronted, in those zones of non-intentional opacity named sensibility or affectivity, with the *enigma of the invisible* constitutive of the ‘phenomenon’ – so many themes announcing the anti-Husserlian, Heideggerian and non-Heideggerian turning of French phenomenology. However, his critique could also have been informed by the critique of logicism attached to the name of Jean Cavaillès, a major philosopher and member of the Resistance, who was executed by the Nazis. During the years of World War II, Cavaillès denounced the *void of a radical abstraction* leading the scientific transformation of the philosophy of the positivists back to the bitterly contested aporia of neo-Kantianism. By eliminating predication anchored in apperception and the categorization of the sensory datum, the register of quantification, by definition, effectively leaves the precept of evidence and the return to things themselves with nothing to do. But then it is the *phenomeno-logical* distance that renders problematic those philosophies that appealed to the arguments either for analysis or for foundation in order to cross that distance. Recent attempts to refound cognitivism in the Husserlian noema are no exception to the aporia that was posed by Cavaillès in a fashion that was as rigorous as it was brutal. It is worth recalling that for the philosophical generation of the 1960s, who recognized themselves in the programme of a philosophy of the concept, this aporia effectively expressed and denounced the real logic of a *purely logical grammar* that cannot condition transcendental subjectivity without fissuring *a priori* its constituting power. ‘If transcendental logic truly founds logic, there is no absolute logic (that is to say, no logic regulating absolute subjective activity). If there is an absolute logic it can only draw its authority from itself and so is not transcendental.’ From this Cavaillès deduced that ‘if, by separating transcendental consciousness from a consciousness inserted in the world, the *epokhe* takes away from logical empiricism and from psychologism their naïve and slightly aggressive qualities, they remain subjacent to the development of phenomenology.’ Or, as Dominique Lecourt puts it, in its rupture with the psychologism of traditional logic ‘the Husserlian doctrine in its turn comes up against major difficulties which, in the final analysis, are the exact replica of those that logical positivists had endeavoured to circumvent.’ This lesson, we know, will preside over the anti-Husserlian/anti-*Krisis* tone of the last part of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*.

It is interesting to note, at the very least, that at the end of his critical traversing in and of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty reached the same conclusion, whilst making the point that because reflexive philosophy, in the trajectory that led from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* to Husserlian phenomenology, ‘to grasp the thing in itself immediately, [it] falls back into subjectivity
theorization of referentiality, semantically and tautologically (i.e. analytically) reinforced by the Fregean functional-linguistic turn, in order to escape it most effectively. It is in its understanding of this that the distance taken by The Visible and the Invisible with regard to the texts that precede it is marked, indebted as they were to the realism and the transcendental psychologicalism of Husserlian phenomenology. This led Merleau-Ponty to announce the ‘necessity of return to ontology’ wherein ‘ontology would be the elaboration of notions that must replace that of transcendental subjectivity, those of subject, object, meaning.’

On the cusp of the 1960s, Merleau-Ponty laid out a field of research whose condition of reality – in all the diversity of procedures and the multiplicity of discordances it would induce – was to extract philosophy from the magic triangle of Critique–Logical Positivism–Transcendental Phenomenology, a Bermuda Triangle in which it had for the most part breathed ever since the nineteenth century. Its realization, however, had to deal with the reality of the critical observation set out by Merleau-Ponty (‘the crisis has never been so radical’, he stated), along with the multiple and contradictory necessities borne by reopening the question of ontology under a Heideggerian influence twisted so as to grasp a highly improbable nexus between the ‘philosophy of structure’ and the analysis of the ‘flesh of the world’ – against Sartre’s Transcendence of the Ego. (In his 1937 article, Sartre had tied down the impersonal field of the transcendental in the auto-unification of an ‘absolute consciousness.’) We know how it will turn out: it is ontology that will have its presence of Being deconstructed by Derrida; un-said (dé-dite) as Otherwise than Being by Levinas; and un-done by the ‘action of the structure’ in the cross-over between Marxism and Lacanianism (Althusser’s epistemological circle). Because the critical distance from the transcendental-phenomenological and analytic-positivist traditions was not equally maintained, it was possible for some to respond to the question ‘what is contemporary philosophy, today?’ by opposing (with the more and more frequent possibility of combinations) post-analytic Anglo-Saxon philosophy to a post-phenomenological French philosophy. I will only remark that post-analytic and post-phenomenological philosophies (taking the latter in the rigorous sense of those philosophies at work since Husserl but against Husserl) are all worked on by a strange principle of telescoping between two traditionally antinomic positions: positivism and scepticism in the case of Austin, Searle, Cavell and what has been called the ‘sceptico-positivist becoming’ of the analysis of language; immanence and transcendence in the case of those philosophers who have invested the sites that, despite himself, Husserl had opened up beyond constitutable objectivity, so as to investigate them in the name of a ‘donation’ that, thanks to Heidegger, had turned out to be ‘absolute’ (absolute Gegebenheit), with the suspension of the appearance of phenomenality proper to being in its pure presentness-to-hand (vorhanden). This can be rendered, according to the formula of Jean-Luc Marion: so much reduction, so much donation.

Divested of its metaphysical ambiguity, the principle of principles stated by Husserl can in this way escape from the aporias of descriptive phenomenology by virtue of a reduction to the originary. This reduction permits the elaboration of a ‘new apophasis’ of the otherwise than being, by positing the donation-revelation of a phenomenality that is not phenominalized in the world but in itself, in the ‘invisible’ and the ‘unseen’. In this way, by subordinating ontology as a regional instance to phenomenology in the pure form of its deconstruction (which is not without its echoes with the Derridean project), French post-phenomenology inevitably developed a manner of negative phenomenology which renews the thinking of the divine Absolute that had presided, in Husserl himself, over the ultimate development of immanence in an ‘auto-transcendence’. (Merleau-Ponty denounced this ‘theology’ of consciousness which led Husserl back to the ‘threshold of dialectical philosophy.’) In this way, there would be less a turning, a theological détourment of French phenomenology, than there would be an auto-comprehension of the returning of immanence to the call of the primordial transcendence, which had never stopped haunting phenomenology. Thus, despite the apparently antithetical character of the philosophies of Michel Henry (an ontology of immanence purified of all outside) and Emmanuel Levinas (an ethics of absolute transcendence), faith would be conceived identically as the last resort of a post-historical time, in which it becomes practically indifferent whether one thinks of immanence as the foundation and the revelation of transcendence or of transcendence as the calling of immanence: the
religious *pathos* of phenomenology... ‘The reversal of values had to go so far’, concluded Deleuze at the end of his reflection on the labour of the ‘mole of the transcendent within immanence itself’: ‘we are no longer satisfied with thinking immanence as immanent to a transcendent; we want to think transcendence within the immanence, and it is from immanence that a breach is expected.’

Except that this breach comes from the *radical philosophical im-possibility* manifested by phenomenology with each new attempt to think donation as more originally unconditional in an endlessly expanding metaphorization, which by exhaustion and *reductio ad absurdum* brings the metaphysical and post-metaphysical Odyssey of transcendence in immanence full circle. Thus, French post-phenomenology demonstrates in its *negative* way the actuality and the necessity for new images of *non-post* (phenomenological/analytic/modern) thinking which configure, more and more frequently *from abroad*, the reality of ‘contemporary French philosophy’.

**68-Thought**

As ‘multiple’ as it may be, the first characteristic of this thinking is never to have compromised on the question of the immanence on which its *materialist* consistency and contemporaneity depend. It is for indissociably philosophical and political reasons that the ‘movement’ of May 1968 (in the long period of its retro-actions, still bitterly disputed today) crystallized for ‘subjects’ no longer sustained by a consciousness of self or any mention of an ‘object’, but rather *subjectivized* in a *constructive* relationship to a non-transcendent outside. The stake of this outside is the ‘event’ as the condition of reality of the production of the new. A non-transcendent outside: this is, of course, the point that conditions philosophies as different as those of a Foucault, a Badiou, a Deleuze or a Rancière – with their differences overlapping in the understanding of a falsely common notion that determines so many ‘thoughts of the event’ as ‘thoughts of immanence’.

I want to name and rename this thought ‘68-Thought’ because I *also persist* in thinking that it is distributed across a spectrum whose arc of forces unfolds, materially and ideally, between the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze (with Félix Guattari too) and Alain Badiou. Between these two, the absolute antagonism of thinking is motivated both openly and more secretly by what of 1968 is still an event for contemporary philosophy. (To fully convince yourself that this is the case, you have only to read the Preface of Alain Badiou’s *Logics of Worlds*, where he dramatizes the opposition between a ‘democratic materialism’ – whose progressive reverse takes the name ‘minoritarianism’ from Deleuze – and ‘the materialist dialectic’.) For Deleuze and Badiou share the decision to draw the consequences of a double philosophical impossibility: the impossibility of phenomenology, definitively ‘reduced’ to the archi-aesthetic of its ‘religious’ unthought; and the impossibility of logicism as the calculating disposition in which thought no longer thinks, and a rupture with the linguistic turn (the oscillation between positivism and scepticism, the calculus of propositions and the pragmatics of culture on which the linguistic turn runs aground demonstrates this). All this is carried out from the point of view of an ontology equally distinguished from any Heideggerian or hermeneutic conception, in order to develop an *immanent thinking of the multiple* that invests to their contemporary extremes of coherence the two major paradigms in which it operates: the ‘vitalist’ paradigm of open multiplicities and the ‘set theoretical’ paradigm of the pure multiple.

Now, it is still the thought of 68 that will constrain each of these systems to confront its constitutive limit: the pure expressionism of the becomings of the world of which the event is the immanent consequence, for Deleuze; and the pure constructivism of a subtraction from the world of which the event is the immanent principle, qua exception to its becoming, for Badiou. Historically overdetermined by the encounter with Guattari in the aftermath of 1968, for Deleuze it will be the constructivism of a denaturalized desire, of a desire-machine, of desiring-machines, which will assemble (*par agencements*) the expression–selection of the forces of the world by ‘cuts’ and ‘connections’ of fluxes so as to extract ‘revolutionary-becomings’. To respond on the terrain of the world to the proclaimed bio-materialism of the multitudes, Badiou’s *Logics of Worlds* will for its part apply itself to defining a logic of appearing that gives up the rigid opposition between event and situation (mediatized by a mysterious – but necessary – ‘nomination’) so as to express the existential nuances of a transformation placed in the present of a being-there-in-the-world by the subjectivating incorporation to the exception of a truth...

However, this polarization of the contemporary philosophical field, placed under the political sign of a constitutive relation to the necessities of the present, also inevitably signifies the *reactivation* and *over-problematization* of the relationship between philosophy and its ‘sensible’ other, which can no longer be simply said under the category of the ‘aesthetic’. This is because there is indeed *Discontent in Aesthetics*, as Ranciere’s appraisal has it – for philosophical
reasons that animate the tension between the contraries of the *aesthetic* (making sensible insensible forces in a constructivist installation: Deleuze and Guattari) and the *inaesthetic* (the transformation of the sensory into the event of the idea: Badiou); but also by virtue of the sensible and conceptual ‘dis-identification’ of contemporary art. There is the risk that the latter finishes by projecting art before philosophy. For is it not to contemporary art that it falls today to invent, in a *spectacular* fashion, counter-narratives of the relationship between life and thought, through the restaging of a sensibility knotted to the thinkable and to the words to say it? Such a claim would validate that very descriptive-genealogical allure of contemporary art, taken up here by Deleuzo-Rancièrean formulae that had originally aimed to express the immanence of philosophy to the description of the possibilities of a life that assures being of what (there) is to (be) sense(d) and to be thought. These are formulae that Badiou denounces to better identify art by the univocity of its most modernist of names, subtracted from the *mélange de genres*. To complete the regression: it remains only for us to mention the phenomenology of art that exhausted itself in celebrating the ‘absence opened’ in the visible/invisible ‘gift/donation of the sensible’ of the work of art – right up to Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Luc Nancy.

**Contemporary philosophy ‘after’ contemporary art.** This programme of research, which could become mine for ‘historico-speculative’ reasons that Peter Osborne would explain better than (but doubtless differently from) me, is not inscribed ‘on the edge of the void’ but on the extreme border and in a still very virtual zone of contemporary French philosophy – even when it is politically and ontologically redefined as I have tried to do today. Which is all the more reason to conclude that it concerns one of the most ‘active’ stakes for a *de-nationalized* and *in-disciplined* contemporary philosophy, such as that promoted by this Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy. With a contemporaneity that is never ‘given’ – but that has always to be constructed to express what matters.

**Based on a translation by Andrew Goffey**

**Notes**


4. Ibid., p. 385.


15. Ibid., pp. 165, 167 (Working Notes, January 1959).


Reading Schmitt geopolitically

Nomos, territory and Großraum

Stuart Elden

With the 2003 translation of The Nomos of the Earth, a rather different set of Carl Schmitt’s ideas became accessible to an anglophone audience. While previously his work had shaped debates on politics, the political, the friend/enemy distinction, the question of democracy and the sovereign decision, his ideas on international politics became available. A 2004 conference session led to a symposium in the Leiden Journal of International Law and an edited book on his ‘international political thought’, in which The Nomos of the Earth is hailed as a ‘missing classic’ of International Relations. In a 2008 book William Hooker describes Schmitt as ‘one of the most profound and most prolific theorists of international order in the twentieth century’, with The Nomos of the Earth likely to be guaranteed a place ‘in the canon of essential IR reading’. In another recent work we are told that Schmitt’s work ‘involves a complex theory of political territory’. Hooker also suggests that Schmitt’s ‘bold vision of the importance of spatial concepts in shaping the possibility of political order’ qualifies him as a geographer, and a couple of sessions at the Association of American Geographers have led to a forthcoming edited book. The interest in Schmitt, to an extent, parallels both the appropriations of Giorgio Agamben, whose own ideas draw greatly on Schmitt, particularly in terms of the ‘space of exception’, and the impact of Hardt and Negri’s Empire on the thinking of global order. Schmitt apparently can help us understand terrorism, the ‘war on terror’, responses in terms of security, the post-Cold War world, the European Union and globalization.

But if Schmitt is to be read geopolitically, then the same cautions that were made about reading him politically should be heeded. Schmitt’s complicity with National Socialism should never be forgotten; nor should it be thought that this was merely opportunistic, or unconnected to his work on international politics. As Mark Neocleous put it in this journal almost fifteen years ago, Schmitt was a ‘conservative revolutionary, fascist and an enemy of the Left’, and to turn him ‘into a debating adversary… is a dangerous political manoeuvre’. Here I want to make three moves in contesting the turn to Schmitt as a geopolitical theorist. First, I suggest that we cannot simply read The Nomos of the Earth alone, but must situate it both in its time and in relation to earlier parts of Schmitt’s work. Second, I interrogate what Schmitt says about the concept of territory, surely one of the notions central to any adequate theory of international politics or geopolitics, and, following the first point, relate it to the notion of Großraum. Third, and more briefly, I look at Schmitt’s understandings of global order and the shifts he saw in his own time. The argument is that Schmitt’s work on territory, the world and global order is both politically compromised and intellectually limited, and that this is important in terms of his worth to IR or political geography. Yet rather than dismiss Schmitt out of hand, I want to show why the work is compromised and how it is limited.

The Nomos of the Earth: resituating Schmitt

Until relatively recently the two works by Schmitt that have had most impact – at least in anglophone debates – have been Political Theology (1922) and The Concept of the Political (1932). While both pre-date his joining of the Nazi party they are works of that period in his intellectual development, deeply critical of the existing Weimar Republic. Many years later Schmitt published books that were direct reflections on these works: Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political (1963) and Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology (1970). While both these later works shed a great deal of light on his earlier ideas, nobody would turn to them alone for his views on political theology or the concept of the political. Yet there is a danger we do exactly that when we read The Nomos of the Earth. The Nomos of the Earth was
published in 1950, after the war and during the period of de-Nazification. Yet this was not the first time Schmitt had written on such topics. This book, like Theory of the Partisan and Political Theology II must be read as his postwar reflections on these themes, and to an extent as exculpations. Schmitt himself liked to think that The Nomos of the Earth was a crucial moment and the beginning of his postwar work: Müller tells the story that Schmitt asked that a collection of his political writings begin with this book. We should resist accepting this decision.

Although a long-term critic of the Treaty of Versailles, Schmitt turned to international issues in earnest around 1938. The year is not insignificant. It was connected both to his own position in the party, where debates on international politics were somewhat less policed, and events on the world stage. While Hitler had broken the terms of Versailles when he marched troops into the demilitarized Rhineland in 1936, and through rearmament, 1938 was when his expansionist aspirations became most evident. March of that year saw the Anschluß with Austria – also forbidden under Versailles – and in September the Munich conference signed over the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. Schmitt’s key work is Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung mit Interventionsverbot für raumfremde Mächte: Ein Beitrag zum Reichsbegriff im Völkerrecht, published in 1939. This book had its beginnings in a lecture Schmitt delivered in Kiel on 1 April 1939, two weeks after the invasion of the remains of Czechoslovakia. Translating this title into English is no easy task. International Law of Großraum-Ordering with a Prohibition on Intervention for Extra-Regional Powers: A Contribution to the Concept of Reich in International Law is probably as close as can be achieved, although this leaves two terms untranslated. Reich, empire, is well known, but in 1939 this could only have had one connotation. Großraum is much more of an issue. Literally it means ‘great-space’, but has a sense of a ‘sphere’ of influence, and ‘geopolitical space’ may be closer to the meaning. By the term Schmitt intends to grasp an area or region that goes beyond a single state (that is, a specific territory), to comprehend much larger scale spatial orderings, complexes or arrangements (VG 11–12). As Ulmen notes, the term emerged in economic thought first, to comprehend how the provision of key utilities such as gas and electricity could be integrated and provided as part of a Großraumwirtschaft, a large-scale spatial economy, rather than a Kleinraum, a small-space or small-scale organization. Before further discussion of Großraum, however, it is worth noting one other word in the title: raumfremde. A word combining the German words for ‘space’ and ‘stranger’ sounds rather sinister, but it really just means external or extra-regional. Schmitt’s particular focus is on countries outside the specific sphere of influence, the Großraum. These should have no right of intervention within it.

Schmitt’s classic example of a Großraum in the wider international political-economic sense is the Monroe doctrine, where the United States declared that the whole of the Americas was off-limits to European powers, in terms of both colonization and influence. Something similar happened in Eastern Europe after the end of the Second World War. This was not universalism, but competing spheres: what would be called a multipolar rather than unified or unipolar world. In the 1930s, though, his analysis of space and spatial politics was not simply for analytical reasons; but their legal context as part of his service of the regime. At this time, Schmitt did not simply analyse the existence of these regions, but actively campaigned for one. This was for a kind of German-dominated Mitteleuropa (VG 12). Mitteleuropa meant ‘middle’ or ‘central’ Europe; an extent of the continent exceeding Germany’s own boundaries where they would hold strategic domination. While this would, in practice, include German-speaking peoples, and was therefore tied to the presence of a Volk, it was not explicitly dependent on the Blut und Boden elements of racialist discourse. Rather, the basis for the argument was a legalistic account of land law, partly derived from John Locke’s argument about cultivation: adding value to the land gave a right of propriety ownership. As such, it came close to arguments made about ‘land without people’, which should be filled with people without – or without sufficient – land. While Schmitt only occasionally uses the vocabulary of Lebensraum, his ideas at this time were hardly critical of, and sometimes explicitly endorsed, National Socialism’s expansionist politics into the East (VG 23, 42–8).

The line drawn through Poland by the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact was one such division into regions (VG 47); the key point being that central and eastern Europe was Germany’s sphere of influence, and that other world powers should not be involved in the region. Schmitt later declares that this world war is a Raumordnungskrieg, a war for spatial ordering. In Schmitt’s analysis, the Großraum cannot be reduced to the Reich, but it is the Reich that will dominate it (VG 49, 67). If this means his position has some distance from a policy of explicit annexation, this is little comfort. While some parts of the lands seized by Hitler were annexed to a greater Reich, and some were
occupied, other countries were simply subjugated while retaining nominal independence. The establishment of the Reichskommissariat Ukraine and Ostland was part of a multifaceted policy of occupation. Similarly, for Schmitt, a Reich was more than a mere state, territorially confined, but exercised authority beyond any nominal boundaries. As Bendersky notes, press coverage of the time indicates that Schmitt was seen, at least by his enemies, as articulating the claims of the National Socialist movement. Indeed, later in April 1939 Hitler began to articulate ideas of a German-dominated Monroe doctrine for Europe, as a response to President Roosevelt’s demands on him to cease his territorial ambitions. Hitler declared that this was a European matter, off-limits for America. Schmitt was apparently warned from trying to assert his own prior articulation of such claims. Schmitt complied and clearly followed the tide of opinion in his attitude to Nazi foreign policy: he says some of his most explicitly supportive comments in 1941 in a piece added to the last edition of Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung (VG 64–73).

It has been suggested that Schmitt began The Nomos of the Earth between 1942 and 1945. This was after Operation Barbarossa, which Schmitt considered a disaster, and the entry of the Americans into the war. These events meant that it was increasingly clear that the tide had turned and that the German loss of the war only a matter of time. Although in 1942 Schmitt claimed that the entry of the USA into the war was not decisive, he acknowledged its seemingly unstoppable power in 1943. That in 1942 and after Schmitt was able to take positions that do not openly seem National Socialist tells us little. Indeed, there is an effective denial of the context of the writing and publication of The Nomos of the Earth since, as Zarmanian notes, ‘there is no mention of the Nazi occupation of much of Europe, let alone the horrors of the Holocaust, in the entire book.’

The key point to be stressed is that what Schmitt writes about international politics in the postwar book bears the boot-print of what he said about such issues in the context of National Socialist Germany.

Indeed, The Nomos of the Earth makes a number of similar moves to Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung in analytic terms, though apparently shorn of their political resonances. Schmitt suggests that for Locke, ‘the essence of political power, first and foremost, is jurisdiction over the land.’ He reinforces this by quoting Locke to the effect that ‘government has a direct jurisdiction only over the land’ (NE 18/47). His other key source is Immanuel Kant’s argument about the distinction between Obereigentum and Landes-

herrschaft, supreme proprietorship and land-rulership, which Kant links to the Latin terms dominium and imperium. The first set of terms invoke private property; the second public property (NE 17/46). Individuals can own land; states control territory. Schmitt reminds us that the Greek word nemein, from which nomos is derived, means both ‘to divide’ and ‘to pasture’ (NE 40/70). Hannah Arendt has similarly noted the relation between ‘law and hedge in the word nomos’, stressing the relation between law and boundary line or zone, and pointing out that ‘the Greek word for law, nomos, derives from nemein, which means to distribute, to possess (what has been distributed) and to dwell.’ The legal is thus tied directly to the land. As Schmitt continues: ‘Nomos is the measure by which the ground and soil of the earth [Grund und Boden der Erde] in a particular order is divided and situated; it is also the form of political, social, and religious order determined by this process. Here, measure, order, and form constitute a spatially concrete unity’ (NE 40/70).

**Territory**

In his pre-1938 writings, Schmitt says relatively little about territory. He seemingly saw the relation of territory to the state to be essential, but equally unproblematic. As he says in The Concept of the Political:

The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political. According to modern linguistic usage, the state is the political status of an organised people in an enclosed territorial area (territori-aler Geschlossenheit). This is nothing more than a general description (Umschreibung), not a conceptual determination (Begriffsbestimmung) of the state.

While often reduced to simply the first line, this is an important formulation of which two things need to be underscored. First, that the territorial determination is inherent to Schmitt’s understanding of the state. But, second, that this is insufficient. It is merely a paraphrase or circumlocution, an analytic judgement, an explication of terms, rather than the synthetic work that goes beyond this and that Schmitt believes is necessary. In Political Theology he makes another oft-quoted claim, but one which is similarly frequently reduced to a single sentence:

All central concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts. This is not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawmaker – but also because of their systematic structure, the
recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of those concepts.\textsuperscript{35}

There are two aspects to the claim being made here. While the first part – ‘not only’ – is certainly important and worthy of investigation, the second part – ‘but also’ – is much more challenging. Political theory puts the sovereign in a privileged position, just as theology did God: that much is straightforward. But what is it about the systematic structure of state-theoretical concepts that owes a debt to theology, even if this is masked through a process of secularization? The point is not to wish to restore the theological, but rather to note what has been transformed in the process of secularization. To what extent is this the case with the notion of territory?

Schmitt’s analysis in The Nomos of the Earth covers a long historical period. His suggestion is that modern territorial politics emerges, in part, as a consequence of the conquest of the new world and the different sense of the world this gave. Before this time, there were empires (Reiche) that could be understood as Großräume, but they lacked any kind of order, because the idea of the earth as a whole, of a common space (gemeinsamen Raume), and its overall spatial order was lacking (NE 25/55). As he says in the opening lines of part II:

No sooner had the form [Gestalt] of the earth emerged as a real globe [Globus] – not just sensed as myth, but apprehensible as fact and measurable as space – than there arose a wholly new and hitherto unimaginable problem: the spatial ordering of the entire earth [Erdenballes] in terms of international law. The new global image [globale Raum-bild] required a new global spatial order. This was the situation resulting from the circumnavigation of the earth and the great discoveries of the 15th and 16th centuries. (NE 54/86)

There are a number of issues at stake here. Schmitt is suggesting that it was only with the explorations of the late fifteenth century that the earth as a globe actually became tangible. Of course, even the Ancient Greeks knew the earth was a sphere, but it was not demonstrably shown through circumnavigation until Magellan’s voyage of the early sixteenth century. At the same time, a number of scientific techniques were developed to map and survey the lands and seas encountered. This is the basis for the notion of measurability Schmitt suggests here. These had been anticipated by decisions such as the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, which had proposed a line being drawn from pole to pole through the Atlantic to divide Portuguese and Spanish claims to the new world (NE 56–7/88–9). The ‘global image’ he talks of is, literally, a ‘global space-picture’; and one of the words he uses for ‘earth’ is the ‘earth-as-ball’. Throughout The Nomos of the Earth, Schmitt outlines the ways in which political theory and nascent international law provided a basis for such an understanding to arise.

Schmitt sees a primitive relation between Ortung and Ordnung, placing and ordering (see VG 81). Thus political order is always a geopolitical order. This appears to be valuable to IR, whose neglect of the
spatial aspects of its questions is well known, but is superficial at best. Schmitt tends to work as if all ages have operated with a sense of territory and spatial ordering, just in different ways, rather than tracing the emergence of the categories themselves. Schmitt, as with most accounts, sees the conquest of the new world and the religious wars in Europe following the Reformation as the basis for the emergence of a distinctively modern political-legal understanding of the relation between space and politics. But there is a frustrating lack of detail and textual specificity to his arguments. Indeed, given his suggestion of the secularization of the theological, it is striking how little attention he pays to the theological arguments about the division between secular and temporal power, and how theorists of temporal power began to articulate the spatially limited and circumscribed extent of political rule as opposed to universalist aspirations. This spatial extent became both the object and the possibility of what was later understood as the idea of sovereignty. Nor, surprisingly for a legal theorist, does Schmitt pay attention to the impact of the rediscovery and reinterpretation of Roman law on political theory, especially for the relation between territory and jurisdiction, in the fourteenth century. He takes up the story with the more familiar sixteenth- and seventeenth-century figures of de Vitoria, Grotius and Pufendorf, rather than returning to Bartolus and Baldus. While understandable in terms of his focus on international law, and the relation between the two spatial orders of firm land and free sea, this obscures the emergence of the modern relation between a state and its territory. Schmitt contends that if the focus is

isolated, sovereign, territorial states [souveränen Flächenstaaten], then the facts of the matter are clear: the territory of the state [Staatsgebiet] is the theatre of rule [Schauplatz des Imperiums]; with a territorial change [Gebietswechsel], the agent of rule relinquishes the theatre and another sovereign agent appears on the stage. (NE 166/194)

For Schmitt, the complexities are in the international dimensions. The simplicity of his formulation obscures a lot; the English translation even more. His understanding of territory is far too static, and seemingly ahistorical. Territory, for Schmitt, remains a bounded space under the control of a group; a quasi-Weberian definition that may provide the terms to be analysed, but is hardly a theory in itself. From Schmitt’s time or before, the work of Otto Gierke, the Carlyle brothers and even his fellow National Socialist Otto Brunner are more informative for more properly historical conceptual inquiries. Perhaps most intriguingly, Schmitt uses a range of German words for his concept of ‘territory’. He talks, for instance, of ‘the new territorial order [Flächenordnung] of the state’ (NE 96/126), one which he later glosses as ‘spatially self-contained, impermeable, unburdened with the problem of estate, ecclesiastical, and creedal civil wars’ (NE 99/129). Territoriale is usually used as an adjective; like Weber he uses the term Gebiet, often in the phrase Staatsgebiet, or state-territory; here we see the use of Flächenordnung; and he sometimes uses the earlier term Landeshoheit, which was the German translation of jus territorialis in the treaties of Westphalia. This shows that, for him, at least four terms have a sense close to the English ‘territory’. Historically and politically much more needs to be said about these concepts and vocabulary, and how they relate to earlier terms that demarcate the relation between place and power. But Schmitt is frustratingly imprecise: reason enough to be cautious about appropriating what he does say, especially when mediated through translation. Hooker suggests that ‘territory is as close as we come to a foundation in Schmitt’s thought, and the idea of trying to situate real politics without it seems absurd and fanciful.’ But it is not at all clear that Schmitt means the cohesion that the collapsing of these terms in English translation implies. He makes the valid claim that ‘space, soil, land, field, area, terrain, territory and district [Raum, Boden, Land, Feld, Fläche, Gelände, Gebiet, Bezirk]’ are not simply terminological nuances and interchangeable terms (VG 76), but never spells out the differences or accounts for their conceptual histories. He also sometimes runs the different concepts together to strong rhetorical effect. At one point in 1939, for instance, he suggests that legal doctrine’s idea of a Raumtheorie actually implied the very opposite of a

concrete representation of space and grasped land, soil, territory, state-territory [Land, Boden, Territorium, Staatsgebiet] indifferently as a ‘space’ in the sense of an empty flat area with added depth and linear borders [einer leeren Flächen- und Tiefendimension mit Lineargrenzen]. (VG 16)

Schmitt wants to rescue the idea of territory – and more explicitly Großraum – from a ‘mathematically-neutral, empty concept of space’ (VG 14, 75, 76, 79). Such an argument concerning space and territory has been made elsewhere. Yet while for Schmitt this is because it is neglectful of a spiritual, Völkish sense of place (VG 77), other accounts see this more powerfully as being complicit with the calculative strategies of the state and capitalism.
A New World Order?

If the transitions Schmitt alludes to gave birth to the ‘modern’ spatial order, he is clear that in the twentieth century there was yet another transition. This is the key claim of *The Nomos of the Earth*, that a new spatial-political order is taking shape; and there is a need to understand it. It is here that the concepts of *Großraum* and territory are disassociated. Within a *Großraum*, Schmitt now claims, dominant powers exercise influence, but do not seek to incorporate the land as with previous colonization. The first step, Schmitt suggests, is that the dominant power is not seeking the territorial annexation (*territoriale Annexation*) of the controlled state, but rather to absorb it into its spatial sphere of influence, its *spatiale Bereich*, spatial field or area, which Schmitt calls its Raumhoheit, its spatial supremacy (NE 225–6/252–3).

The external, emptied space [äußere, entleerte Raum] of the controlled state’s territorial sovereignty [*territoriale Souveränität*] remains inviolate, but the functional [sachliche] content of this sovereignty is changed by the guarantees of the controlling power’s economic *Großraum*. This is how the modern type of intervention treaties came about. Political control and domination were based on intervention, while the territorial status quo remained guaranteed. The controlling state had the right to protect independence or private property, the maintenance of order and security, and the preservation of the legitimacy or legality of a government. Simultaneously, on other grounds, it was free, at its own discretion, to interfere in the affairs of the controlled state. Its right of intervention was secured by footholds, naval bases, refuelling stations, military and administrative outposts, and other forms of cooperation, both internal and external. The controlling state’s right of intervention was recognized in treaties and agreements, so that, in a strictly legal sense, it was possible to claim that this was no longer intervention. (NE 225/252)

Schmitt, then, is suggesting that there is a fragmentation of how state control of space is understood. On the one hand, there is the preservation of existing territorial divisions, fixing of boundaries and the reinforcement of settlements. In 1950, with the UN Charter only five years old, this would seem to make sense. It was the culmination of previous attempts to fix boundaries in Europe, such as the Locarno treaty of twenty years before. But Schmitt is simultaneously saying that this space, while fixed in terms of its external limits, is emptied out, hollowed out. Internally, the idea that a state is sovereign within its boundaries – the late medieval notion of *Rex est imperator in regno suo*, that the king is the emperor within his own kingdom – is dissolved. A situation that was wrestled from the Pope only with struggle both in practice and in ideas is no more. Economically, at least, sovereignty is worth little, even if it appears that the ‘territorial status quo’ is preserved. Schmitt proposes that in the early modern period the struggle was over the enactment of the principle *cuius regio, eius religio* (NE 99/128) – to whom the region, the religion; a principle of religious freedom put forward at the 1555 Diet of Augsburg – and that the secular equivalent of this was *cuius regio, eius economica* – to whom the region, the economy. A fundamental aspect of a sovereign state is not simply to decide on ‘such concepts as independence, public order, legality, and legitimacy’, but also on ‘its constitution of property and economy’ (NE 226/252–3). Today this has been reversed to *cuius economica, eius regio* (NE 285/308), economic power gives regional control.

Economic power in that fundamental sense is no longer an option for most states. Religious struggles give birth to modern politics; economics is the central decision of a political regime; now politics becomes reduced as economics is predetermined.

As Schmitt suggests:

Territorial sovereignty [*territoriale Souveränität*] was transformed into an empty space for socio-economic processes. The external territorial form [*territorial Gebietsbestand*] with its linear boundaries was guaranteed, but not the substance of territorial integrity [*territorienalen Integrität*], its social and economic content. The space of economic power determined the sphere [Bereich] of international law. (NE 226/252)

If it is true that individuals own land but states control territory, then it is the Reich that will dominate the *Großraum*. In the immediate postwar period, this may make a lot of sense of the relative spheres of the USA and the USSR. Indeed, in one of the many seemingly concluding statements of the book, Schmitt mentions the London Charter of 8 August 1945 as a moment when ‘East and West finally came together and agreed. Criminalization now took its course’ (NE 255/280). What was this charter and why was this date significant? The charter was that setting up the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal for war crimes; on the same day the Soviet Union declared war on Japan, invading Manchuria.

But the idea of competing *Großräumen* with their own rules and enforcements needs to be much more thoroughly interrogated if it is to help understand the post-Cold War period, where such understandings have become more truly global. As I have argued at length elsewhere, the term used in the UN Charter,
‘territorial integrity’, has much more generally been split apart: territorial preservation seen as non-negotiable; territorial sovereignty as entirely contingent. The US-led interventions in 2001 and 2003 took the sovereignty of Iraq and Afghanistan as subject to intervention because of their failure to meet particular codes of behaviour, yet subsequently the polities themselves were to be preserved at all costs. In particular, questioning their spatial constitution was entirely off the table, even as their sovereignty remains profoundly compromised through occupation. Similar situations can be found in Kosovo and Sierra Leone with the notion of ‘humanitarian intervention’. Indeed, it was long a rhetorical trope of Tony Blair to insist on the territorial integrity of places he was about to bomb. Yet for the Schmitt of The Nomos of the Earth there is no clear sense of why any of this might be happening, what it produces and to what extent we should find it worthy of embrace or critique. Schmitt sees the ‘plurality of großrer Räume’ or the global spatial order of a unitary dominated world [einer einheitlich beherrschten Welt]’ as ‘the great antithesis of world politics’, as if these were the only possibilities (NE 220/247). Schmittian accounts today founder on similar rocks. Are different spheres of US, European, Chinese and Russian Großräumen really to be preferred to a unipolar world?  

**Blank space: IR and geopolitics**

Schmitt is more geopolitical than most International Relations theorists. He undoubtedly says more about territory – historically, conceptually and politically – than most accounts of the international order. But these are hardly major challenges. He explicitly acknowledges the influence of geographers on his work, singling out the imperialist figure of Halford Mackinder, who proposed the heartland theory of global control (NE 5/37). His debt to Friedrich Ratzel, the writer of the 1901 essay ‘Lebensraum’, is also important. It would be a regressive step indeed if Schmitt’s use of Mackinder or Ratzel somehow became an influence on modern political geography, or if his work proved to be the basis of the injection of a political-spatial sensibility which International Relations so sorely needs. If such themes deserve attention, as they surely do, then a dialogue between these disciplines might be a better start. If the search is outside, then other theorists such as Lefebvre and Foucault have much more to offer. Foucault, especially in recently published lectures, offers much more by way of a historical and conceptual purchase on territory; Lefebvre enables a much more progressive understanding of the political and economic aspects of such questions. But the history of the concept of territory remains to be written. The one area where Schmitt’s work here may be worth a little more interrogation is his use of a broader vocabulary than simply the German Territorium, but the range of complicated terms including Gebiet, Land and words derived from Fläche.

To what extent the concept exceeds the practice is debatable. In this regard we should also remember that the notion of territory is frequently subsumed in his work into a wider Großraum, for which we lack a simple English equivalent. If somewhat obscured in the postwar The Nomos of the Earth, the lineage of this term is essential to bear in mind. Even in his later work this remains the dominant concept for world-ordering. Yet here again, the gains from Schmitt seem minimal. In fact, one of the reasons that Schmitt seems so amenable to IR is that he repeats, anticipates and lends a spurious credibility to so many of the tired clichés of that discipline, concerning, for example, the Westphalian system and the challenges to it today. Most fundamentally, it must be remembered that Schmitt is not only offering something approaching a theory of geopolitical space, but was once a passionate advocate of a German Großraum. As much as he tries to obscure the explicit political context in which its ideas were forged, The Nomos of the Earth is a deeply reactionary text. He must always be read politically, and, if he is to be appropriated for insights into international relations or political geography, geopolitically. This is a deliberately chosen term. Over the past couple of decades, attempts have been made to reappropriate the notion of ‘geopolitics’, with its imperial connotations, as a ‘critical geopolitics’. But just as Mackinder, Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellén, Karl Haushofer and others need careful historical, contextual and political readings in such a project, in order to recognize the limits of their work and the reactionary politics that accompanies them, so too does Schmitt. Hooker makes the point that Schmitt is often characterized as ‘an arcane and reductive Nazi who has little to offer current debates’, and that ‘the invocation of Schmitt is dangerous, seductive and destructive’. He claims that both cannot be true. Yet it is entirely possible that they are. While his work does have little to offer, it is precisely because he appears to be useful that he is so dangerous. The seductiveness is that he seems to transcend his circumstances and political views, when remaining deeply rooted in them. The anointing of Schmitt as a geopolitical theorist with contemporary relevance is thus a serious error, intellectually and politically.
Notes


5. Hooker, Carl Schmitt’s International Thought, p. 196.


8. Mark Neocleous, ‘Friend or Enemy? Reading Schmitt Politically’, Radical Philosophy 79, September/October 1996, pp. 13–23, p. 21. See also the more documentary account in Jan-Werner Müller, A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought, Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 2003. To answer the obvious charge that this is a bit rich coming from someone so indebted to Heidegger, see the analysis in Stuart Elden, Speaking against Number: Heidegger, Language and the Politics of Calculation, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006, which tries to suggest that what insights he has can only be used having passed through detailed textual, contextual and political analysis.


13. Müller, A Dangerous Mind, p. 87.


20. This had been the case in the 1920s in his analysis of the Rhine region. See Schmitt, Positionen und Begriffe, pp. 26–33, 97–108.


22. The classic text on this was Hans Grimm, Volk ohne Raum, Albert Langen, Munich, 1926.


26. Ibid., pp. 258–9. For a detailed discussion, see Lothar Gruchmann, Nationalsozialistische Grossraumordnung:
32. See also NE 171/199 where this is related to state and colonial territory. See Immanuel Kant, The Philosophy of Law, trans. W. Hastie, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1887, p. 182.
34. Schmitt, Der Begriff des Politischen, p. 20; Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, p. 19, translation modified.
35. Schmitt, Politische Theologie, p. 43; Political Theology, p. 36, translation modified.
36. Baldus de Ubaldis is never mentioned; the one substantive reference to Bartolus of Sassoferrato (NE 33–4/64) is misleading.
37. In Die Diktatur von den Anfängen des modernen Souveränitätsgedankens, bis zum proletarischen Klassenkampf, Duncker & Humblot, Munich, 1921, p. 190, Schmitt describes the ‘state of emergency’ in terms reminiscent of Weber, as establishing ‘an unconstitutional situation for a determined territory [ein bestimmtes Gebiet]’.
41. Schmitt also blames the interwar politics of the allies at Yalta for Czechoslovakia’s ending up in the ‘eastern Großraum’, at NE 221 n1/248 n10.
44. For an excellent recent study, see Gerry Kearns, Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009.
45. The explicit references in NE 56/88, 258/283 are rather muted. See, though, VG 76, 78.
46. See, for example, Hooker, Carl Schmitt’s International Thought, pp. 69–101.
Marx’s Eurocentrism
Postcolonial studies and Marx scholarship
Kolja Lindner

The English jackasses need an enormous amount of time to arrive at an even approximate understanding of the real conditions of … conquered groups.

Karl Marx, 1879

A great deal of ink has already been spilled on the question of Marx’s Eurocentrism. The debate turns on his relationship to colonialism, the conception of Asian societies which informs it, and his theory of social formations and social progress. Special attention has been paid to Marx’s 1853 article on British colonialism in India. In the field of Marxian studies per se, approaches to the subject have been either apologetic or strictly philological. A few exceptions aside, comprehensive treatments of the theme written from an anti-authoritarian (herrschaftskritisch) standpoint are non-existent, and neither does there exist a systematic examination of Eurocentrism in Marx’s work as a whole. The chief contribution of Marx scholarship here resides in the ongoing publication of the scholarly edition of his writings, which provides the basis for a balanced discussion of the subject.

The question has also been addressed in postcolonial studies. Here, critical voices dominate. Marx is said to have defended a ‘Eurocentric model of political emancipation that consistently ignores the experiences of colonized subjects in non-Western societies’ and to have ‘failed to develop his studies of India and Africa into a fully elaborated analysis of imperialism’; his analyses neglect ‘disenfranchised groups such as colonised subjects’. Edward Said, whose study of Orientalism has become a classic in the field, goes so far as to accuse Marx of a racist orientalization of the non-Western world. There accordingly exists a powerful tendency in postcolonial studies to dismiss Marx as a Eurocentric or even Orientalist thinker, the author of a philosophy of history.

Against this backdrop, I attempt, in the pages that follow, to contribute to a dialogue between these two strands of Marxian studies, on the one hand, and postcolonial studies, on the other. I begin by considering the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism, concretizing it in an analysis of one of Marx’s sources, François Bernier’s Indian travelogue. My aim is to show, among other things, what Marxian studies can learn from postcolonial studies. I also trace Marx’s treatment of ‘non-Western’ societies through his life’s work, in so far as it is available to us. (In Marx, and therefore in the present essay as well, ‘non-Western’ is used as a synonym for ‘precolonial’ or ‘precapitalist’.) It will appear that Marx’s work evolves in this respect. In sum, he gradually comes to reject Eurocentric assumptions. Thus this article also constitutes an objection to the often hasty dismissal of Marx in postcolonial studies.

Marx’s abiding theoretical preoccupation with various (non-European) forms of (pre-capitalist) land ownership plays a particularly important role in his progressive abandonment of Eurocentrism. Since Marx himself never journeyed to the regions of the non-Western world he wrote about, and never carried out systematic empirical research on them, his knowledge derives in part from massively Eurocentric sources, above all British, such as travel writing, parliamentary reports and theoretical treatises. On the view prevailing in this literature, there was no private land ownership in Asia. This is a false, Orientalist notion that has since been thoroughly discredited by historians. Charting Marx’s gradual turn from Eurocentrism therefore also involves determining the degree to which he freed himself from these notions, the stock-in-trade of ‘the English jackasses’.

The concept of Eurocentrism
It makes sense, given our objectives here, to define Eurocentrism. It has four dimensions:

1. A form of ethnocentrism distinguished not only by the presumption that Western societies are superior, but also by the attempt to justify this presumption
in rational, scientific terms. This world-view goes hand in hand with the aspiration to subject the whole world to such rationality. The discourse in question treats Western Europe as the political, economic, theoretical and, sometimes, racial centre of the world.

2. An ‘Orientalist’ way of looking at the non-Western world which has less to do with the real conditions prevailing there than with what Said calls the ‘European Western Experience’. The world as a whole is imagined from a regional standpoint. The measure used in compiling impressions of the extra-European world conveyed by diverse genres of writing is furnished not by reality, but by a Western European conceptual system. There emerges, as an expression of economic, political, cultural and military domination, an institutionally sanctioned geopolitical discourse which creates these ‘other’ regions of the world in the first place (‘the Orient’ in Said’s analysis; ‘Asia’ in Marx’s) by means of homogenization, co-optation, and so forth. Their inhabitants are transformed into distorted mirror images of the European self-image.

3. A conception of development which by means of a ‘false universalism … uncritically makes the cultural and historical patterns of capitalist Western Europe the established standards for all human history and culture’. With this in mind, it is sometimes taken for granted, or even demanded, that the whole world should develop, or be developed, on the Western European model.

4. Effacement of non-European history, or, more precisely, of its influence on European development. What is known as ‘global history’ seeks to counteract this by focusing on the interaction between different regions of the world. It thus denies Europe an exclusive position, transforming or ‘provincializing’ its universalistic conceptions with the help of particularistic history. The premiss here is that ‘ideological and political conflict had… achieved a global scale, before economic uniformities were established across much of the world’. Thus the suppression of the ‘interweaving of the European with the extra-European world’ – that is, of the ‘history of [their] intertwining’ – can be regarded as Eurocentric.

A thin line separates the first two dimensions of Eurocentrism from racism. The border is crossed when the ethnocentric assumptions are articulated in a discourse about essential differences. The other two dimensions generally culminate in an authoritarian universalization of the particular.

**Marx’s 1853 essays on India**

Marx produced his famous essays on India in the framework of a series of articles that he wrote in the early 1850s for the *New York Daily Tribune* (*NYDT*). One hallmark of these essays is Marx’s perception of India’s social structure as static. India’s climatic conditions, on his analysis, necessitated an artificial irrigation system, which, as a result of the low level of social development and the sheer size of the country, could be created and maintained only by a central state authority. It was characterized by a unity between agriculture and manufactures (handicrafts) that limited the development of productivity. Such a system discouraged the emergence of urban centres. Marx regards the structure and isolation of India’s village communities as ‘the solid foundation of oriental despotism’ and of the country’s ‘stagnatory life’. Finally, he proceeds on the assumption that the state, in this ‘Asiatic society’, is ‘the real landlord’ thanks to complicated tax and property laws.

Marx’s condemnation of British colonialism is based on this conception of the structure of Indian society. It is ambivalent: England, he says, ‘has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying, the material foundations of Western society in Asia’. Manifestly, he sets out from the premiss that colonialism has promoted India’s development. The consolidation of the Indian railway system, on his analysis, could facilitate further development of the overtaxed irrigation system.

He further assumes that the introduction of steam-driven machinery or scientific methods of production would induce the separation of agriculture and manufactures in the country. Moreover, India’s integration into the world market, Marx says, would rescue it from its isolation. Finally, British rule, in his estimation, has led to the emergence of a system based on private land ownership. In short, the economic bases of the Indian village system are disintegrating, and colonial intervention has led to ‘the only social revolution ever heard of in Asia’.

To be sure, Marx’s ambivalent picture of colonialism includes the idea that India can profit from technological transfer only on condition that it cast off the colonial yoke, or that ‘in Great Britain itself the now ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat’. Furthermore, Marx by no means ignores the colonial power’s selfish approach to the development of productive forces in India or the destructive aspects of colonialism. It remains the case, on his view, that ‘whatever may have been the crimes
of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution;\textsuperscript{20} in other words, in creating ‘the material basis of the new world’.\textsuperscript{21}

Marx’s articles on India are Eurocentric in all of the senses defined above. In the first place, they one-sidedly treat Europe as a society with a superior technology, infrastructure, legal system, and so on. In this connection, Marx attaches special importance to private land ownership. His assumption is that European property relations make social progress possible in consequence of class divisions and, thus, the class conflicts that go hand in hand with them. The situation in India, by contrast, is marked, in his view, by despotism and stagnation. This description of Indian village communities is deceptive, in so far as it presents them as stagnant, self-enclosed entities which, isolated and lacking all communication with the outside world, stood over against a king who was sole owner of all land; it masks the fact that these communities were themselves traversed by class divisions. There was, moreover, unmistakable development of the productive forces as well as commodity production in precolonial India, whose social structure must therefore be regarded as conflictual and dynamic.\textsuperscript{22} In line with the third dimension of Eurocentrism, Marx elevates a particularistic development to the rank of the universal: the creation of a ‘Western social order in Asia’ is, he assumes, a necessary station on the path to the creation of a classless society, a path he conceives as human ‘destiny’.\textsuperscript{23} This is problematic not only because India’s indigenous potential for development is not taken into account, but also because its social structure is perceived exclusively as a barrier to progress or, at any rate, as standing in need of radical transformation. Moreover, the overestimation of the development of Western Europe is predicated on the highly speculative assumption that European conditions could be transferred intact to India and would thus serve as the point of departure for a revolutionary movement there. Marx fails to see that, in international capitalism, the different regions of the world are integrated into the world market asymmetrically, or are confronted with different possibilities and perspectives for development.\textsuperscript{24} It is less a question of ‘an inevitable transformation’ of pre-capitalist modes and their transformation by capitalist relations’ than of ‘an articulation between different modes of production, structured in some relation of dominance’.\textsuperscript{25}

With respect to the fourth dimension of Eurocentrism, Marx’s articles on India must be regarded as Eurocentric in the sense brought out by students of global history. While it is true that Marx emphasizes the interaction between different regions of the world, his analyses are confined to the economic sphere. Moreover, they are, with rare exceptions, one-sided, since, as a rule, he is interested only in the effects that integration into the world market has on non-European countries, not on the European countries themselves. Intertwined histories outside the economic sphere, as elaborated in the Indian case by, say, Chakrabarty, are quite simply nowhere to be found Marx.\textsuperscript{26}

**Marx’s Eurocentric sources: François Bernier**

In what follows, I pay particular attention to the second dimension of Eurocentrism, ‘Orientalizing the Oriental’.\textsuperscript{27} Marx takes over the Eurocentrism of his sources without reflection. Critical examination of those sources is a task that Marx scholarship has, generally speaking, neglected, a deficiency particularly conspicuous when it comes to travel writing, about which Said says: ‘From travelers’ tales, and not only from great institutions like the various India companies, colonies were created and ethnocentric perspectives secured.’\textsuperscript{28} Discussion of Marx’s source material, even by writers concerned with his Eurocentrism, has hitherto focused on his use of classical political philosophy and political economy.\textsuperscript{29} This is puzzling, not only because of the significance of travel writing for the development of the Western imagination, but also because Marx writes, in a 2 June 1853 letter to Engels (three weeks before the *NYDT* published the first of his articles on India), that ‘on the subject of the growth of eastern cities one could hardly find anything more brilliant, comprehensive or striking than *Voyages contenant la description des états du Grand Mogol*, etc. by old François Bernier (for 9 years Aurangzeb’s physician).’\textsuperscript{30} It is, moreover, this source which Marx takes as justification for his conclusion that the non-existence of private property in Asia is ‘the real *clé*, even to the eastern heaven’.\textsuperscript{31}

Finally, Engels, in his response to Marx four days later, himself cites Bernier in defence of the thesis that the non-existence of private ownership of land is due to the climate and to soil conditions,\textsuperscript{32} a thesis that Marx adopts, in part verbatim, in his first article on India. I shall consider Bernier’s travelogue in some detail, not only because it has so far been neglected by Marx scholars, but also because such analysis offers, in my view, an example of the way that Marxian studies could apply insights gleaned from postcolonial studies to a comprehensive study of Marx’s Eurocentrism partially based on a critical examination of his sources.

François Bernier (1620–1688) was a French doctor and physicist who spent a total of twelve years in...
India. After returning to France in 1670, he wrote an influential travel narrative that was translated into several European languages and saw several editions.\textsuperscript{33} It was one of the main sources of the widespread belief, shared by Western thinkers such as Montesquieu and Hegel, in the existence of something known as ‘Oriental despotism’.\textsuperscript{34} Bernier contended that, in India, only the monarchs owned the land, deriving the revenues they lived on from it.

The king is sole proprietor of all the land in his kingdom. Whence, by a certain necessity, the fact that capital cities such as Delhi or Agra derive their income almost entirely from the militia and are accordingly obliged to follow the king when he leaves for the countryside for a certain period.\textsuperscript{35}

This thesis is an Orientalist projection par excellence. It is rooted in a subjective impression of the superiority of the European social and legal order and has nothing to do with real conditions in India. The ‘jackass’, even if he is French rather than English in the case to hand, has not arrived at even an ‘approximate’ understanding of ‘real conditions’: numerous historical analyses have established that, in precolonial India, land ownership was not centralized and landed property could be alienated – that is, that private land ownership existed.\textsuperscript{36} The denial of private land ownership is only one aspect of the Orientalist discourse that traverses Bernier’s travel account from one end to the other. His description of superstition in India is another. Bernier depicts it as a determining feature of Indian society: Indians consult astrologers, he says, ‘in all their undertakings’\textsuperscript{37}. Stuurman argues that this is not a ‘straightforward affirmation of European superiority’, inasmuch as Bernier also rails against European superstition and makes fun of Western missionaries.\textsuperscript{38} I would counter that Bernier’s Orientalism makes itself felt nonetheless. In the passage just cited, for example, he does not attribute superstition to certain social circles alone, inevitably leaving European readers with the impression that Indian society in general is characterized by a mental darkness distinguishing it from its European counterpart. Marx’s depiction of India as a stagnant country incapable of progress, whose modernity does not stem from internal factors, has one of its sources here.

Bernier’s text displays other Orientalist features. I agree with Stuurman that, although \textit{race} is not a structuring category in his travelogue, whiteness is an omnipresent subtext in it. Bernier’s descriptions often spill over into manifest essentialization. Thus we read that Indian craftsmen are ‘extremely lazy by nature’,\textsuperscript{39} that a majority of Indians are ‘of a slow, indolent disposition’,\textsuperscript{40} and so on. Such essentialization goes hand in hand with typically Orientalist outbursts of enthusiasm about ‘this little earthly paradise, the Indies’.\textsuperscript{41} Bernier does not, however, merely acquit himself of these mandatory Orientalist exercises; he sets himself apart from the Orientalist crowd by announcing that he knows no Sanskrit.\textsuperscript{42} The grounds for his broad generalizations about India thus remains rather obscure; they are not, in any case, based on native sources. In the context of the nascent European colonization of India, the objective of which was to bend the colonized regions to European interests, this is hardly surprising. We must here take into account the tendency, established by postcolonial studies, to treat classical autochthonous texts with suspicion as sources of knowledge, relying instead on one’s own observations, on the assumption that ‘the Orient’ is incapable of speaking for itself.\textsuperscript{43} It is an integral part of the comprehensive colonialist undertaking.

Another point in Bernier’s narrative that has received some attention in postcolonial studies should be mentioned here: Western discourses about the burning alive of widows in India. Without trying to justify this custom, Gayatri Spivak has shown how these discourses limit subaltern women’s capacity to speak and act.\textsuperscript{44} One can indeed see, in Bernier’s travelling, how his intervention in favour of a widow menaced with immolation is not only of a piece with the depiction of her as hysterical or pathological, thereby constricting subaltern female agency, but is also bound up with a denunciation of the ‘barbaric customs’ of this ‘idolatrous people’.\textsuperscript{45} Thus the rescue of an Indian widow becomes, for the Frenchman, a ‘signifier for the establishment of a good society’\textsuperscript{46} – a discourse which, in the final analysis, imposes still heavier ideological constraints on these women than the colonial situation itself already has.\textsuperscript{47}

Thus Bernier’s narrative can be summarily described as an ‘imaginative examination of things Oriental’.\textsuperscript{48} Like any other Orientalist discourse, his descriptions not only project a picture of the ‘other’, but also help construct the European self-image. Thus ‘superstitious’, ‘stagnant’ India stands over against the ‘disenchanted’ Western societies of the day, marked by dramatic social upheavals. The fantasy of Indian ‘indolence’ and the Indian ‘paradise’ transforms the country into a foil for early capitalist Western Europe, characterized by diligence, dynamism and self-denial. The ultimate effect is to contrast ‘Asian despotism’ with the ‘enlightened Absolutism’ of Europe and ‘barbaric customs’ with the ‘good society’\textsuperscript{49}.

In short, Marx would have done well to subject his source to a critical examination rather than distilling
a central element of his own assessment of India's social structure from it. Despite this failing, however, his differences from Bernier leap to the eye. He never engages in essentialization. He does not cross the thin line between Orientalism and racism. While it is true that, as in his treatment of colonialism, he takes certain 'facts' from Orientalist or racist sources and incorporates them into a discourse on progress that is in many respects Eurocentric, the fact remains that he does not reproduce the essentialization informing such sources. This problematic procedure, which is certainly quite naive, shows that Marx's discussion of colonialism and slavery by no means unfolds in a generally anti-authoritarian context; an approach of that sort would attribute a place of its own to the extremely complex question of racism, which can by no stretch of the imagination be reduced to the question of the division of labour. Nevertheless, in the light of the foregoing, the affirmation that Marx himself is a racist seems to me unwarranted.

At any event, there can be no doubt that the Marx of the early 1850s had at his disposition neither a discriminating, non-Eurocentric perspective on colonialism nor sources that might have helped him to develop an accurate understanding of precolonial societies (one capable of realistically focusing attention on the social upheavals precipitated by colonialism). In the 1860s and beyond, he produced a more finely shaded account of these societies. In what follows, I shall accordingly try to indicate how he went about elaborating a more carefully drawn picture of colonial expansion, especially in his journalism of the 1860s, thereby breaking with at least two dimensions of Eurocentrism. I shall then look briefly at certain Orientalist themes in the critique of political economy.

India versus Ireland: the beginnings of Marx's turn from Eurocentrism

There is disagreement as to whether Marx’s study of British colonialism in India or, rather, Ireland first led him to take a more carefully balanced position on the question. Pranav Jani contends that Marx overcame his Eurocentrism in studying the 1857–59 Indian uprising. It is true that he acknowledges that the rebellion was partially justified and mentions the difficulty of grasping Indian conditions using ‘Western concepts’. There is, however, little basis for Jani’s claim that Marx’s initial acceptance of British assumptions about the passivity of the colonized gradually gives way, in his articles on the revolt, to the insight that the subaltern Indians were capable of taking independent action, the more so as these 1857/1858 articles are, unlike those of 1853, primarily intended to convey information, and do not contain nearly as much theorization, speculation and pointed political analysis. Marx’s viewpoint in the late 1850s is basically military and strategic – a perspective buttressed by the stereotypical portrayal of the Indian rebels and the evocation of a general Western superiority in Engels’s texts on the subject. Pace Jani, the commentaries on the British colonial power’s military logistics and battle plans are hardly marked by a critical attitude, let alone a shift in perspective towards anti-Eurocentrism. Reinhard Kößler has, moreover, rightly pointed out that, in Marx’s estimation, the rebellion was made possible in the first place by Britain’s creation of an indigenous army. Thus resistance to colonization is supposed to have become possible only as a result of ‘innovations set in motion by the colonization process, not as a prolongation of class struggles in the colonized countries themselves or thanks to specific structures forged by traditional social conditions and the revolutionary effects of the penetration of capitalism’. It is difficult, in this light, to regard Marx’s texts on the Indian uprising as steps on the way to his break with Eurocentrism. However, I share Bipan Chandra’s view that, by the 1860s at the latest, Marx (and Engels) had developed an awareness of the under-development due to colonialism or the overall colonial context. They did so in connection with Ireland. Thus Marx depicts the suppression of industry in Ireland, the systematic elimination of markets for Irish agriculture, the outbreak of famines and rebellions, and Irish emigration to North America and Australia. The emphasis on the British use of violence, however, influenced his shift of perspective less decisively than did his new assessment of the prospects for development opened up by colonialism. In the case of India, Marx observes that destruction and progress go hand in hand; this explains his ambivalent appreciation of England’s ‘double mission’. The example of Ireland, in contrast, shows him that colonialism ultimately brings the colonies’ asymmetrical integration into the world market, while actually throwing up barriers before the establishment of a capitalist mode of production, rather than promoting it. Ireland, says Marx, is the victim of murderous superexploitation – military, agricultural and demographic. Essential to the accumulation process in the ‘motherland’ is Ireland’s colonial status, not its socio-economic development.

Interestingly, Marx draws political consequences from this insight; he concludes that, in order ‘to accelerate the social development in Europe’, social struggle will have to be waged in Ireland. He goes...
still further, positing that ‘the decisive blow against the English ruling classes (and it will be decisive for the workers’ movement all over the world) cannot be delivered in England, but only in Ireland’.\textsuperscript{76} It is true that Marx’s perspective here is still partially marked by teleological notions of progress. Nevertheless, in contrast to India, said to be capable of throwing off the colonial yoke only if ‘in Great Britain itself the now ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat’, political upheaval is assigned, in the Irish case, decisive importance for revolutionary developments in the country of the colonizers itself. It is therefore no exaggeration, in my opinion, to speak of a ‘revision’ of Marx’s positions on colonialism or national liberation by the latter half of the 1860s at the latest.\textsuperscript{63} It is precisely this shift in Marx’s position that leads to his first break with Eurocentrism.\textsuperscript{64} He undoubtedly continues to regard England as a superior society, but he no longer credits English colonialism with initiating progressive developments in other regions of the world. Thus the universalization of the ‘Western social order’ which the example of India was supposed to illustrate begins to crumble. Finally, Marx now conceives of the interaction between various areas of the world differently: it is no longer thought of in strictly economic or linear terms.

**Orientalist themes in Marx’s Critique of Political Economy**

Marx’s critique of political economy is the most substantial and most fully elaborated part of his work. An examination of all four dimensions of Eurocentrism in the countless manuscripts and publications that make it up would constitute a research project in its own right. I shall here consider only the persistence of Orientalist themes in it.

Marx’s relatively unsystematic reflections on precapitalist societies in *Grundrisse* (in the section on ‘Forms which precede capitalist production’),\textsuperscript{65} are almost as well known as his 1853 articles on India. Central assumptions of the ‘Asiatic conception’ are to be found here, notably the idea that there is no private land ownership and that social stagnation is due to the ‘unity of agriculture and manufactures’.\textsuperscript{66} The latter factor is said to account for the fact that a transformation of property relations can be effected only ‘by means of altogether external influences’\textsuperscript{67} such as colonial rule. Furthermore, cities in Asia, ‘where the monarch appears as the exclusive proprietor of the agricultural surplus product … [are] at bottom nothing more than wandering encampments’ or ‘royal camps’.\textsuperscript{68} Not long after, in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx formulated this ‘Asiatic conception’ still more sharply. Although this 1859 text contains no comparably detailed remarks on pre-capitalist societies, the Introduction deploys the much discussed concept of the ‘Asiatic mode of production’, which is here presented in terms that are anything but clear. In the early 1860s as well, in *Theories of Surplus-Value* or, more precisely, his debate with Richard Jones, Marx assumes that land was owned exclusively by the state in Asia\textsuperscript{49} and that there was ‘unity of agriculture and industry’ in the ‘Asian communal system’. Here, too, he makes a positive allusion to ‘Dr. Bernier, who compares the Indian towns to army camps’.\textsuperscript{70} Finally, we find in *Capital* itself comments about the ‘blending of agriculture and handicrafts’,\textsuperscript{71} on which Marx blames the stagnation of Indian rural communes. Similarly, we find a passage about the state whose power is based on ‘the regulation of the water supply’,\textsuperscript{72} in whose hands land ownership is supposedly concentrated. It therefore falls to England, Marx says, ‘to disrupt these small economic communities’\textsuperscript{73} by expanding trade. In *Capital*, one also comes across the very naive notion, also already defended by Marx in 1853, that the railway technology introduced by the English in India had acquired a dynamic of its own, was being appropriated by Indians, and had set in motion the construction of modern industry and disintegration of the caste system.

Despite the persistence of Orientalist themes in the critique of political economy, two mitigating factors, it seems to me, should be stressed. First, Marx’s analysis of precapitalist societies within the framework of that economic critique is quite contradictory. He neither makes an unambiguous distinction between ‘primitive communism’ and the ‘Asiatic mode of production’, nor clearly defines the latter.\textsuperscript{74} Furthermore, it is impossible to situate the social relations Marx describes historically or geographically. Second, it is anything but obvious what influence these Orientalist themes have on the categories that Marx mobilizes in his economic critique, categories supposed, after all, to depict ‘the inner organization of the capitalist mode of production’, ‘its ideal average’.\textsuperscript{75} No hasty conclusions should be drawn here – they would be just as inappropriate as the simplistic defence which has it that the critique of political economy evinces ‘a significant shift in the perception of tradition village communities’, ‘from a negative assessment of their isolation and stagnation to a positive appreciation of their socially integrative power and endurance’.\textsuperscript{76} We would be better advised to maintain, with Amady A. Dieng, that Marx by no means possessed ‘sufficient knowledge about the
colonies of Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Pacific Islands’. It must, however, be pointed out that the ‘jackasses’ whose ‘wisdom’ Marx worked like a beaver to assimilate bear much of the blame for his, at best, ‘approximate understanding of the real conditions’ of non-Western societies.

The accelerating turn from Eurocentrism in Marx’s late work

Marx’s late work represents a still largely unpublished and, in that sense, truncated corpus of writings. It has already been noted on diverse occasions, quite rightly, that his revision of the first volume of Capital for the French translation, which appeared between 1872 and 1875, already contains important revisions of the idea that Western European history can serve as a model for international development. Of pivotal importance to the transformation of Marx’s view of non-Western societies were, above all, his studies of questions of land ownership from the later 1870s on. They had a direct influence on his exchanges with the Russian Social Revolutionaries.

Marx devoted considerable attention to the book Communal Ownership of Land by the Russian legal historian Maxim M. Kovalevskii immediately following its 1879 publication. Of the North American, Algerian and Indian forms of property discussed in it, he took a special interest in the last-named. He excerpted Kovalevskii’s book at length, commenting as he went, so that his excerpt as a whole ‘essentially reflects Marx’s own position’. Marx noted the existence of ‘archaic property forms’ in precolonial Algeria, which the Western colonial powers refused to acknowledge because that was not in their interest: ‘The French lust for loot makes obvious sense; if the government was and is the original proprietor of the entire country, then there is no need to acknowledge the claims of the Arab and Kabyl tribes to this or that concrete tract of land.’ We observe a similar shift in his position with respect to the Indian case. In his notes, Marx underscores ‘the variety of forms of property relations’ and the fact that the disintegration of communal property forms was already well under way: ‘arable fields and, often, threshing floors are the private property of different members of the commune, and only the “appurtenances” (agoda) remain their common property.’ About the Mongol Empire, Marx notes: ‘Four centuries later, the principle of private property was so solidly anchored in Indian society that the only remaining demand was that such sales [of real estate] take place publicly.’ This accurate understanding of the property relations governing land ownership, as Marx’s excerpts from Kovalevskii show, stemmed in part from knowledge of sources that were, for linguistic reasons, a closed book to Bernier and others: ‘In the annals of certain Indian communities, a source that was still essentially unavailable to historians ignorant of Sanskrit, we find evidence of the way private property suddenly sprang up, suddenly and en masse, as a result of measures taken by the Rajas and to the detriment of communal property.’ Marx not only takes his distance from his former positions, but, somewhat later in the same text, even lashes out at the ‘miserable “Orientalists”’ who had turned to the Koran for information on land ownership instead of analysing the historical realities of the situation. It is true that Marx, in notes he assembled under the heading ‘the English economy and its influence on India communal property’, still lists, among his sources, the ‘Letter to Colbert found as a supplement in “Voyages de François Bernier”. Amsterdam. 1699’. However, he immediately appends the following comment: ‘Dupeyron (see Mill: History of British India, 1840 edition, vol. 1, p. 310 etc.) Dupeyron (priloženie) was the first to realize that, in India, the Grand Mogul was not the sole property owner.’ In the light of this new information and these new sources, Marx’s own judgement of colonialism in India is more carefully balanced. Unmistakably, the English had occasionally acknowledged the existence of communal property forms. Where they had striven to abolish them, they had done so ‘in fact in order to promote European colonization’. Even the ‘modernizing’ effect of the crumbling of communal property forms was, in every case, open to question. Although the English portrayed it ‘as a mere result… of economic progress’, it was in fact actively promoted by the colonial authorities: ‘The inhabitants (peasants) are so attached to the soil that they prefer to remain on their former farms as mere rural labourers rather than seeking higher wages in the city.’

For present purposes, the chief interest of Marx’s 1880–81 Ethnological Notebooks resides in that fact that he adopts Lewis H. Morgan’s standpoint in them: property is a historically transitory form, which he contrasts with ‘a higher stage of society’. Marx cites Morgan to the effect that this higher stage should represent ‘a resuscitation … in a superior form, of freedom, equality, and fraternity of the old Gentes’ – that is, of communal property. According to a passage Marx excerpts from Henry S. Maine, ‘the form of private ownership in Land’ quite clearly enjoyed legal recognition – ‘yet the rights of private owners are limited by the controlling rights of a brotherhood of kinsmen, and the control is in some respects even more
stringent than that exercised over separate property by an Indian village community.' According to another passage excerpted by Marx, ‘property in its modern form [was] established’ when a man’s property was divided up by his direct descendants at his death, even if the family did not cease ‘to influence successions’. Marx comments: ‘“property in its modern form” is in no way established thereby: see the Russian communes f.i.’ The excerpts from Maine, then, confront us with a kaleidoscopic mix, in which property forms and actual enjoyment of property can diverge. These confused conditions, according to Marx’s critical commentary on Maine, cannot be grasped by way of the putative ‘English equivalent’: ‘This blockhead identifies the Roman form of absolute land ownership with the “English form of ownership”’. With regard to the different dimensions of the concept of Eurocentrism that we distinguished in setting out, the excerpts Marx made late in life are significant in three respects. First, he now no longer considers England a superior society that, by means of colonization, initiates social progress in India. In support of his new position, Marx even makes his source say more than it actually does: thus Haruki Wada has shown that Marx’s hostility to colonial land policy is much more emphatic than Kovalevskii’s. Second, in his finely shaded discussion of various forms of land ownership in the extra-European world, Marx breaks with Eurocentrism in a way consonant with Said’s critique of Orientalism. We find, in his notes, such a broad range of distinctions in the approach to land ownership that these notes can hardly be mobilized in support of the view that he sticks to a monolithic ‘Asiatic conception’. Moreover, he explicitly rejects approaches to non-Western regions of the world grounded on the European experience alone, and he expressly criticizes the assumption (bound up with the thesis of the non-existence of private property) that the state holds a monopoly on land – formerly an integral part of his ‘Asiatic conception’ – as a ‘legal fiction’. Finally, he points to the fact ‘that even in the earliest Indian class societies, if only formally, by way of “donations” by the Raja, “private property” suddenly came into existence “en masse”’. In short, Eurocentrism no longer authorizes a homogenizing approach; Marx now recognizes that the ‘real conditions’ are more complex than he had supposed. Third, Marx breaks with the Eurocentric conception of development for which the patterns that led to the emergence of Western European societies are the measure of human history as such. Thus, although he points to the ‘feudalization’ of India under Muslim rule, he is careful to emphasize that this process differs from the one observable in Europe because of the absence of hereditary rights in Indian law. Furthermore, he upbraids Kovalevskii for basing what he says on a conception of ‘feudalism in the Western European sense’ while ignoring the absence of serfdom. Similarly, the Ethnological Notebooks vehemently criticize the authors they discuss for the historical analogies in which they indulge. John Phear, for example, is a ‘jackass’ who calls ‘the structure of the villages “feudal”’. Thus the late Marx regards ‘the application of the category of feudalism to the Oriental polity’ as a ‘form of ethnocentrism that press[es] world history into a European mould’. He consequently opposes ‘too stark a generalization of the concept of feudalism, and, more generally, the straightforward extrapolation of concepts of structure developed on Western European models to Indian or Asiatic conditions’.

Thanks not least to the emergence of Russian revolutionary movements, for which, because of the agricultural structures that prevailed in Russia, the question of land ownership and the rural commune played a central role, Marx devoted particular attention to conditions there. Late in 1869, he started learning Russian and took part in Russian debates about Capital, a Russian translation of which appeared in 1872. In what follows, I shall be using, above all, texts written in this context to show how, at the end
of Marx’s life, there materialized a break with the various dimensions of Eurocentrism that we began by sketching.

In connection with the Russian rural commune, Marx initially expresses what seem to be familiar ideas: ‘the land in the hands of the Russian peasants has never been *their private property*.’ However, he also notes the existence of the kind of communes which, he says, ‘descended from a more archaic type’, ‘in Germany’ as well. ‘Go back to the origins of Western societies; and everywhere you will find communal ownership of the land.’ Marx regards this form of communal property, which he claims was widespread in Asia, as economically superior. There were, he affirms, different reasons for the dissolution of these archaic communes; in Western Europe, above all, it was ‘an immense interval’ that ‘separated’ it ‘from the birth of capitalist production’, that is seen ‘embracing a whole series of successive economic revolutions and evolutions of which capitalist production is merely the most recent’. These characteristics of the rural commune provide the backdrop against which Marx projects a specific Russian form of development. Thus he affirms that his ‘historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe’, in the chapter on so-called primitive accumulation in *Capital*, Volume 1, must not be transformed into

a historic-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed, in order to eventually attain this economic formation which, with a tremendous leap of the productive forces of social labour, assures the most integral development of every individual producer.

It follows that the ‘historical inevitability’ of so-called primitive accumulation is ‘expressly limited *… to the countries of Western Europe*’. Because Russian peasants do not own their land, the movement that led to the triumph of capitalist property relations in Western Europe cannot simply be projected onto the Russian case. There ‘communist property’ would be transformed into ‘capitalist property’. Moreover, Russian agriculture would ‘try in vain’ to get out of the ‘cul-de-sac’ in which it found itself by means of ‘capitalist farming on the English model’, even judging matters ‘from the economic point of view alone’. The only way to overcome the problems besetting Russian agriculture leads through development of the Russian rural commune.

Thus Marx opposes hasty universalization of historical development, insisting that, when it comes to social transformations, what is decisive is the historical surroundings in which they unfold. In the Russian case, those surroundings facilitate transformation of the rural commune into an ‘element of collective production on a nationwide scale’. Without having to ‘first pass through the same process of dissolution as constitutes the historical development of the West’, the commune could ‘pass directly to the higher form of communist common ownership’. ‘Thanks to its contemporaneity with capitalist production’, the Russian rural commune ‘is thus able to appropriate its fruits without subjecting itself to its *modus operandi*’. Communal ownership land offers this rural commune

the basis for collective appropriation, its historical surroundings, its contemporaneity with capitalist production, lend it all the material conditions of communal labour on a vast scale. It is thus in a position to incorporate all the positive acquisitions devised by the capitalist system without passing through its Caudine Forks. It can gradually replace parcel farming with large-scale agriculture assisted by machines, which the physical lie of the land in Russia invites. It can thus become the *direct point of departure* for the economic system towards which modern society tends, and turn over a new leaf without beginning by committing suicide.

In sum, the Russian agricultural commune can, according to Marx, appropriate the fruits ‘of Western capitalist production’ ‘without subjecting itself to its *modus operandi*’. If it does, it will become the ‘fulcrum of social regeneration in Russia’ or, rather, the ‘starting point for communist development’.

Given the various questions that Marx’s view of non-Western societies in the 1850s and 1860s raises, three points in his exchanges with revolutionary movements in Russia should be emphasized. First, we should note the shift in Marx’s position on colonialism in India, which begins to materialize in the Kovalevskii excerpt. When Marx has occasion to discuss the Indian case in the 1880s, he observes that the English have managed only ‘to ruin native agriculture and double the number and severity of the famines’. He also notes ‘the suppression of communal landownership out there was nothing but an act of English vandalism, pushing the native people not forwards but backwards’. It can therefore hardly be asserted that Marx maintained, overall, his 1853 ‘assumption that social conditions would be homogenized throughout the world’ as a result of the expansion of the Western–capitalist mode of production, while making an exception for Russia. By the end of the 1860s, at the latest, Marx possessed an adequate understanding of colonialism; it helped shape, thereafter, his perception of the non-Western world.
Second, it is noteworthy that Marx now sees the need to criticize his sources. Only ‘Sir H[enry] Maine and others of his ilk’, he remarks, remain blind to this ‘English vandalism’.

When reading the histories of primitive communities written by bourgeois writers it is necessary to be on one’s guard. They do not even shrink from falsehoods. Sir Henry Maine, for example, who was a keen collaborator of the British Government in carrying out the violent destruction of the Indian communes, hypocritically assures us that all the government’s noble efforts to support the communes were thwarted by the spontaneous forces of economic laws!

Marx emphasizes that ‘it is in the interest of the landed proprietors to set up the more or less well-off peasants as an intermediate agrarian class, and to turn the poor peasants – that is to say the majority – into simple wage earners.’ There exists, in other words, in Russia as well, an interest in the dissolution of the rural communes that hold property in common. This interest is comparable to that of the Western colonial powers in Asia and North Africa.

Third, it must be admitted that, even in the Marx of the 1880s, we find features reminiscent of his ‘ Asiatic conception’. Thus he considers the isolation of the Russian rural communes an obstacle to development, since it favours a ‘central despotism’. However, he adds that this obstacle could itself be overcome if the volosts (government bodies) were replaced by a peasant assembly.

The isolation of rural communes, the lack of connexion between the life of one and the life of another, this localised microcosm is not encountered everywhere as an immanent characteristic of the last of the primitive types, but everywhere it is found, it always gives rise to a central despotism.... It seems to me an easy matter to do away with the primitive isolation imposed by the vast extent of the territory as soon as the government shackles have been cast off.

These continuities notwithstanding, the texts that grew out of Marx’s exchanges with Russian revolutionary movements bear witness to a politically reinforced version of his break with dimensions of Eurocentrism. First, Marx no longer premisses the one-sided superiority of Western societies, but, rather, confirms ‘the economic superiority of communal property’. Second, his preoccupation with Russia cannot be dismissed as ‘imaginary investigation’ of a non-Western region of the world which only serves to buttress a European self-image. For behind Marx’s efforts here lies a long, careful examination of the issue of property relations in the extra-European world, as well as an endeavour to articulate capitalist penetration and local social conflict. On this basis, Marx’s appreciation of English colonialism in India undergoes sharp modification: what he once called the ‘double mission’ of destruction and renewal becomes, unambiguously, ‘vandalism’.

Fourth, Marx meets the critical reception of authors such as Morgan, ‘one of the few people of his time to have conceived of progress along a number of different lines’, stands behind these developments. Even if recent research has shown that Marx’s ‘analysis of the Russian rural commune [is based] on altogether erroneous premises’, it does not follow that his ‘conceptual approach to them’ has lost all relevance: ‘At bottom, it is a question of the construction of human history. Here, Marx’s sketch of several different paths of development for human societies stands in sharp contrast to unilinear, evolutionistic notions.’

Marx studies and postcolonialism – shaken, not stirred

We began by pointing to the existence of two problems. In Marxian studies, one finds no systematic critical study of Marx’s Eurocentrism. In postcolonial studies, one finds a fully elaborated critique of Marx’s Eurocentrism that largely ignores the changes in his thinking that occurred after he wrote his articles on India in 1853, changes that have been brought to light by Marx scholarship, thanks notably to the project to publish a comprehensive edition of his writings. This situation can be overcome only if each of these fields
of knowledge is willing to learn something from the other. Only if we take Marx’s entire œuvre into account can we make a valid judgement of his Eurocentrism; only if we have a carefully worked out idea of just what Eurocentrism is can we say exactly what constitutes Marx’s Eurocentrism.

Bart Moore-Gilbert has rightly pleaded for cooperation between Marxian studies and postcolonial studies. Militating in favour of it, he argues, is the fact that both fields often have the same object of research, have been relegated to the margins of academia, and boast theoreticians such as C.L.R. James or Frantz Fanon, whose work cannot be confined to either of the two fields. Marx scholarship could learn something about ‘the historical differences and cultural specificities of the non-Western world’. On the other hand, Marxian studies could mark out the limits of various postcolonial projects, with analyses, for example, of the international division of labour. If such cooperation is to become a reality, however, both sides must abandon polemics, and must undertake ‘more finely calibrated, attentive readings’.131

What has so far prevented postcolonial studies from embarking on such a project, it seems to me, is the fact that Marx’s study of Russia and the conclusions he drew from it have gone largely unknown. Thus a majority of those who have entered the debate see Marx as an optimistic believer in progress or a teleologically minded Eurocentric. It is to be hoped that further publication of his work in the second MEGA – for example, release of the Marx manuscript known as the Chronological Excerpts (excerpts from world history) – together with studies of this less familiar material, will help to bring postcolonial studies, as well, to a more balanced assessment of his Eurocentrism. Further work on Marx’s sources, of the kind exemplified by my discussion of Bernier’s travel account, is also indispensable if old prejudices are to be shed.

Marxian studies needs to cooperate with postcolonial studies for three reasons. First, because they need to deepen their analysis of the contradictions and complexity of capitalism by adopting a global perspective. This should make it clear that capitalism’s totalizing claims have been only partially realized: certain social spaces remain beyond its reach.132 Capitalism would then appear not as ‘a self-identical system that emanates from the West and expands to the periphery, but as a changing ensemble of worldwide relations that assumes different forms in specific regional and national contexts’.133 This would also make it possible to lay the foundations for an adequate understanding of colonialism, which was precisely not some ‘local or marginal subplot in some larger history (for example, the transition from feudalism to capitalism in western Europe, the latter developing organically in the womb of the former)’, but, rather, takes on, viewed from this standpoint, ‘the place and the significance of a major, extended and ruptural world-historical event’.134 Marxist discussion of international relations of domination, especially Marxist study of imperialism, has apparently not yet set out to acquire this kind of carefully differentiated understanding.135

Second, Marxian studies has to acquire a new understanding of historical progress. Here, it seems to me, the potential of world systems theory has yet to be fully realized. Thus Immanuel Wallerstein has pointed out that the traditional evolutionist conception of the emergence of capitalism as the replacement of a ruling feudal group is highly dubious:

Instead, the correct basic image is that historical capitalism was brought into existence by a landed aristocracy which transformed itself into a bourgeoisie because the old system was disintegrating. Rather than let the disintegration continue to uncertain ends, they engaged in radical structural surgery themselves in order to maintain and significantly expand their ability to exploit the direct producers.136

Jettisoning evolutionist notions of progress would call into question the idea that ‘capitalism as a historical system has represented progress over the various previous historical systems that it destroyed or transformed’,137 or would, at any rate, raise the crucial problem of the standard to be applied to measure progress. I think that the decisive criterion should be freedom from domination, not a specific concept of the form in which the productive forces are developed. The late Marx expressed this by raising the perspective of ‘free equality’ during his study of the Russian rural communes; it is a perspective which seeks to establish connections with already existing historical forms, without forcing them into the mould of one or another scheme of development. This perspective also implies, however, that progress is no inevitability, but must be achieved through struggle. This insight, too, is contained in the late Marx’s outline of a conception of communism rooted in a global history.

Third, Marxian studies must make theoretical room for contingency. Hauck, for example, has pointed out that ‘historical contingency’ was of decisive importance to the historical emergence of capitalism in Europe:

Commodity production, private property, and wage-labour, juridical freedom, and exploitation of
labour-power based on economic constraint (lack of the means of production), legal security, and relative non-interference of the state in the economy (responsible, in large measure, for the separation of the economic from the political specific to capitalism), the existence of intermediary instances and the separation of religious and political power, the plundering of peripheral regions, and phases in which science and technology expand – all these are phenomena which, in defiance of all positions based on Eurocentric theories of modernization, most modern societies have at some point experienced.

In seventeenth and eighteenth century England, they operated in conjunction, making possible the historically unique emergence of capitalism.\(^{138}\)

The project of a non-teleological reading of Marx developed by Althusser’s school also zeroes in on this problem. It might provide a springboard for dialogue between Marxian studies and postcolonial studies. As early as Reading Capital, Balibar pointed out that ‘the history of society can be reduced to a discontinuous succession of modes of production’.\(^{139}\) Althusser, in his late work, insists that we must conceive of the irruption of capitalism as a contingent ‘encounter’ of independent elements, the results of which endured only in Europe, that were by no means predestined to come together: money capital, labour-power, technological development, and a nascent domestic market.\(^{140}\)

Even if it took Marx ‘an enormous amount of time’ to arrive at ‘an understanding of the real conditions’ of extra-European development, he freed himself, at the end of his life, from the influence of the European ‘jackasses’ – which is what his twenty-first-century readers would make of themselves if they failed to take up the challenge of bringing Marxian studies and postcolonial studies into dialogue. The goal is not only to pave the way for the return of Marx, declared a dead dog in the wake of the events of 1989–90. It is, no less, to produce a comprehensive anti-authoritarian analysis of society, which has as much to learn from Marx as from postcolonialism.

Translated by G.M. Goshgarian

A longer version of this text is forthcoming in German in Werner Bonefeld/Michael Heinrich, eds, Kapital und Kritik. Nach der neuen Marx-Lektüre, VSA, Hamburg, 2010.

Notes

1. Herrschaftskritisch: a concept popularized by the Frankfurt School which means, literally, critical of all forms of domination, based on class, race, gender, etc. [Trans.]
4. I thank Lotte Arndt and Urs Lindner, among others, for helpful suggestions and comments.
5. In the present context (contrary to the market for real estate in advanced capitalism), the decisive criterion for private ownership of land is its alienability. Crucial here is the economic aspect of ownership (disposability/appropriation), not the juridical elaboration of it.
13. Ibid., p. 217.
15. See Marx, ‘The Future Results of British Rule in India’.
16. See Marx, ‘The British Rule in India’.


16. Bernier, *Voyages dans les États du Grand Mogol*, p. 120.


19. Ibid., p. 254.


26. See ibíd., p. 305.


30. A comprehensive anti-authoritarian approach to colonialism would bring out not only its economic but also its epistemic dimension. Such a perspective must take into account the fact that the subjection and exploitation of a large part of the world by the West constituted a decisive intellectual, moral and epistemological project with respect not only to its motives, but also to its effects (notions of cultural superiority that paved the way for, grounded and legitimized colonialism, the idea of a ‘civilizing mission’, the construction of a colonized ‘Other’, and so on). See Nicolas Bancel and Pascal Blanchard, ‘Les origines républicaines de la fracture coloniale’, in Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire, eds, *La fracture coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial*. La Découverte, Paris, 2006, pp. 35–45. Marx is far from conceiving of colonialism as a complex project with moral, economic, intellectual, social and cultural implications – notwithstanding the fact that analysing the connection between knowledge and power is one important objective of his critique of political economy.


43. It may seem strange, at first glance, to associate Marx’s break with Eurocentrism with Ireland, a country which, geographically at any rate, is part of Western Europe. However, as a result of the English colonization of Ireland (1541–1922), Ireland and India were in structurally comparable situations: they were both non-capitalist societies under the colonial yoke of an (early) capitalist society. The Irish economy was heavily oriented to the English market, or functionally integrated into a large part of the world by the West constituted a decisive intellectual, moral and epistemological project with respect not only to its motives, but also to its effects (notions of cultural superiority that paved the way for, grounded and legitimized colonialism, the idea of a ‘civilizing mission’, the construction of a colonized ‘Other’, and so on). See Nicolas Bancel and Pascal Blanchard, ‘Les origines républicaines de la fracture coloniale’, in Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire, eds, *La fracture coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial*. La Découverte, Paris, 2006, pp. 35–45. Marx is far from conceiving of colonialism as a complex project with moral, economic, intellectual, social and cultural implications – notwithstanding the fact that analysing the connection between knowledge and power is one important objective of his critique of political economy.

66. Ibid., p. 486.
67. Ibid., p. 494.
68. Ibid., pp. 467 and 479.
70. Ibid., p. 357.
71. See Capital, Volume 1, ch. 14, Section 4.
72. Ibid., ch. 16.
75. Capital, Volume 3, ch. 48.
77. Dieng, Le marxisme et l’Afrique noire, p. 75.
80. Ibid., p. 39.
81. Ibid., p. 46.
82. Ibid., p. 53.
83. Ibid., p. 55.
84. Ibid, p. 61.
85. Ibid., p. 77. Said rightly situates Abraham-Hyacinth Anquetil-Duperron in the rising Orientalist tradition of the last third of the nineteenth century, which generally studied ‘the Orient’ from a scientific point of view, without abandoning the basic objective of co-opting it (see Said, Orientalism, p. 22). Anquetil-Duperron made a significant contribution to the expansion of Orientalism, helping to introduce the study of Avestan and Sanskrit in the discipline in the mid-nineteenth century (ibid., pp. 51 and 76ff.) and to ground the tradition that claimed its legitimacy from the peculiarly compelling fact of residence in, actual existential contact with, the Orient (ibid., p. 156). Thus Anquetil-Duperron is also a dubious source. He may be ranged, on Said’s witness, among the French ‘jackasses’, although, in the final analysis, he arrived at an approximate understanding of property relations, thanks, not least, to his linguistic competence: ‘He argued that the idea of the absence of the rights of private property in Asia was a fiction employed by colonials who favoured the confiscation of native estates’ (Sawer, Marxism and the Question of the Asiatic Mode of Production, p. 23). Because of his better grasp of historical reality, among other reasons, Anquetil-Duperron ultimately rejected the Western conception of ‘oriental despotism’ (see Valensi’s essay in Pouillon, ed., Dictionnaire des orientalistes de langue française, pp. 21–3).
86. See ibid., pp. 84ff.
87. Ibid., p. 88.
88. Ibid., p. 93.
89. Marx, Die ethnologischen Exzerptenhefte, ed. Lawrence Krader, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1976, p. 190. See also Marx, The Ethnographical Notebooks of Marx, ed. Lawrence Krader, Van Gorcum, Assen, 1972 [Marx wrote these notebooks in a mix of English and German. The translator has relied on this extract, taking over Marx’s English, or the English in the passages he cites, as is, and has translated his German. The page references in the present text are to the 1976 Suhrkamp edition, entitled Die ethnologischen Exzerptenhefte, where everything, it seems, is in German; the English edition is no doubt paginated differently. Trans.]
90. Ibid., p. 425.
91. Ibid., p. 455.
92. Ibid., p. 432.
96. Marx, ‘Exzerpte’, p. 76.
98. Krader’s Introduction to Marx’s Die ethnologische Exzerptenhefte, p. 63.
100. What we said earlier about Ireland holds for Russia and comparisons of Russian with India: the Tzarist Empire was a pre-capitalist society with a markedly rural character, which, albeit never colonized, developed along colonial lines. See Bayly, The Birth of the Modern World, p. 177.
102. Ibid., pp. 350–51.
103. Ibid., p. 365.
104. Ibid., p. 361.
107. Ibid., p. 361.
108. Ibid., p. 358.
109. Ibid., p. 349.
112. Ibid., pp. 357–8.
113. Ibid., p. 353.
114. Ibid., p. 371.
117. Ibid., p. 365.
118. Ibid.
119. Ibid., p. 359.
120. Ibid., p. 364.
121. Marx’s letters to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich, from which the passages we have been citing are in the main drawn, stand in a close relation to his studies of land ownership. Marx thus not only mentions Morgan and Maine, but also conceives of communist property as ‘a higher form of the archaic type of property’ (MECW, vol. 24, p. 362). Haruki Wada has also noted the influence that Kovalevskii’s positions had on Marx’s letters.
123. Ibid., p. 363.
124. The importance of these continuities is considerably diminished, first, by the fact that Marx entertains the possibility that indigenous developments can overcome despotism. Thus he has come a great distance from his previous assumption that only exogenous factors (colonialism) can put an end to them. Second, central components of the 'Asiatic conception' have crumbled: ‘Marx treated the period between primitive society and capitalism as a formation with many types; that is to say, he no longer distinguished between the Asiatic mode of production, the social formation of Antiquity, and feudalism [as he does in A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, K.L.], but, rather, considered them to be types of a formation that was preceded by many different variants of primitive society…. The inadequate conception of an “Asiatic” (or Oriental) mode of production based on the absence of private land ownership had given way to the insight that there were, “the primitive form of society” from “India to Ireland” subsumed many different forms of social structure grounded on “rural communes with common possession of the land”, as Engels affirms in the sole note correcting the Communist Manifesto’ (Burchard Brentjes, ‘Marx und Engels in ihrem Verhältnis zu Asien’, in Burchard Brentjes, ed., Marx and Friedrich Engels zur Geschichte des Orients, Wissenschaftliche Beiträge/Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle, 1983, pp. 3–30, here p. 19). Third, Marx’s political perspective changes. Symptomatic here is the idea that communist forces should seek a point of departure in rural communes – that is, the very structures that he perceived as obstacles to development in 1853.
126. Ibid., p. 350.
131. Ibid., p. 317.
137. Ibid., p. 98.
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‘You nearly gave me a heart attack’, a friend told me, after my talk at the opening session of the event in London celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the first national Women’s Liberation Conference in the UK, at Ruskin College, in February 1970. Appropriately enough, the feminist publisher and cultural entrepreneur Ursula Owen had organized this rather special celebration, ‘The Way We Were And Are’, at the recently launched Free Word Centre, in the old newsroom of the Guardian. Free expression, in all its forms, is the raison d’être of Free Word, but I soon found myself an object of censure (though hardly silenced) the moment I began my reflections. Mutterings accompanied my opening suggestion that many young women today seem so much more confident, aspiring and sexually adventurous than we had been when we came of age in the 1960s. They appear as almost another species. This was surely, I suggested, one of the effects of those forty years of feminism, combined, it must be said at once, with well-known shifts in economic affairs (the decline of heavy industry and rise of new technology, and administrative, financial and servicing sectors). Frowns deepened as I proceeded, trying to draw in boys and men, class and other inequalities into my assessment.

There is nothing either new or surprising about feminist contention, especially when one is trying to encompass four decades of social volatility of gender relations in a world where the symbolic traction of sexual difference is constantly being repackaged and flaunted back to us commercially as objects for identification and desire. In the face of continual social upheavals, we see a gritty determination put into maintaining some traditional facade of sexual difference as supposedly the only secure sanctuary of love, caring and commitment, bolstering, above all, the myth that traditional family structures will protect us as welfare entitlements are ever further whittled away. As I write, the wives of our political leaders hit the headlines only, altogether disingenuously, as nurturing helpmates of their superior husbands, chuckling over their prominent partner’s domestic shortcomings as if providing proof of their masculine prerogative to rule over us. Times change, but the gender domain likes to keep that a little secret.

In my talk, I wanted to stress young women’s diverse energies nowadays, not because I thought gender chauvinism obsolete, or that women have managed in anything like equal numbers to join the men among the elites. It was because more and more people seem today ever further from gaining an overview of the complex underpinnings of the increasingly shaky edifices of traditional gender arrangements. We live in a world in which what is still often psychically ‘cherished’ as female ‘difference’ falls outside the near blanket hegemony of fiscal and market concerns, except in so far as it can be used to package commodities to sell to women. Paradoxically, it is this very commercial packaging that is now being highlighted as a source of social alarm regarding the situation of girls and women in today’s world. Only five hours before my talk at the Free Word, the media were buzzing with summaries of the latest report on young women that had nothing positive at all to say about their situation in the world today.¹

Disavowing their own politics, prejudices and semiotic practices, media headlines once again directed social concern with women’s issues to the crucible where multiple fears have always been most easily displaced, the sexual domain, which is always dense and contested, especially when it comes to the dangers surrounding young women’s sexuality. The survey, which identifies young women almost solely as victims of recent cultural shifts, was commissioned by and designed to influence government policy. And coming up to an election, it is currently being deployed in Labour’s strategies for dealing with the situation of women. The very existence of the report says much about the legacy and continued impact of those forty years of Women’s Liberation – its huge achievements, its inevitable disappointments, the seemingly inevitable dilution or simplification of its more diverse and sophisticated perspectives when served up anew in different times and contexts.

¹. Other reports, such as the UK’s 2007 report ‘Youth Matters’, were considered by some women’s organizations as too optimistic in reading the social conditions of young women.
Reporting on the ‘sexualization’ of young women

First up, so unlike the situation forty years ago, the report’s outlook and terminology is an immediate confirmation of today’s widespread and significant official concern with the continuing scandal of men’s violence against women. This is an abomination that remains globally pervasive (although the scope was not in the remit of this particular report), nowhere more viciously than in sites of war and conflict. Public awareness of the routine occurrence of men’s violence against women and children, at home and abroad, and consideration of how to expose, discuss and attempt to eradicate it, were entirely inspired by second-wave feminism. That the report takes the form it does, however, focusing only on violence against women and girls, as if we had not learned that men and boys are also systematically the targets of aggression and abuse in the maintenance of gender and other hierarchies, suggests to me something about the severe limitations of popular conceptions of feminist perspectives. In the media and bureaucratic policy domain, rhetorical frames direct us towards notions of fixed gender contrasts, seeking out the shortest route to the starkest oppositions between women and men. In the process, they kick aside materials for exposing the hollowness of much of the symbolic sway of sexual difference, as we all anxiously negotiate our way individually through gender cliché, constantly revealing the incommensurability between gender norms and practices.

In relation to victimhood and violence, for instance, it is surely important to recognize that part of the way gender norms inscribe symbolic codes of male dominance is by downplaying the perpetual vulnerability of boys and men to fear, abuse and violence (mostly from other men), whether in homes, schoolyards, workplaces, pubs, football terraces, prisons or battlefields. Downplaying men’s susceptibility to humiliation and injury, and its profound effects on them, shores up symbolic machismo. Yet, oddly to my mind, some feminists, mimicking men themselves, collude in denying men’s personal vulnerabilities. Sedimenting macho rhetorical insouciance, we can read in this latest report:

Although both sexes are experiencing partner violence, more girls are suffering and the impact of this suffering is greater. A significant proportion of girls surveyed stated that violence had seriously affected their welfare; for boys there appeared to be few consequences.

Now, while it is almost certain, and easier to establish, that girls are the more likely to be victims of partner violence, it seems highly dubious and fundamentally counterproductive (albeit harder to be conclude with confidence from subsequent confessions about being victims of interpersonal violence) to assert that boys and men remain largely impervious to its effects. This is all the more obvious when here, as with all the surveys reported in the near hundred-page report, no details of methodology or data are provided.

In other ways, too, this report provides evidence of a regression in the public commentary on the latest call for action to end violence against women, including some presenting itself as representative feminist commentary, when the focus remains on the media ‘sexualization’ of young women. The report itself was commissioned by the Home Office Violent Crime Unit as part of a new government promise, expressed in the characteristically promotional jingle tones of New Labour: Together We Can End Violence Against Women. Linda Papadopoulos was the psychologist chosen to examine how ‘sexualized images’ might influence cultural norms and affect the development of young people, especially young women. However, since the goal of the inquiry was to act to end violence against women, the hiring committee would appear to have already made its mind up on the outcome of its investigation into the effects of sexualized imagery, with the study itself flagged as a strategy for ending men’s violence against women and children, avant la lettre. Surprisingly, perhaps, the review comes up with almost no new research or thinking on what the links between the sexualization of young people and violence might be. The bulk of its coverage is of older people’s (and especially parents’) worries about young people’s behaviour, encompassing an amorphous array of their activities as consumers and producers, whether of music videos or fashion photography, and in self-fashioning, including lap-dancing and lessons in pole-dancing.

The emerging jumble of data is sifted and sorted quite precisely for ‘finding’ the link between sexualized imagery and violence. Research querying the link between pornographic imagery and sexual violence is ignored altogether. This will appear particularly blatant to those who can recall the previous report into this issue commissioned by the UK Home Office, undertaken by Howitt and Cumberbatch in 1990. Though itself conducted in a conservative cultural moment, expressing extreme alarm at pornography’s crossing over into mainstream media, and incidentally surveying some of the very same research cited in the latest report (such as the strongly contested data of Neil Malamuth), their findings are now erased from the
record, since these two psychologists highlighted the huge inconsistencies to be found between very similar studies. They concluded their overview of existing research with the claim that there was no compelling evidence of a causal link between the viewing of pornography and sexual violence. As many media researchers could have pointed out, had they been consulted, there is a substantial body of research that calls into question almost all the claims the current review upholds.

Most disappointingly, despite three decades of feminist debate on the topic, Papadopoulos finds it unnecessary to discuss definitions of, or pose any conceptual questions about, such complex and confusing categories as ‘sexualization’ and ‘objectification’. It simply assumes that ‘sexualization’ is always a dangerous thing, whatever it is, if associated with ‘young’ women. This is curious when one repeated need voiced in her report is for greater ‘media literacy’ to be taught in schools. That seems a sensible suggestion, and indeed, for what it is worth, there is evidence from the USA, for instance, suggesting that when women listened to misogynist rap music, such as Eminem, it is the ‘blatant misogyny’ of its lyrics which ‘is startling to them and it triggers a more careful interpretation and rejection of the premises in the song.’ Certainly, almost any sort of media literacy, one might have thought, would raise issues about the reception and context of viewing or hearing ‘sexualized’ material that are foreclosed in the report, not to mention querying why such diverse cultural productions as fashion, cinematic productions, magazines, music videos, lap-dancing, pole-dancing, are swept up into a single apparently homogeneous category.

One point the media literate would surely make about sexualized imagery, for instance, especially in its more pornographic or extreme versions in less mainstream locations, involves its inherently contradictory affect and effect, being produced or performed quite deliberately to provoke both pleasure and condemnation, lust and prudishness, as the very essence of its modes of activity and arousal. However, reading through the report it is as though the last forty years of feminist and other scholarly contention around the body, sexuality and representation had simply never happened. There is no awareness here that what became known, especially in the USA, as the ‘sex wars’ generated some of the fiercest controversies ever seen among feminists. Nowhere were positions more polarized than between anti-pornography campaigners seeking greater state control of images and feminist scholars who were often regarded as the most knowledgeable about the media, working at the cutting edge of cultural and film studies, and usually
among those most worried by the continued inroads made by the discourses of anti-pornography feminism into government policy and legal frameworks. Anti-pornography campaigners such as Catharine MacKinnon, eager to eliminate sexualized imagery through new ways of policing representations, were oblivious to the parasitic relation of pornographic imagery to the most respectable and authoritative phallocentric discourses of gender and sexuality, whether familial, religious, commercial or bureaucratic, and embraced the most reductive behaviouristic psychology, with its disavowal of fantasy and psychic life. Meanwhile, the pursuit of legal remedies that enhance the power of state regulation of sexuality was seen by its feminist critics as a threat to any subversive expressions of women's sexual agency and therefore to the possibilities for sexual resignification. Many feminists, myself included, tried hard to show the folly of hoping to prescribe only politically uplifting sexualized images for popular consumption, aware of a fundamental lack of fit between formations of sexual fantasy in the psychic domain and what might be women's (and men's) support for feminist struggles for equality, justice and autonomy in the public sphere.

Blithely disavowing its complicity in the process of maintaining gender conformity, the mainstream media's main excuse for parading their own most hackneyed images of women today is to do so in the name of 'condemning' the very practice they pursue. This explains the tenacity of the media's interest in discussion programmes addressing pornography – it is simply too easy to be turned on by what we are eager to condemn. Moreover, even when in supposedly condemnatory mode, the visual displays and commentaries on sexualization in the media routinely shun representations that might prove subversive of routine gender banality. It rarely solicits commentary on what more dissident sexual iconography might look like. This tells us something about the problems of official attempts to police gender stereotypes in the media, whether these take the form of hyper-sexualized images of female bodies, reduced to bits and pieces of flesh for a presumptively male desiring gaze, or, in quite a different mode (though usually discussed as if it were the very same thing), parading before us the 'under-sexualized' images of women as blank and anorexic mannequins.

Another odd but frequently cited claim in this recent report on sexualized imagery in the media is not only that it results in violence against women, but also that it distorts and limits women's ambitions: 'Surveys have found that a high proportion of young women in the UK aspire to work as “glamour models” or lap-dancers.' A high proportion? Could this be the same high proportion that is doing better than boys across the board on almost every index of educational achievement, whether in schools or upon entering the professions in equal numbers to men? Young women's intellectual diligence is a strange preparation, one might think, for that ‘majority’ in training for a career as glamour models and lap-dancers. This is a finding that Natasha Walter also homes in on in her new book, Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism (2010), suggesting (obviously without providing evidence for women’s actual under-achievement compared to men) that younger women confuse women's objectification with women's liberation. In disagreement with this view, I would suggest that the media's superficial and decontextualized tossing around of moral anxieties about girls one minute, only to be replaced by another set of social anxieties regarding the under-achievement of boys the next, serves primarily as a mere distraction from exploring a more challenging terrain. This would encompass the diverse gender inflections attending systemic features of social and global inequality in societies where class, region and ethnicity remain the essential ingredient that will tell us which young women are likely to hope that becoming a glamour model is a useful career move (unless it is to fund their university education as a bowel enterologist) and which boys will be failing in school (most of whom won’t end up as either Wayne Rooney or Dizzee Rascal).

I have dwelt upon this report and its reception because it is so characteristic of the twisted sympathies of a mediascape that is as eager to dwell upon the vulnerabilities of young women as to arraign those same women for their lifestyle choices, while simultaneously smugly highlighting the supposed failures of feminism in its inability to ensure women's well-being, overall. Throughout March 2010, this has been the monotonous tone of assessments of women's situation after 'forty years of feminism'. Thus the journalist Charlotte Raven celebrated this International Women's Day by reflecting that feminism had 'lost its way', informing readers that 'feminism had reneged on its responsibility to present uncomfortable truths', before concluding that 'Paradoxically this generation of women is more vulnerable than any of its forbears. Women’s refusal to acknowledge any weaknesses has made them easy prey.' Raven’s warnings are echoed in the feminist campaigner Kat Barnyard's barnstorming text, The Equality Illusion: The Truth About Women and Men Today (2010), which presents us with the similarly
pessimistic conclusion that women are more oppressed than ever today, yet fail to realize it. Even more explicit upbraiding of women and contemporary feminism for their betrayal of the hopes for female emancipation appear in the tone and text of Nina Power’s One Dimensional Woman (2009). Citing barely any well-known feminist writers, though abundant in its citation of reflections from male philosophers with little interest in or sympathy for feminist politics, Power accuses ‘today’s positive, upbeat feminists’ of abdicating ‘any systematic political thought’ for the celebration of ‘individual identity above all else’.

The price of ‘innocence’

There are many reasons for feminists to remain angry, though they are barely reflected in current concerns about the sexualization of young women, which so often double as objections to young women’s lifestyles. Forty years ago, it is true, we entered the world comprehensively ignorant about sex. When I was a girl, oh, we were truly ‘sweet and innocent’, our bodies not yet eroticized, or rather, not that we knew. Some of us had been abused by Daddies, big brothers, uncles, or other adults close to home – but nobody yet knew this, and young women had few, if any, words for or ways of mentioning it. (And if they managed to do so, they might end up in institutions for delinquent women, which even I, a good middle-class girl, knew something about.) Around our bodies there was a blank, no name at all, in my experience, for whatever was ‘down there’. When I entered adulthood in the 1960s, we could not have been more ignorant about sexuality, contraception or abortion, though we soon enough knew what it meant to be pressurized by men for sex. This is why we almost all, and certainly I, could soon name friends or acquaintances who died in self-induced or backstreet abortions. We quickly registered the lowered gaze and badges of shame surrounding ‘fallen women’, those pregnant outside marriage, and heard the many stories of young women whose lives were ruined, one way or another, by unwarranted pregnancy, shotgun marriages, premature ejection from family homes. We also already knew much too much about the resentment and anger of the respectably married woman, whether addicted to Valium, receiving shock or insulin treatment for depression, or simply intensely bitter over the disappointments of her daily life. As often as not, she was our mother, and very soon would be among our female peers. We did not need feminism, then, to be ambivalent about becoming a woman.

Then something happened. Caught up in the political turbulence of the late 1960s, some women, quite suddenly, seemingly unexpectedly, turned to each other, and that was the birth of Women’s Liberation. It seemed to come out of the blue, because female friends were something we usually barely acknowledged in those days. As every woman knew, one way or another, she lived with a certain embarrassment and shame accompanying the lot of being born female. All glamour, all power, all authority, all independent action, resided with, and only with, men. Returning to what budding feminists wrote about their lives, about our lives, forty years ago, to suggest that young women are worse off today than they were forty years ago is so wholly misguided, so abysmally conservative, that it can only suggest how comprehensively the present manages to write over the traces of a mere forty years ago. That past was truly dangerous, in so many ways, for young women unable to make anything like informed choices about how to organize their sexual lives with dignity and safety. Moreover, strangely, it was the emergence of those wretched pin-ups, of the ubiquity of radical young men’s braggadocio (even when we loved them for it) in insisting on pornography in their alternative publications, that served to wake women up, to shake women up, into asserting our own collective, and, yes, our own individual, rights to sexual pleasure, equality, and freedom from the surrounding landscape of men’s disdain and contempt for women.

This is what pushed us into help make the world Western women now inhabit, when being born female is no longer knowing you exist, absolutely, as a secondary, lesser being than those born a man. I see lads’ mags today as one reaction to young men’s unease and declining power over women. They are sexist and often offensive, though quite how men relate to their frequently ironic and self-mocking text and tone is certainly a question ignored by Linda Papadopoulos. Whatever the gender dynamics in play here, however, the suggestion that some combination of lads’ mags and eroticized female bodies constitutes an overriding force keeping young women powerless, or providing confirmation that feminism failed to shift the situation of women, is pigeon-brained. It is the equivalent to imagining that the young women who (usually fleetingly) take pole-dancing classes or, more lastingly, dress in whatever they see as the sexiest clothes do so to prepare themselves for a life of prostitution, or to display a willingness to service any man in whatever way he fancies.

Feminists, I have said, have reasons for anger, and certainly for sorrow, but far better ones than those mentioned above, beginning with the ever-deepening
social divisions between women. Though women still lag behind men in career paths, should we want to, it is quite as easy to observe their style and demeanour in the upper echelons of authority and power as it is to keep judgemental eyes focused upon young women’s apparent obsession with glamour and self-display. Unlike forty years ago, women today do not lack images of other women as powerful – sometimes all too powerful – agents in the world. The problem is rather that the existence of more women with power and authority at the top end of the social spectrum in itself does little, if anything, to improve the lives of women at the other end; just as the existence of glamour models and pole-dancers does not keep Hillary Clinton from representing US power in global contexts, any more than it did Condoleezza Rice before her. Indeed, the relationship is quite the other way around in the servicing domain. Those sexist and sexualized images of women in the West are not enticing women who can avoid it into domestic care work (or paid sex-work); they are enabling more affluent women to escape the harshest burdens of such labour in order to sustain their careers. Conversely, the new army of paid domestic care and sex-workers are rarely women who grew up surrounded by these titillating Western media productions, but more likely to be women from poorer countries from far afield.

Nor, despite the chidings coming from commentators like Raven and Power, has ‘feminism’ proved quite so feeble as to fail to notice these shifts. For decades there has been a remarkable production of ever more sophisticated feminist scholarship across institutions of higher education (some of it perhaps threatened by cuts to higher education). It was never going to be easy for such erudition to translate into the musings of the mainstream media, with its steady commitment to the proverbial. Moreover, feminism has never been reducible to any single set of theoretical or activist dilemmas, even forty years ago, be they the marginalization and disparagement of women, inflated claims to women’s shared virtues, universal victimhood or the enduring linguistic challenges of their symbolic entrapment in hierarchical difference. Rather, what has been persistently troubling over all these years is finding adequate ways of articulating the similarities and differences between women themselves, as well as between women and men; especially as the uneven developments of technological change and increasingly turbo-charged financial markets have drawn certain sectors of people into privileged cores of its workforce, while ejecting others into ever less protected and exploitable segments of the workforces on which it depends.

The huge diversity in women’s and men’s life experiences is evident, despite and because of the continued hold of gendered markings and sexual preferences as sites of identity, whatever their intrinsic instability. Some veteran feminists, such as Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild, have kept themselves busy recording the voices of those they call ‘global woman’: the distinctly gendered experiences of immigrant domestic labourers, nannies and childminders, forced by economic necessity to leave their own homes and children behind to service the personal needs of others elsewhere.12 There is no way of thinking usefully as a feminist today without thinking globally. Feminism is not dead, nor even resting, and some of us at least are trying still, from whatever bunkers in which we reside, to move forward, to learn from past mistakes, and to be heard.

Notes
In 1982 a wall divided Berlin and made two Germanies. Berlin, unloved and redundant seat of power, more than anywhere was further chipped and scarred by a million traces of the Nazi regime and war. Graffiti snarled out from walls pockmarked by Nazi and Soviet bullets. The wall that cut up the city was a palimpsest of causes and declarations. Some causes never went away. Ever-again repainted graffiti identified the deaths of RAF adherents Gudrun Ensslin, Ulrike Meinhof, Jan-Carl Raspe and Andreas Baader, in high-security prison Stammheim in 1977, as state murders. Those were the days when The German Issue was first published. With too much dense text, a reader turns first to the images. Found or made, these string their way through the texts like a montaged no-man’s-land film strip – grey walls, edgy punks facing riot police or contorting to display tattoos, fragments of city maps, like corners of swastikas, pale corpses in the concentration camps next to rows of VWs in the factory, and again walls, walls, THE WALL. If the images merged into one monotone parasomnia called Berlin, the texts were more various: many were articles that Peter Gente, founder of Merve Verlag, had salvaged from here and there. Sketches, newspaper articles, interviews with artist–intellectuals, film-makers, refugees from the East of all political stripes, transvestites and lesbians, student activists ten years after, RAF terrorists dead and alive, squatters and Greens. There were William Burroughs’s thoughts on terror as political action; Baudrillard on Mogadishu; Foucault on Boulez doing Wagner; Blanchot on Berlin; and, strangely, a short piece by Heidegger from 1950 on his relation to National Socialism: ‘A strange blindness pushes forward in this way the wearing away and inner dissolution of the last substantial strengths of our people.’ In short, a compendium of stuff and nonsense, bulletins from the ‘Frontstadt’, as it styled itself.

An aperçu from Lotringer: ‘The wall of history is totally visible here. I’d rather see it that way than hidden in people’s minds.’ The text is about exposure – of how the wall makes concrete political stakes obscured in other geographies. The drama of life in Berlin in the 1980s is to be envied and feared: that it need be so stark, contested, hard. In 1982 the collection’s ideas were to be transported out from that pressure-cooker city to the USA. Two years earlier, Semiotext(e) has scored with a book on Autonomia/Italy. Here was more news from Europe – strange movements thataway, something exotic, fertile. Reissued in 2009 (with one additional interview with Volker Schlöndorff), and again appearing two years in the wake of the Italian Issue’s (re)publication, the book likes to pretend it snapshots a city on the brink of change, just before collapse, its prescient editing revealing the outlines of the end to come. The wall models binary thinking. The solution – as Merve Verlag and Semiotext(e) promulgated it – was a Deleuzean loosening of hardened blocs. Undermined and so destabilized was to be East and West, conceived here, in a super-naïve way, as Capitalism versus Communism. In the dialogue between Germany and the USA, between Merve and Semiotext(e), what was really at stake was the reception of French thought – the canon of Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Virilio, Lyotard and so on – by both (as publishing sensation). The book’s frissons stem, however, from the ever re-versioned modes of hardness, punk fundamentalism, unrepentant terrorists, anti-Semitism without end, ‘authentic’ life in the East versus faux Americanism in the West, anti-Americanism alongside American anti-ism, and, here and again, the love of the Wall (and the possibility of being shot from both sides). The persistence of the marginal might be showcased here, but not a loosening. No walls in the mind or elsewhere are being dismantled before our eyes.

A recurrent reference in the book is the RAF milieu. As Neue deutsche Welle singer Annette Humpe suggests in her interview, in 1982, ‘it was becoming fashionable to know somebody who knew somebody who maybe knew somebody like Ulrike Meinhof’. Thirty years on and that fascination refuses to disappear. German publishing, it would seem, cannot get enough stuff by people who knew people who knew… One of the most recent takes comes from a never-more-
intimate relation to that first generation of terrorists. It goes back to origins, of the RAF movement and of an individual. It stems from a folder of letters from 1968–9 between Gudrun Ensslin and Bernward Vesper, which fell into the hands of their son, Felix Ensslin, along with a long letter from Ensslin to her lover, Andreas Baader, to whom she had transferred affections just after the birth of Felix. This folder had written on it Notstandsgesetz – emergency act. This referred to the act passed by the Grand Coalition of SPD and CDU in May 1968, an act that provoked countless demonstrations. Vesper altered this to read Notstandsgesetze aus Deiner Hand – ‘Emergency Acts From Your Hand’ – the personal and political are enmeshed. Ensslin languished on remand and was subsequently imprisoned in Frankfurt. In April 1968 Ensslin, Baader, Thorwald Proll and Horst Söhnlein engaged in their first terrorist activity: they ignited fires in two Frankfurt department stores. There was 650,000 DM worth of damage, mainly caused by the sprinkler system set off in one of them. No one was hurt, though one store worker was traumatized. This led to Ensslin and the others being sentenced to three years in prison. They were released temporarily after nine months, while an appeal was considered. The appeal rejected, they went underground. Ensslin and Baader returned to Berlin in 1970, where Baader was rearrested. Ensslin, together with one man and three women, one of whom was Meinhof, freed Baader (and killed a man) during an outside visit. The Red Army Faction was formed and this first-generation core group was operative in terroristic activities until their arrests – and deaths – in the 1970s.

The eighty-odd letters record political discussions and emotional states. Vesper’s first letters to Ensslin are raw and beseeching. Ensslin distances herself from being drawn into a discussion of blame and guilt around leaving Vesper for Baader. Over time, Vesper stops trying to persuade Ensslin to return to him and concentrates more on relating the day-to-day practicalities of bring up their young child. Ensslin demands constant updates on Felix’s development (at this time mothers could not see their children when on remand/in prison). Recorded here are the private aspects (the fear of losing Felix), the personal burden (the difficulties of managing childcare and intellectual work), the political aspects (what is the right, liberated way to bring up a child – what is a socialist crèche, what of children brought up in a commune). This last aspect is one of the most interesting and it records the shifting discussions and attempts to politicize the private and personal during turbulent days in which the modes of everyday life are being brought into question. Vesper tries to persuade Ensslin that the bourgeois self is over or should be. She is writing to someone who no longer exists. She, on the other hand, and her comrades, he observes, are speaking from a grave that was made two or three years ago. Political insight and personal developments are entwined in the letters. Later in the correspondence this intertwining of the personal and the political develops, on Vesper’s part, into a critique of monogamous relations between men and women. He attacks Ensslin’s relationship to Baader, which he condemns – in an effort to be wounding as well as politically correct – as conventional, a petty-bourgeois form, from which she should emancipate herself. However genuine the sentiment (though he could not face communalizing his and Felix’s existence and got by with a succession of employed women helping him to bring up Felix), his own investment in this analysis is, of course, obvious. The politics of childhood have a particular resonance in relation to Vesper’s own upbringing by his well-known Nazi poet father, the methods and consequences of which he was reflecting on in this period in his own autobiographical study – Die Reise. They are adamant they will not inflict the errors of their own ‘fascistic’ upbringings on their child.

Ensslin’s letters to Vesper sometimes contain hints of a political analysis or a defence of her political actions. At one point, having been admonished by Vesper for the stupidity and uselessness of bombs in shops, she refuses to condemn the action and states that, if it is madness, then it may be the very madness that the European socialist movement has been missing for 100 years. For his part, publicly, Vesper defended her.
Included here is his ‘Baader, Ensslin, Proll, Söhnlein, We Will Not Defend Ourselves in Front of this Type of Justice’, a response to the highly politized trial and passing of sentence on the arsonists. The context of the ‘action’, according to Vesper: ‘Vietnam is the Auschwitz of the young generation.’ This explained the level of support among youth that the defendants enjoyed. Ensslin’s letters, in the main, are pragmatic and consoling. They concentrate on reassurances to Vesper that she loves Felix and wants to see him again, whatever the ultimate arrangements become. She asks Vesper to buy her things – make-up, cigarettes – there are long wish lists. She requests money. She asks for reading materials – Proust, Luxemburg, Mao, Freud, Wittgenstein. She draws pictures for Felix and sends him messages in baby language. The letters are not reflective, not in the way that Vesper’s are. Nor are they as consistently ‘literary’; rather their style shifts abruptly from clichéd sentimentalism to hard-edged observation to banality to agitprop. Only her letter to Baader is passionate, a wild, pleading of whirling language, violent imagery, intertwining of private fantasy and political will (‘we are brutal with ourselves … this may lead to us being equally brutal and cold with everyone else’), culminating in the affirmation of ‘Hell, YES! Andreas, Praxis, You said it!’ The final letters between Vesper and Ensslin evidence the breakdown in relations between them, ending their story (though, as Ensslin herself observed, ‘Our story may have ended, but it is not the story as long as Felix exists) on a sour note.

Felix Ensslin’s afterword is remarkable. He is the subject of so many of the letters, and yet it is from a time that he cannot remember. Instead he has had a lifetime of dealing with a public image, a voyeuristic fascination with his mother and the many traces left behind by her and by his father. On receiving the folder of letters, he was older, he notes, than either of his parents came to be. One died in prison. The other killed himself in 1971. He reflects beautifully on the extension of the principles of equality and community that prevail on the camping trip to society as a whole. He distinguishes between three versions of equality of opportunity. Bourgeois equality of opportunity distributes advantage ignoring status differences, both formal (e.g. serfdom) and informal (e.g.

He comments on how people would try to persuade him that his mother was acting on behalf of all the children, for a better, fairer future, and that is why he had to sacrifice his relationship with her. Some of that anger and hurt comes through here, as well as tenderness. It is an intelligent, sweet, not bitter, moving meditation on something greater than one child’s lost relationship to his parents. In Felix Ensslin’s effort to reflect on the curious intertwinnements of personal and political histories and in its resolute insistence on the continuing openness and nuance of even the most seemingly closed histories, it instantiates something of that loosening that the editors of the blaringly monochrome and hysterical reissue of The German Issue might learn from.

Esther Leslie
race). Left-liberal equality of opportunity targets social disadvantages more broadly, but allows individuals to benefit unequally from their natural talents. Socialist equality of opportunity goes further still, seeking ‘to correct for all unchosen disadvantages, disadvantages for which the agent cannot reasonably be held responsible, whether they be disadvantages that reflect social misfortune or disadvantages that reflect natural misfortune’.

This presentation of different conceptions of equality distils a generation’s worth of discussion among anglophone political philosophers – discussion to which Cohen himself has been an important contributor (notably in ‘On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice, Ethics 99, 1989). There is a case for quibbling over how he differentiates between left-liberal and socialist equality of opportunity. John Rawls in A Theory of Justice famously dismissed the distribution of natural talents as ‘morally arbitrary’ and therefore not something from which individuals are entitled to benefit. Another egalitarian liberal philosopher, Ronald Dworkin, seeks to construct his own conception of equality of resources in a way that compensates individuals for the ‘brute bad luck’ that arises from being less talented than others.

Indeed, one might argue that there’s nothing especially socialist about a form of equality under which ‘differences of outcome reflect nothing but differences of taste and choice’, given the emphasis it places on creating the conditions under which freedom of choice can prevail. One reason why Cohen might not be too worried about this objection is that he regards even socialist equality of opportunity as an insufficient basis for a socialist society. Community is required as well: under socialism ‘people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another’. This involves, in particular, people providing each other with goods and services because they need or want them, and not because the providers are materially rewarded for doing so.

Once again, Cohen here restates a theme of his more technical philosophical work. Indeed, his two preceding monographs – If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich? (2000) and Rescuing Justice and Equality (2008) – develop in great detail the argument that an egalitarian society requires not simply a just Rawlsian ‘basic structure’, with an appropriate distribution of rights and resources, but also an egalitarian ethos shaping the motivations of individual members of the society.

Thus Rescuing Justice and Equality develops an earlier critique of Rawls’s Difference Principle, according to which socio-economic inequalities are legitimate to the extent that they benefit the worst off. Rawls here relies on the idea that the more talented require material incentives in order to maximize their productive potential, and thereby to help to increase output, from which more resources can be allocated to the least advantaged. But, Cohen objects, this is not an argument that could be made by the more talented to the less if they all formed a ‘justificatory community’ whose members, where they have to react to the actions of other members, require these others to justify their actions. We may decide to pay a kidnapper the ransom he demands, but that doesn’t mean he could justify to us what he has done. The claim for incentives made by the more talented, Cohen suggests, is conceptually (and morally) comparable to a kidnapper’s demands.

These considerations lead Cohen to contend that it is desirable that the principles of equality and community governing the camping trip be extended to a society-wide scale. He is less sure, however, that socialism is feasible. This is not for the familiar reason that it contradicts human nature since he conceives this as a complex mixture of selfishness and generosity. The problem is rather that the failure of ‘existing socialism’ suggests we lack the ‘social technology’ to replace the market as a system of economic coordination. Cohen thinks that market socialism – that is, a society where the market integrates cooperatively owned enterprises – may be feasible, but he regards this very much as a second-best alternative to capitalism. This is partly because it would give greater rewards to the more talented people who formed their own cooperatives.

Perhaps a stronger objection for Cohen is that market socialism relies on the same motivations as ‘the hypertrophy of selfishness’ that drives capitalism. Markets rely on ‘base motives … the history of the twentieth century encourages the thought that the easiest way to generate productivity in a modern society is by nourishing the motives … of greed and fear. But we should never forget that greed and fear are repugnant motives.’ And thus the book concludes, with Cohen reaffirming simultaneously his hostility to the market, his uncertainty about how to replace it, and his commitment to seeking nonetheless to do so.

Why Not Socialism? is a lucid and accessible statement of some of Cohen’s deepest preoccupations. In a sympathetic review, Ellen Meiksins Wood, one of the most trenchant critics of Cohen’s interpretation of Marx, argues that there is an inner connection between what she describes as the ‘transhistorical determinism’ of Karl Marx’s Theory of History and his later work on justice and equality: ‘having absorbed the operating
principles of capitalism into a general law of history that didn’t allow for a historical explanation of how capitalism differed from other social forms, it now seemed reasonable to explain its specificities in purely moral terms’ (‘Happy Campers’, London Review of Books, 28 January 2010).

This is a bit too quick for several reasons. First, there is more to be said in favour of Cohen’s interpretation of historical materialism than Wood allows – but I shall not pursue this point here. Second, Wood is careful not to dismiss Cohen’s later work, noting that his ‘philosophy of moral choice was … very fruitful’. The implication is that it should be considered on its merits independently of however one assesses Karl Marx’s Theory of History. Indeed, once we grant, as I think we must, that in a socialist society resources would be scarce and differing individual needs and wants could not be spontaneously reconciled, then the kind of philosophical scrutiny of distributive principles to which Cohen devoted his later years is indispensable.

Third, I’m sure Cohen would deny that he conceptualized capitalism ‘in purely moral terms’. Wood is right nevertheless to point to the relative thinness of his account of capitalism, even in Karl Marx’s Theory of History. The reason for this is, however, less the supposedly transhistorical character of his version of historical materialism (any theory of history worthy of the name must posit explanatory mechanisms whose scope is broader than any specific society), than Cohen’s long-standing rejection of Marx’s value theory. This led him in Karl Marx’s Theory of History to seek to restate the Marxian critique of capitalism in terms that don’t depend on value theory. Perhaps because the results were evidently weak and unsatisfactory, he seems subsequently to have confined himself to exploring the moral foundations of a post-capitalist society.

In consequence, Cohen fails to appreciate that the problem with market socialism isn’t simply that it relies on ‘repugnant motives’. Marx’s value theory conceptualizes capitalism as constituted by the social equalization of labour via competition among interdependent but autonomous producers and by the exploitation of labour-power within the units of production. Market socialists seek to separate the first from the second. This would be harder to achieve than Cohen acknowledges because the imposition of market discipline on individual units of production is likely to generate hierarchies of power and inequalities of power within the workforce.

Market socialism is thus an unstable form of economic coordination: the pressure of competition is liable to undermine the cooperative organization of production. Indeed, in distancing himself from the Marxist critique of political economy, Cohen loses sight of what Wood calls the ‘systemic imperatives’ that drive capitalism towards economic crisis and environmental destruction. Perhaps for this reason he was unwilling to explore (despite some ineffectual prompting on my part) the models of democratic planning developed by anti-capitalist economists such as Michael Albert and Pat Devine.

These criticisms do not in any way diminish the depth and subtlety of all Cohen’s work, or his abiding socialist commitment. He begins Rescuing Justice and Equality by invoking Marx’s discussion of ‘human emancipation’ in ‘On the Jewish Question’:

In the ideal socialist society, equal respect and concern are not projected out of society and restricted to the ambit of an alien superstructural power, the state. If the right principles are, as Marx thought, the ones that are right for real, everyday, material life, and if they are practised in everyday life, as the socialist ideal utopianly envisages that they will be, then the state can wither away.

Whatever pressure Cohen seems to have felt to distance himself from Marxism, his philosophical explorations seem never to have strayed too far from their original source.

Alex Callinicos

Pop more bubbles, please


What has been variously termed ‘the animal question’ in philosophy, as in many other disciplines, has become of increasing importance in recent years; though, as Cary Wolfe has argued, critical theory and cultural studies have rather lagged behind in this regard (something which may be regarded as, in fact, an understatement, given their all too humanistic focus). Yet this supposed ‘animal question’ is not a new question – as diverse contemporary studies also reveal – and it is not one question, for many questions emerge here about knowledge practices, living practices, killing, eating, and wider ecological or
environmental practices, as well as the many politics of human–animal entanglements, in what might better be seen as more-than-human worlds.

An entry, as provided here by Brett Buchanan, into the ways twentieth-century philosophers engaged with animals and environments more generally can be found in Being and Time, where Heidegger admonishes the ways that biologists misuse the notion of environment, treating it as something given. Heidegger is followed in this by Merleau-Ponty, in the course notes on Nature and The Visible and the Invisible, though in differing ways and seemingly without much sense of what the former wrote. Both stress relations between animals and environments in which fleshy bodies become inseparable from the immediate environments they are of and become within. For Deleuze, the focus, when he writes of animals (and animals are not at all of major importance, but an example in his work), is on much more open becomings in terms of the relations between entities that point towards a geophilosophy of flows, folds and lines of flight. But all make use of Jakob von Uexküll’s researches to help drive their differing philosophies in ways that centre animal bodies, though Deleuze carries this forward most radically (as well as perhaps problematically) in terms of seeking to develop (macro-)politics that might ring out transformations in current human–animal ecological political relations in their hugely diverse forms. As such this is a book about how aspects of Uexküll’s researches are put to use by these philosophers in a way that stretches notions of being into becomings and conceptions of environments and beyond.

Uexküll’s work has gradually risen in prominence throughout the twentieth century in European philosophy, though, it must be said, rather less so in the discipline of biology itself, broadly understood. (Agamben disagrees; in The Open: Man and Animal he argues Uexküll has become one of the greatest zoologists of the twentieth century and a founder of ecology, a view that perhaps partly reflects a disjunction between European and North American perspectives on the rise of ecology, or, more likely, an overly philosophical understanding of how ecology developed, rather than how ethology was more lately developed.) It has also been claimed that Uexküll helped pave the way for cybernetic approaches in biology. He has been claimed as a forerunner of what is termed biosemiotics or zoosemiotics – the emerging cross-disciplinary study of the meanings and signs of organisms that effectively focuses on the study of the signs of life – aspects of which Uexküll developed first in his Theoretische Biologie. Those readers who do not regularly peruse the pages of journals such as Sign Systems Studies or Semiotica, or the writings of Thomas Sebeok, are perhaps more likely to have come across unelaborated references to Uexküll in the works of Deleuze and Guattari, or more lately in Agamben, Elizabeth Grosz and Paul Bains among others. But his work was also something of an influence on Cassirer, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Maturana, and many others. This is rare company indeed for a somewhat marginal early-twentieth-century biologist.

Brett Buchanan does warn us not to read too much into how Uexküll’s work influences the philosophies and onto-ethologies of these aforementioned philosophers, but he does seek to show how they each made use of Uexküll’s work. (Agamben again disagrees, arguing that Uexküll ‘strongly influenced’ both Heidegger and Deleuze – but Buchanan knows this; he just resists such epithets.) As such, this is a subtle book, a welcome engagement with a renewed focus on certain strands of biophilosophies of the twentieth century, with a particular focus on animals at a time when the so-called ‘animal question’ is moving through a whole ream of different disciplines. It is a reading that goes deeper than Agamben’s chapters on Heidegger and Uexküll in The Open, and takes the reader in different directions, as well as seeking to give some contextualization of his work and Kantian-derived philosophy.

Buchanan provides an introductory chapter setting out some of the basic concepts and philosophy of biology in Uexküll. Often overviews of Uexküll’s work can quickly become very technical, but here Buchanan gives an outline that has much more of a philosophical slant than a biological or semiological one. He also engages in a brief discussion of Uexküll’s relationship to Darwinian theory at the time. For Buchanan, Uexküll castigated Darwin for generating ‘hopeless confusion’ with his theory of evolution. Yet, as he states, this supposed critique of Darwin seems also to emerge from a host of misinterpretations, and is in many ways unconvincing. For Uexküll ‘nature’ has a design where beings develop through an unfolding inner force or morphological plan: a view (according to Ernst Mayr) that did not make his theories acceptable to most biologists of his day. Nonetheless his theories do not hold to a teleology of nature. Instead, Buchanan suggests that Uexküll retains a kind of neo-vitalism. However, this does not seem to have been Heidegger’s view of Uexküll, and Heidegger seemed to have been able to sniff out a (neo-)vitalist quite well. Uexküll was sympathetic to vitalism but did not regard himself as being one. Nor was Uexküll anti-evolution, being neither a Darwinian
nor a Lamarckian in this respect, but took a third way that came out of the work of the development theories of animal organization proposed by Karl Ernst von Baer. As Buchanan argues, Uexküll had different priorities than Darwin’s focus on natural selection, being more interested in the physical development of the organism and how ‘the animal’, together with its environment, forms a whole system, and how animals and environments are implicated beyond the skin of the body. Critical for this inseparability was the concept of Umwelt, or better Umwelten, the hugely differing subjective ways in which differing animals perceive their worlds – a radically non-anthropocentric perspective for biology. Umwelten are described as like a soap bubble that ‘circles around and contains the limits of each specific organism’s life.’ Inside this bubble certain things are significant and meaningful, whilst ‘outside’ other things are as good as non-existent. These are not monadic worlds cut off from others; rather, Umwelten are intersubjective but different for each organism or type of animal, and are continuously produced by interactions between animals and other things in their subjective environments. It was this neo-Kantian-based notion of subjective Umwelten that seems to have been most important for Heidegger’s uptake of Uexküll’s work, as well as that of both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, with the latter finding in Uexküll someone who counts the affects of bodies as a ‘Spinozist of affects’.

Yet, even as Buchanan does seek to contextualize the work of Uexküll, there would have been something to be said for a more direct engagement with the ambivalence towards Darwinian evolution that runs through certain strands of continental philosophy in the twentieth century: an ambivalence, or more, that is given most force in Deleuze and Guattari’s utter rejection of the Darwinian vertical ‘tree of life’ – a metaphor of arborescence was been prioritized and branded in the 150th anniversary of Darwin’s publication of *On the Origin of Species* by the London Natural History Museum and the BBC over the course of their 2009 festivities. According to Buchanan, Heidegger was drawn to Uexküll’s research ‘because he finds in him an accomplice in biology in order to think through the concept of the world’, and he is generally seen as the biologist for whom Heidegger has nothing but praise. Still, Heidegger remained ultimately frustrated with Uexküll for not radicalizing his theories, especially in terms of the fundamental difference between animals and humans. The result, as is well known, is that an animal behaves within an environment (or sometimes does not have an environment, but a milieu) but not, for Heidegger, within a ‘world’: only ‘man’ has a world, while ‘the animal’ is poor in world. (You can forget about the stone altogether.) The big feature here is the 1929–30 lecture series *The Fundamental Concept of Metaphysics*. This text has been pored over a lot in recent years, including in Agamben’s *The Open*. But Buchanan provides a slightly different twist, for he wants to tease out, in more detail, the ontological status of animal behaviour in Heidegger’s work. He does this in a way that still feels fresh, although, particularly towards the end of the second chapter on Heidegger, one does wish here that his discussion of Uexküll’s Umwelten included more of his biological research to show how Heidegger leaned on this and converted it into his travails through animal behaviour and his distinctions between ‘man’ and ‘animal’. Indeed, the lack of clearer explication of Uexküll’s work, beyond repeated iterations of how metaphors used to describe the Umwelten have been taken up by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, then Deleuze (and Guattari), is perhaps the general
weakness of this book. Instead we get an in-depth outline of how animals were incorporated into the latter’s philosophies to do differing things, such as, for Deleuze, to smash out of the notion of a bubble, so as to make animals even more radically relational. In this Uexküll disappears for long sections of the book, while Buchanan never really looks at the possible relevance to recent philosophy of any of Uexküll’s concepts beyond that of his *Umwelten* notion. Moreover, the lack of any real engagement with work from biosemiotics, and semiotics more generally, means that the area where Uexküll has most clearly risen to prominence, and where a massive amount of scholarship (some good, some not so good, as ever), has been done on his relations with philosophy, is somewhat passed over.

Still, this is a compelling book, even if the greater concentration on Heidegger means that *Onto-Ethologies* constitutes something of a lost opportunity to have engaged in more detail with other traditions of thought. This is particularly true of the recent emergence of Deleuze and Guattari as philosophers who, for many, are thought to aid an ecological politics that would be more ecological than ‘ecology as a science’, with all the repercussions this would have for the ‘animal question’. Recent work by Patrick Hayden, Bernd Herzogenrath and others is seeking to push at a radical naturalism that Uexküll can also be seen to be generating. This book may aid these linkages and connections, helping to produce a more philosophically engaged politics of human–animal practices.

Chris Wilbert

New asceticism


The problem that Jim McGuigan’s impressively wide-ranging book addresses – capital’s capacity to incorporate dissent – is an old one. Under neoliberal hegemony, however, capital’s omniphagic capacity to consume all exteriority became supercharged. Capital did not merely absorb disaffection, it fed on it. McGuigan identifies the metabolization of the desires and discourses of the 1960s’ counterculture as the crucial moment in this process. He draws upon Thomas Frank’s doctoral thesis, *The Conquest of Cool*, which argues that, far from undermining capitalism, the countercultural rebellions of the 1960s ‘effectively – and ironically – refreshed the cultural and political economy of corporate America’.

‘Coolness’ is a necessarily nebulous concept, in part because it is always shifting (hence the phenomenon of corporate ‘cool hunters’, charged with pursuing and capturing it). McGuigan shows that the concept of ‘coolness’ originated in Africa, and, in America, ‘coolness’ – from jazz to hip-hop – has always been associated with black culture. Business schools and management gurus seized upon the rhetoric and imagery of the counterculture in the 1960s, ‘effectively – and ironically – refreshed the cultural and political economy of corporate America’.

The legitimacy of market forces in any sphere of life, consumer sovereignty, widespread participation in capitalism through share ownership, anti-government rhetoric, ‘cool’ culture and the argot associated with it, all these elements emanate from the US but are now global in their reach, representing the popular appeal of neoliberalism around the world

One of the stories of the last thirty years has been the annexing and subduing of bohemia by business, and McGuigan’s discussion of bohemia proves to be one of the most fascinating sections of the book. He
returns to Marcuse’s concept of art as ‘the Great Refusal – the protest against that which is’. Whilst conceding that Marcuse’s thought was in the end too ‘totalizing’, McGuigan defends Marcuse from the common criticism that he was a ‘cultural elitist’. This kind of dismissal of Marcuse is of course typical of the flattened out ‘democratization’ which is very much a part of the new spirit of capitalism, and which has successfully smeared Marxism at the same time as it has denigrated intellectualism. As Jameson argues in his essay ‘Actually Existing Marxism’ (recently collected in *Valences of the Dialectic*), ‘the repudiation of Marcuse at once takes a political and an anti-intellectual form (who is the philosopher-king appointed to adjudicate between the true and the false in these matters, etc.?')

McGuigan traces the Great Refusal back to the Paris of the 1830s and the 1840s. From the start, bohemianism was caught in a relationship with the bourgeoisie that was both symbiotic and antagonistic. Even as they excoriated bourgeois mores, the bohemians depended on the bourgeoisie for money, and the way that a series of art movements – realism, naturalism, impressionism, cubism – first of all challenged and then were absorbed into the dominant culture is the paradigm case of the process of rebellion and recuperation which has characterized capitalist innovation. ‘Each movement challenged academic art, was at first rejected by the academy and eventually usurped the old academy and became the new one, in a dialectic of refusal and incorporation.’ Yet this process seems to have been short-circuited by the emergence of something like the Young British Artists of the 1990s. Here, the moment of ‘rebellion’ and incorporation became simultaneous. With someone like Damien Hirst, an attenuated and anodyne sense of ‘shock’ was coterminous with – even preceded by – his championing by business. The partnership between Charles Saatchi and Hirst brought advertising and art – which had shadowed each other throughout the twentieth century – into a tight synergy. If, before, advertising had plundered art, now art – like every other form of culture – had become a form of advertising. In these conditions, ‘the Great Refusal’ becomes a passé romanticism, and the required attitude is a chic realism which fully embraces consumerism. The tastemakers in this era of hyper-conspicuous consumption are not artists, but celebrities: McGuigan gives the examples of David Beckham and Michael Jordan. Nike’s marketing of the Air Jordan sneakers is for McGuigan ‘an exemplary case of the articulation of the articulation of a life-enhancing sport (basketball), blackness and global – that is, American – consumer culture under the dominant sign of “cool”’. Yet, as Naomi Klein long ago made us aware, Nike is also notorious for its exploitative outsourcing of labour to sweatshops. Capitalism’s ‘cool’ veneer – McGuigan also points to mobile phones, manufactured in factories in Shenzen, where there is insufficient ventilation and a high concentration of toxic substances – is typically a front for the most exploitative processes.

Even as it cites the resurgence of socialism in South America, McGuigan’s concluding chapter on anti-capitalism maintains that ‘capitalism is here to stay, having survived any conceivable challenge to its reason to be’. This might have seemed to be the case at neoliberalism’s moment of high pomp, but things appear rather different in the wake of the financial crash. Capitalism may not have instantly perished, as some hoped, but neither has it survived the crash intact. Only a few years ago, capitalism confidently proclaimed itself the only system that worked, but we are now in a situation in which nothing seems to work. As Martin Wolf declared in the *Financial Times* last year, ‘the assumptions that ruled policy and politics over three decades suddenly look as outdated as revolutionary socialism’. *Cool Capitalism* does a thorough job in identifying what anti-capitalism is still up against, but the book begs the question: is it necessary to create a ‘cool’ anti-capitalism, or should we be seeking to overcome the ‘coolness’ that has supported capitalism for the last thirty years? ‘Coolness’ has in many ways served as a synonym for ‘contemporary’, and it is, without a doubt, imperative that anti-capitalism resist cool capitalism’s identification of modernization with neoliberalization. Yet is it also necessary to defeat ‘coolness’ itself? In place of consumerism’s slick insouciance, can we posit a new ascesis, a new Great Refusal?

Mark Fisher
New new (graphic) journalism


Early in Footnotes in Gaza Maltese-American comics artist Joe Sacco shows the development of Khan Younis in the Gaza strip from a refugee camp in the late 1940s to an overcrowded twenty-first-century town. A sequence of panels shows Palestinian refugees putting up tents, then building brick huts, then building bigger houses. Sacco makes use of a whole page to show the symmetrical layout of row after row of identical single-floor dwellings. Turning the page, the reader is brought up to date with a double-page spread showing the ground-level housing replaced by apartment blocks, the only way for the overcrowded camp to expand being upwards. This destitute vista transitions into an episode that shows Sacco accompanying an official from UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Work Agency) on a visit to a Palestinian family of eleven who share two rooms. The mother enthusiastically encourages Sacco to take photographs to show the outside world the conditions in Khan Younis. The panels show Sacco doing just this; the skinny, crop-haired, bespectacled figure with his camera photographing the single bed and the bundles of clothes hanging up in plastic bags. Two panels apparently reproduce photographs of a broken cooker and leaking sink, the visuals tethered to the narrative by Sacco’s superfluous commentary and the insistent requests from the mother that he continue to take pictures.

This brief but telling episode encapsulates Sacco’s by now recognizable signature: the embedding of his persona within the narrative conducting research, the processual investigation charted by the gathering of research through oral testimony, which in turn is transformed into the narrative discourse. Sacco’s persona remains ever present even as he tries to merge into the background, his own features ironically caricatured in contrast to his more detailed representations of the faces of eyewitnesses who are often shown speaking directly to the reader, breaking the fourth wall. Sacco has almost single-handedly created the genre of war journalism in the comics medium with his graphic reportage from conflict zones such as the Bosnian enclave in Safe Area Goražde (2000), postwar Sarajevo in The Fixer (2003), and the West Bank and the Gaza strip during the First Intifada in Palestine (2001). This style draws explicitly from two sources, New Journalism and underground comix, that combine to produce Sacco’s characteristic method, equal parts Michael Herr and Robert Crumb.

Sacco’s work is itself emblematic of a wider historical movement in anglophone comics that has opened the medium up to non-fictional discourses such as memoir, autobiography and journalism. Possibly the most famous example of this is Art Spiegelman’s anthropomorphic holocaust memoir Maus (1991), but it also encompasses such diverse and random examples as Jewish socialist everyman Harvey Pekar’s ongoing American Splendor (1976–), and Alison Bechdel’s coming-of-age and coming-out chronicle Fun Home (2006). This trend is further evidenced in francophone bande dessinée such as Marjane Satrapi’s memoir of growing up in post-revolutionary Iran, Persepolis (2003), Guy Delisle’s Shenzhen (2000) and Pyongyang (2004), which dealt with the author’s experiences of working in China and North Korea, and, most recently, Emmanuel Guibert’s dramatic recontextualizing and re-narrativizing of journalist Didier Lefèvre’s photographs taken in Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion in The Photographer (2009).

Footnotes in Gaza was partly inspired by a passing reference in Noam Chomsky’s The Fateful Triangle (1983) that examined the relationship between America, Israel and Arab Palestinians, arguing that American media operated a pro-Zionist bias. Chomsky made a passing reference to the killing of Palestinian civilians by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in Khan Younis in 1956. In 2001 Sacco started working with Harper’s journalist Chris Hedges on a piece that would look at how people in Khan Younis were coping with the Second Intifada. Though the killings were a significant part of the town’s history, references were cut from the published article. Sacco’s research had further unearthed details of another incident at about the same time in the neighbouring town of Rafah in which 111 Palestinians were killed by the IDF, this time buried deep in a UN report. Such incidents, writes Sacco, constitute ‘footnotes to a sideshow of a forgotten war’, referring to the post-imperial debacle that was the Suez conflict. Footnotes divides somewhat unevenly between accounts from Khan Younis, and what Sacco originally set out to cover, and those from Rafah, which he became progressively more interested in and which form the lengthier section in the book.
The fragmented flux of the comics page captures the sense of frustrated relation between past and present as panels and narration shift from one temporal and spatial location to another in an instant, the articulation between these two narrative strands performed over the larger unit of the page and across the totality of the work. Sacco repeats the use of the whole page or the double-page spread at key moments throughout Footnotes, most notably in his depiction of the Khan Younis killings, which shows side-by-side page-length illustrations of a fourteenth-century castle: the first shows dead bodies piled against the wall of the castle in 1956; the second shows the castle fifty years later, the walls covered in graffiti and posters, cars parked against where the bodies had lain half a century before. This sense of fragmented flux is carried over into the content: Sacco’s narratives proceed episodically and by a process of accumulation of detail that incorporates analepses and prolepses, and often pause to consider the problematic nature of veracity and the unreliability of memory. Sacco is fully aware of the problems associated with traumatic memories and often foregrounds this. One instance of many across not just Footnotes but his entire body of graphic journalism is the testimony given by Khamis, a survivor of the Khan Younis massacre, who remembers his three brothers dying in striking detail. The problem is his family and friends insist Khamis was not in Khan Younis at the time. What Sacco calls the ‘twining of grief and guilt’ leads to a disjuncture in the account and highlights the problem of eyewitness testimony. But Sacco insists that such digressions should not cloud what he calls the ‘essential truth’, namely that 275 Palestinians were shot that day in Khan Younis by the IDF, including Khamis’s three brothers.

The use of eyewitness accounts forms an important part of Sacco’s work, especially in his ability to represent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and the Middle East through the oral accounts of Muslims, the very people that Chomsky accuses the American media of under-representing. But Footnotes comes with a hefty research-based documentary scaffolding to buttress these accounts. As well as scouring UN archives, Sacco employed two Israeli researchers to comb the archives of the IDF and the Knesset, as well as press archives such as that of Kol Ha’am, the organ of the Israeli Communist Party. Reliance on the archive brings with it different problems, of course, particularly if records are missing or inaccessible, and this is another problem that Sacco has to negotiate. These available sources find their way into the fabric of the text in the extensive appendices (mistakenly omitted in the first print run by the publisher Jonathan Cape) which include transcripts of interviews with Israeli military personnel, extracts from newspaper accounts and UN reports. Sacco also names bibliographic historical sources, notably right-wing Israeli historian Benny Morris, with whom he met in Jerusalem.

What Footnotes and other non-fiction comics dramatize is the productive tension that inevitably arises when attempting to represent the past through subjective filters and elliptical records. The appeal such texts make to authenticity is somewhat undercut by the artifice of the comics page which advert its own form through the use of a hybridic system of signification that draws on and often collapses the distinction between the verbal and the visual. This dialectical tension is something that the best non-fiction comics incorporate into the texture of their narrative discourse, resulting in what Charles Hatfield has called, in his 2005 book Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature, ‘ironic authentication’. What Sacco’s work shows, and enacts, is how the conflicts that he reports on are always already heavily mediated. In acknowledging the filtering of these conflicts, Sacco calls into question the very possibility of neutral, objective accounts that seek to represent both sides’ point of view but singularly fail to take into account the grossly uneven status.
between those sides. *Footnotes in Gaza*, rather than being simply a sequel or continuation of his earlier *Palestine*, caps an incredibly rich sequence of works from Sacco that provokes serious questions about the representation of history as well as constituting a valuable counter-archive in itself.

*Antonio Venezia*

**The customs man**


In a startling moment in his ‘Conversations with Brecht’, Walter Benjamin recalls being intensely moved during one of their discussions ‘by a power that was the equal of that of fascism – one that is no less deeply rooted in the depths of history than fascism’s power’. Erdmut Wizisla’s study implicitly elaborates upon this ambiguous power as that of friendliness, to be understood not in some facile way as intimacy, but in that specific sense which Benjamin evokes in his commentary on Brecht’s Lao Tzu poem. The friendly confrontation that enables the customs man to extract the wisdom of the exiled philosopher in the poem produces that humanity which, in the darkest moments of existence, demands we take up the cause of the oppressed. For thinkers like Brecht and Benjamin, the value of such friendliness as a medium of exchange was to be measured in terms of productivity. Benjamin’s epistemology, no less than what he calls his ‘existential economy’, was underpinned by an insistence that truth lies in the movement between extremes. The friendliness of ‘dangerous’ relationships, in which he included his own with Brecht, was necessary and productive to the extent that it permitted him a ‘freedom to juxtapose things and ideas that are considered irreconcilable’.

Those ideas normally considered irreconcilable in Benjamin’s thought are historical materialism and theology, embodied by the contrasting figures of Brecht and Gershom Scholem. Wizisla’s subtitle might suggest a balancing response to the latter’s ‘Story of a Friendship’ and a re-evaluation of Scholem’s verdict that the influence of Brecht upon Benjamin’s thought was ‘baleful’ and ‘disastrous’. Instead, and in spite of the meekness of its philological exactness and theoretical reserve, the book threatens the complete annihilation of Scholem’s inadequate biographical concept of friendship and the intellectual claim upon Benjamin that this grounds. Wizisla draws attention to a remark, taken from the archived minutes of the editorial meetings for the aborted 1931 journal *Crisis and Criticism*, which form the centrepiece of this book, that indicates the relationship between theology and materialism within Benjamin’s thought: ‘There have always been movements, formerly predominantly religious ones which, like Marx did, start out with the radical demolition of icons. Two research methods: (i) theology; (ii) materialist dialectic.’ That the refusal to attempt their juxtaposition is more dangerous than the risk associated with failing is a principle that underpins Benjamin’s whole philosophy.

The danger of failing, as Wizisla cautions, is that of remaining caught in an extremism inscribed as limiting concepts at the borders of Benjamin’s thought: Zionism and Stalinism. It is ironic that Brecht detected an acquiescence to what he called ‘Jewish fascism’ in Benjamin’s affinity with Kafka, at the spot in which the critic, for all the complexity of their interpretative disagreements, remained closest to Scholem. For the charge, which Wizisla quite rightly contextualizes in its political relation to Zionism (a reaction to the alienating power of modernity that in its rejection of social categories produces a longing for leadership), is identical to that which Benjamin eventually levels at Brecht’s earlier poetry. The ‘pious falsification’ of his own commentary had failed to clarify the extent to which Brecht’s poems were ‘implicated’ to the same degree in the development of the Cheka under Stalinism, he writes, where ‘the worst elements of the Communist party resonate with the most unscrupulous ones of National Socialism’. If theology and materialism share a common methodological intent, the failure to reconcile them points to a shared ideological consequence.

‘Friendliness’, Benjamin insisted, ‘does not abolish the distance between human beings but brings that distance to life’, and the ultimate success of Wizisla’s book hinges on the capacity to articulate neither the biographical proximity nor the material productivity of Brecht and Benjamin’s friendliness – easily measured in terms of shared months in exile or literary output – but to revive its theoretical one. Wizisla’s research into *Crisis and Criticism* provides the opportunity for such a task, and the journal on which both artist and critic collaborated closely assumes a virtual existence in his book through its reconstruction in the important central chapter and in the appendix’s reproduction of the archival documentation. As director of both the Brecht and the Benjamin archives in Berlin, Wizisla’s...
intention is to correct the omission of the former’s value and importance for the construction of the constellation of friendships which have determined the reception of the latter’s thought. This concern also informs the new critical edition of the Benjamin archive (projected at twenty-one volumes), directed against the organizational and editorial distortions it has suffered at the hands of Adorno, Scholem and Tiedemann. For this reason, it is a disappointment that a significant section (Edition und Forschung) in the first chapter of the German edition of Wizisla’s book has been omitted from the English translation, for it includes an important discussion of the controversy surrounding the afterlife of Benjamin’s work.

Wizisla’s descent into the archives clears the intellectual space necessary to survey the extent of Brecht and Benjamin’s friendliness without, however, retrieving its vital theoretical ground. It establishes, for example, how Benjamin’s interest in Brecht led to a first meeting as early as 1924, indicating that the former’s admiration for Brecht’s poetry is consistent with the philosophical and aesthetic tendencies of his earlier writings, and not simply predicated on a shared ‘Marxist turn’. Conversely, Brecht’s capacity to tolerate Communist Party orthodoxy became a political dividing point in their collaboration on the journal, without leading to a divergence of theoretical understanding. Benjamin had withdrawn his editorial involvement in response to the content assembled in preparation for the first edition by the working committee led by Brecht. These articles toed the Communist Party line with regard to the leadership role assigned to the intellectual in the revolutionary process, ignoring the need for revolutionizing the existing means of intellectual production in turn. The failure to do so rendered the socialist aesthetic amenable to fascist appropriation, contradicting the insights Benjamin found confirmed in Brecht’s own artistic practice. These signals of theoretical continuity suggest, Wizisla argues, that the omission of Brecht’s name from Adorno’s work on Benjamin is ‘far from accidental, and cannot be explained by reference to his philosophically accentuated interpretation of Benjamin’.

The book sparks with hints of what these theoretical affinities might be, without providing any philosophical elaboration for this encounter. Whilst Wizisla emphasizes their shared commitment to the contemporary renewal of criticism, the minutes for the journal suggest Brecht sought to restore criticism’s relation to the concrete and empirical by way of the ‘objectivity’ of a scientific empiricism. In contrast, Benjamin insists on proceeding via the philosophical legacy of the Kantian concept of criticism, a view consistent with his earlier writing on Romanticism. There is a point of contact between these two positions, which Benjamin must have sensed and which is the true foundation of their theoretical reconciliation, and it lies in a specific kind of philosophical pragmatism which informs their shared understanding of the methodological principle of historical construction. Günther Anders claims that ‘Benjamin understood Brecht far better than Brecht understood Benjamin’, but it is also tempting to conclude that Benjamin understood Brecht better than Brecht understood himself. The desubjectivizing experience associated with modern forms of artistic practice (baroque Trauerspiel, Brechtian poetry, epic theatre) – which typically dominates discussions of the productivity of Brecht and Benjamin’s friendship – must be understood in this broader philosophical context. Intellectual production is removed from the hands of the oppressors when it encounters such a pragmatism. For this, ‘the customs man also deserves our thanks’.

Matthew Charles
During the summer months of 1934, Walter Benjamin stayed with Bertolt Brecht in Svendborg, Denmark. The charm of Erdmut Wizisla’s book, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship* (reviewed above), is deepened by a set of three photographs showing the two absorbed in the early stages of a single chess game. The first (right) is well known and was used as the backdrop at a recent conference prompted by Wizisla’s book (from which all correspondence citations here are taken). The second photograph, not shown here, is one move further on: Benjamin, moving a knight, cups it in his hand while pondering the square on which it should land. The third photograph, taken from behind Benjamin (below), is the key.

The change of angle reveals a black pawn, which is obscured by the queen in the other two photographs. This small detail opens the game to interpretation.

It is now possible to represent the position from the first photograph. Brecht has the white pieces, Benjamin is black. The position is distinctive and suggests that both are more than ‘idlers in the garden of chess’. The configuration of the central pawns – white’s placed on the dark squares and black’s on the white squares forming a chain – proves sufficient to identify the game as having begun with the opening known as the French Defence. (Brecht, with the white pieces, opened the game by moving his king’s pawn two squares forward, to which Benjamin replied by moving his equivalent pawn, but only one square forward.) Moreover, it is possible to reconstruct these first moves. In English algebraic notation:

1 e2–e4 e7–e6  2 d2–d4 d7–d5  3 c4–c5

Slight variations in move order are possible. It should be underscored that the possibility of reconstructing the game means that the position on the board reveals a certain logic: the play is beyond that of the beginner, or ‘woodpusher’. Wizisla records that the daily routine
in Denmark (to which Benjamin returned in 1936 and 1938) included ‘after a meal, one or two lengthy games of chess’. These games were played without accompanying conversation, but the significance this repeated, taciturn struggle held for each opponent can be gauged by the references we find in various items of correspondence. Brecht writes twice to Margarete Steffin about the new chess set he had purchased cheaply: ‘My chess pieces are as big as Benjamin’s.’

Besides regular play, the choice of the French indicates possible contact with the chess theory of the time. First played in a correspondence match between Paris and London in 1834, the theory of the French was largely developed in the 1910s and 1920s by Aron Nimzovich (or Nimzowitsch), whilst the Latvian grandmaster was living in exile in Copenhagen. Nimzovich is the author of what is generally recognized as the first modernist work of chess theory, the 1925 Mein System. (Marcel Duchamp is reported to have said, ‘Nimzowich is my God’.) Brecht’s third move (3 e4–e5) initiates the Advance variation, also championed by Nimzowich when facing this defence.

Here is the position from the third photograph. In the interval, Brecht has moved his bishop twice (d2–e3, e3–f2) and made two pawn moves (one of which, the move of the rook’s pawn, is weak). Benjamin, generating persistent threats against Brecht’s pawns, has developed both knights to strong squares. It is Benjamin to move. The following sequence is likely:

9 Bd2–e3 Ng8–e7 10 h2–h4 Ne7–f5 11 Be3–f2 Nb8–c6 12 c2–c3

The final position is roughly equal (material is level), but Benjamin’s play between the photos has been the more focused. Benjamin appears to be the stronger player, though in a letter to Gretel Adorno in 1938 he admits that he ‘seldom wins’. Perhaps the competitive Brecht, who would hustle for gingerbread or whisky, practised assiduously in the intervening four years. In 1936, Steffin alludes to his improving play: ‘[now] he frequently beats [Hanns] Eisler’.

Brecht has moved only one of his remaining pieces, the bishop; the rest wait on their original squares. We are provided with a grounding reference for Benjamin’s diary entry from 12 July 1934. There he records Brecht’s musings on the new game they should devise for Karl Korsch’s visit: ‘where the function of every piece changes after it has stood in the same square for a while: it should either become stronger or weaker. This way the game doesn’t develop, it stays the same for too long.’

If the preceding play here is indicative, then the game in the photos may indeed have stayed the same for a long time. The dynamic tension in position has twice been prematurely released – Benjamin’s pawn move c5–c4 and Brecht’s exchange of pawns on the f6 square. The white pawns and black pawns are now locked in place across the centre of the board: the pawn structure acts as a barrier, keeping the opposing pieces apart and leading to a drawn-out game. It is even possible that Benjamin’s seventh move was 7 … f7–f5 seeking total closure of the centre (Brecht would then have captured on f6 en passant).

Wizisla cites a letter to Benjamin from Steffin: ‘As far as your chess-playing is concerned, I still remember your “attrition tactics” [Ermüdungstaktik]. Do you still practise them?’ (27

*As depicted in the diagrams, English algebraic notation labels each column of the chessboard with a letter (a–h) and numbers each rank (1–8) beginning at the bottom left-hand corner from white’s point of view. Each square is thereby identified through a coordinate: white’s queen’s rook stands on square ‘a1’, his queen on ‘d1’. etc. Each piece is accorded a letter: K for king, Q for queen, R for rook, B for bishop, N for knight (the pawns receive no initial). Each move is then numbered in turn and notated by starting with the piece moved followed by the coordinates for its original square and ending with the destination square. Moves that capture opposing pieces are marked by the ✖ symbol. ‘1 e2–e4’ records that for his first move, Brecht moved his king’s pawn two squares forward.
October 1937). This judgement on his preferred style is corroborated by Helene Weigel’s teasing: ‘I would like to know how you are … with all your unfriendly peculiarities. I have begun to learn how to play chess, and so there would be an opportunity for you to annoy me to death’ (20 January 1935).

If this is a typical game, then this would be a fair description of its likely course; the play allowed its full, grinding character given that no chess clock can be seen in the photo. Without such a device to regulate the speed of reply, Benjamin sank into thought. As Brecht wrote in 1936, when inviting him back to stay in Denmark, ‘The chessboard lies orphaned, and every half hour a tremor of remembrance runs through it: that was when you made your moves.’

In the second half of 1941, on learning belatedly of his friend’s fate, Brecht wrote four poems in tribute to Benjamin. One, a brief quatrains, begins with a word similar to Steffin’s, who had also died shortly before. These lines belong with the photos and game considered here.

Ermattungstaktik war’s, was dir behagte
Am Schachtisch sitzend in des Birnbaums Schatten.
Der Feind, der dich von deinen Büchern jagte,
läßt sich von unsereinem nicht ermatten.

‘An Walter Benjamin, der sich auf der Flucht vor Hitler entleibte’

Tactics of attrition are what you enjoyed
At the chessboard seated in the pear tree’s shade.
The Enemy then drove you from your books;
The likes of us? Ground down, outplayed.

‘To Walter Benjamin Who Killed Himself While Fleeing Hitler’

As Stanley Mitchell noted in his introduction to the New Left Books edition of Benjamin’s Understanding Brecht, this pessimism has its dialectical complement in Benjamin’s 1939 commentary on Brecht’s poem ‘Legend of the Origin of the Book Tao Te Ching on Lao Tzu’s Way into Exile’. Here, Ermattungstaktik patiently wear down the hard and the imposing as ‘yielding water in motion … wears down granite and porphyry’. Benjamin’s concluding sentence of his ‘Commentaries on Poems by Brecht’ caps this thought with its vital component: ‘Whoever wants to make the hard thing give way should miss no opportunity for friendship.’

Note
The chess diagrams were prepared using Diag Transfer 3.0.1 by Alain Blaisot. Photographs courtesy of Akademie der Künste, Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv, Berlin (photographer unknown).
In the twenty years since the nationalist takeover of state power in Croatia, the idea of collective good, beyond its mandatory and narrow identification with the nation, has been absent from public discourse. In those rare moments when it appeared on the margins of public life, evoking the economic aspects of the collective, the state and media were successful in containing it, narrowing it down, rephrasing it ideologically, and preventing it from spreading in undesired forms. For the previous forty-five years, Croatian citizens had enjoyed the benefits of free education and health care. Even the most efficient ideological engine, the liberal parliamentary capitalist one, could not erase that overnight. As less and less remained in the carcasses of industries to be ripped apart and stolen from the people (in Yugoslavian socialism, they were formally owned by the people, not the state), the capitalist vultures turned to one of the remaining mainstays of the 45-year socialist project: free education and health. Their problem this time was that they found a formidable opponent. The privatization of education has been introduced gradually – most likely in the hope that no one would notice. Not this time.

Two large student occupations at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, one in spring 2009 (lasting for thirty-five days) and one in the autumn (lasting for fourteen days), were executed through a series of strategic moves: openness, discipline, refusal of negotiations; statements by different anonymous students making personalized attacks by the state and media impossible; utilizing links and support for rebelling workers and peasants; distribution of a seventy-page ‘Occupation Cookbook’ and Workers-Peasants FAQs, printed and distributed to occupied factories. Through all this, and the simple yet powerful demand ‘free publicly financed education at all levels, available to all’, the students have stunned the state-capitalist machinery, pushing it onto the back foot. Consequently it has been forced to defend and in many cases publicly discuss what has thus far been a standard process of Croatian political-economic life: uncritical implementation of the worst aspects of the neoliberal doctrine. This was by no means the usual ‘we don’t like neoliberal educational reforms’ chant from the Left, supplanted by student activism, but a constantly theorized and developed, coordinated attack on the ideological foundations of capitalism in Croatia and its parliamentary undemocratic form, through which the enormous amount of socially distributed wealth produced in Croatia under socialism has been either destroyed or stolen under the guise of ‘dysfunctionality’.

Unusually, only regular classes were blocked – the administration, the library, the bookshop and other facilities within the faculty building were allowed to function as usual. Plenums at which all decisions were made concerning the functioning of the occupied faculty were open to participation and voting to everyone who turned up, not just to students. These were directly democratic: delegates could be elected to ‘communicate the decisions and the will of the plenum, as well as pass back offers and questions to be considered by the plenum’. But ‘the plenum cannot at any time elect a representative who can make decisions or agree to certain terms on his/her own.’

Viktor Ivančić, co-founder of Feral, the long-standing and best critical political journal of the past twenty years, and the sharpest political commentator, put it succinctly:

Depersonalizing their public appearances, organizing student plenums (plenary open to all citizens) daily, rejecting selecting of the delegates or charismatic leaders, refusing negotiation scuffles and trades, girls and boys from the Faculty of Philosophy have unmasked the lie of so-called representative democracy, which, after passing through party and inter-party machines, appears as an authoritarian model. (April 2009, http://bit.ly/b0pUBW)

Ivančić’s thinking cuts to the bone: not only have the students demonstrated, for almost a year, the possibility of a new model of participatory, inclusive direct democracy in practice, but they keep showing the extent to which the capitalist parliamentary model is corrupt, undemocratic, and directly against the interests of all but a tiny minority. A central argument the students bring to the fore, which challenges the core tenet – financial independence based on managing its
own resources – of the nationalist state project, is that
by entering the EU the national state is signing away
a wide range of rights and benefits that the vast major-
ity of citizens had in abundance under (international)
Yugoslav socialism.

Financial violence

This is a scenario that was a significant factor in the
break-up of Yugoslavia, and in the social disorder and
wars in other states subject to neoliberal violence: physical violence is preceded by financial violence. The
conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund
(IMF) upon Yugoslavia in the early 1980s in order that
it pay back its debt gave rise to nationalist groups, and
eventually assisted them in claiming their stake on
power, transforming their nationalism opportunisti-
cally into an anti-socialist project. The Yugoslav state
was unable to withstand financial violence: it fell apart
in the war led by nationalists seizing the moment of
crisis, exploiting the long period in which citizens had
to queue for basic foods like milk and bread, resulting
from the Yugoslav leadership’s failure to defend the
country from IMF pressure. In the early years of the
new century, after a decade of systemic destruction
and theft of the state economy by the Croatian govern-
ment and its criminal accomplices, Croatia sold off its
entire banking system, earning the praise of the EU for
‘liberalizing’ over 94 per cent of the financial sector.
Croatia thus repeated the Yugoslav socialists’ mistake
from the 1980s: failing to defend itself from imperialist
financial attacks, it thereby narrowed the possibilities
for state intervention in a time of crisis.

The rosy picture that neoliberal revolutionaries have
painted for the past thirty years, which directly and
violently shaped the fortunes of both Yugoslavia and
Croatia, has perished with the financial crashes of
2008. The logic is almost painfully simple: had not
the state intervened in the markets with huge amounts
of money, effectively nationalizing large parts of the
financial sector, it would have collapsed.

Although the decisions made by Rohatinski, the
governor of Croatia’s National Bank, can be seen as
proof that the Croatian state still has mechanisms of
internal economic protection from external financial
upheaval, the worst economically is yet to come for
Croatia. A recent report compiled by the Austrian
National Bank paints a depressing picture of rapidly
growing debt and declining production. Croatian
foreign debt was around €10 billion in 2000; at the
end of 2009 it was over €42 billion, close to 100 per
cent of GDP. Between 1993 and 2002, around 75 per
cent of foreign investment was related to privatization
projects, mainly in the banking, telecommunications
and pharmaceuticals sectors. In other words, it was
not investment, but a sell-off of massively undervalued
assets built up during socialism.

This history of financial violence, imposed from
outside, but accepted and executed internally, is the
story of a repeated mistake – the 1980s in Yugoslavia,
the 2000s in Croatia – with no lessons learnt by the
ruling political elite, so far. The student occupations
in Croatia speak up against this violence, against neo-
liberalism, imperialism and capitalism, and for new
egalitarian political projects, based not on twentieth-
century militaristic hierarchical and representative
models (the political party, parliament, the unions),
but on directly democratic models of political organi-
zation, starting in the workplace.

Few peoples of the world have more to say on this
topic, having witnessed its failure and learnt from it,
than the people of ex-Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia’s self-
management was a bold yet failed effort whose theo-
retical re-evaluation is overdue. The technologies for
self-management and direct democracy did not exist at
the time to make such a participative model efficient,
or open, or transparent, or accountable to its egalitarian
political subjects and to society at large. The actions
of Croatian students show that the means of com-
unication and organization (as well as the means of
production of discourses and organizations) we have
at our disposal today allow for a new, directly demo-
cratic set of organizational structures and processes
– blogs, email lists, plenary sessions, working groups,
all used without representative bodies. However, for
their utilization to be effective, many strategic political
decisions, informed by the application of theory to the
concrete situation in which intervention occurs, have
to be made, and, most importantly, carried out with
discipline.

Not only do rebelling Croatian students deserve
our unconditional support and comradely critique; it
will be a missed opportunity for the left anti-capitalist
struggle if their work is not assisted, studied and
reapplied appropriately to other contexts. One of the
founding approaches of many martial-arts disciplines
is that a force directed against us is often best not
confronted frontally, but better undermined by being
contained and redirected against political enemies.
Badiou, Negri and Žižek insist that the idea of com-
unism needs to be thought anew, outside of the
worn-out forms of the party and unions. Students in
Croatia have demonstrated how it ought to be: bold,
directly democratic and strategically open.

Toni Prug
Colin Ward, 1924–2010

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olin Ward, who died on 11 February 2010, was the leading anarchist thinker and writer of postwar Britain. Ward’s anarchism was at once constructive, creative and immensely practical. It drew critical but sympathetic attention from many outside the anarchist movement, and arguably it still holds lessons for contemporary radical thought.

Born in 1924 in suburban Essex, Ward gravitated to the anarchist movement while serving in the army during World War II. Following the war, he became a regular contributor to the London-based weekly anarchist newspaper Freedom, beginning a lifelong association with Freedom Press. From 1961 to 1970, he edited Anarchy, easily the most interesting anarchist theoretical journal published in the UK and one of the most interesting of any political stripe in that interesting decade. Through the journal, he laid out the ideas that would culminate in his 1973 book, Anarchy in Action.

Ward’s anarchism rests on three main ideas: pluralism, the presence of anarchy in existing society, and a focus on problem-solving. First, Ward argues that all societies solve problems using a variety of mechanisms. They use commercial, market-based techniques; they use authority and directive and bureaucratic techniques; and they also use techniques of mutuality – techniques of mutual aid and cooperative self-help. Within this pluralist framework, ‘anarchy’ refers to the space in which the latter techniques of mutual aid and cooperative self-help predominate. The aim of anarchism should be to try to push society in the direction of greater anarchy in this sense – to shift the balance of society’s pluralistic problem-solving in a more anarchic direction.

Second, related to this pluralist perspective, is Ward’s claim that anarchy is already very much part of our social world:

far from being a speculative vision of a future society … anarchy is a description of a mode of human organization, rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our society … the anarchist alternatives are already there, in the interstices of the dominant power struc-

The incremental anarchist

ture. If you want to build a free society, the parts are all at hand. (Anarchy in Action)

Examples of anarchy in action that Ward gives include Alcoholics Anonymous, Friendly Societies, squatters’ movements, tenants’ housing co-operatives and efforts to bring workplaces under ‘workers’ control’. The anarchist aim should be to build out from already existing anarchy in society, extending its coverage to wider and wider spheres of social life: To do this, anarchist thinking must, in Ward’s view, have a resolutely practical, problem-solving focus. Anyone wanting to theorize the intricacies of ‘autonomy’ or ‘anarchy’ as abstract concepts will look to Ward’s writings in vain. His work is overwhelmingly concerned with discussion of concrete issues such as housing, urban planning, education, welfare and transport, trying to show how the anarchic techniques of mutual aid and cooperative self-help might be applied.

Housing was a particular interest – he spent his early career working as an architect – and illustrates his general approach. Here he was highly critical of state-heavy efforts, led by middle-class housing professionals, to provide housing for the working classes. In an open letter to the Labour MP Tony Crosland, then shadow minister for housing, Ward drew out the paternalism he saw in the social-democratic tradition:

You … see the homeless, the ill-housed and overcrowded and the newly-weds just coming up for membership of the Housing Shortage Club, as the inert objects, the raw material of policy, waiting
Against this paternalism, Ward asserted the principle of ‘dweller control’ of housing, exemplified in tenants’ co-operatives, self-build projects and, not least, squatters’ movements.

Ward’s resistance to paternalism inevitably brought him into conflict with the Marxist tradition. In his 1985 book When We Build Again, Ward refers to the ‘ludicrous polemics among Marxist pundits’. Reflecting on the claim that council-house provision is ‘decommodification’, Ward points to the older use of the word ‘commodity’ to refer to that which is useful or commodious. He then argues that, in this sense, the mass council housing of the postwar period has indeed been a tremendously successful experiment in ‘decommodifying’ how many working-class people live.

It would nevertheless be quite wrong to see Ward’s anarchism only in terms of a series of interventions in specific policy areas. In a 1968 interview for BBC Radio 3, he described himself as ‘an anarchist-communist, in the Kropotkin tradition’. And underpinning the various interventions there is indeed a unifying vision drawn from the work of Kropotkin and from Ebenezer Howard’s original conception of the garden city. Ward edited a version of Kropotkin’s Fields, Factories and Workshops for Freedom Press in 1975 with commentary on what he saw as its contemporary relevance in the new era of energy crisis and stagflation.

The vision is of a society in which local communities are the prime political unit and in which economic activity is localized around a mix of agricultural/horticultural and industrial production. The citizen might work on her allotment on Monday, teach for the next three days a week for the Teachers’ Guild in a local school (where children’s attendance is not compulsory) and then spend Friday in the Community Workshop making items for a Local Exchange and Trading Scheme. One evening a week might be spent at a meeting of the neighbourhood council.

Ward stood, in effect, at the confluence of two traditions. On the one hand, he knew his anarchist classics, particularly Kropotkin’s work, and he drew on them. On the other, he was inspired by the diffuse traditions of working-class and popular self-help – resolutely practical traditions concerned to get things done, to make the world better in some simple but important and measurable way, and which have little time for theoretical niceties. He sought to bring the traditions into dialogue, for their mutual benefit.

Needless to say, his ideas were – and remain – controversial. Within the anarchist community, some saw his incrementalist perspective as objectionably revisionist, if not defeatist. On the other hand, anarchist theorists of our own day, such as Uri Gordon, have claimed Ward as a thinker who anticipated the idea of an ‘anarchism of present tense’ (Anarchy Alive: Anti-authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory, Pluto, 2008). Outside of the anarchist community, Ward’s ideas found a receptive but also critical audience. David Goodway, in an important conversation with Ward, published as Talking Anarchy, points to the affinities between Ward’s ideas and those of the sometime Labour, sometime SDP thinker and policy entrepreneur Michael Young.

Ken Worpole, editor of a recent Festschrift for Ward, Richer Futures (1999), argues that Ward’s work contains valuable resources for thinking about a new kind of politics, but also adds that ‘Ward’s anarchism has been strongly antagonistic to most forms of state provision, and some writers, myself included, do not always share this particular antipathy.’

Ward frequently appealed to Martin Buber’s argument that governments tend to possess more power than is required by the given conditions…. The measure of this excess … represents the exact difference between Administration and Government. I call it the ‘political surplus’… The political principle is always stronger in relation to the social principle than the given conditions require. The result is a continuous diminution in social spontaneity. (Buber, ‘Society and the State’, Anarchy 54, 1965)

Buber also argued, however, that ‘In history there is not merely the State as a clamp that strangles the individuality of small associations; there is also the State as the framework within which they may consolidate’ (Paths in Utopia, Routledge, 1949). This indicates, in a rough and ready way, the spirit in which some on the Left have acknowledged Ward’s contribution while also wishing to affirm at least a potentially constructive role for the state – albeit, perhaps, a radically transformed state – as a facilitator of mutual aid and cooperative self-help. Nevertheless, it is striking just how far Ward’s work as an anarchist has found a receptive audience beyond the anarchist community.

Ward’s achievement lies in his detailed exploration of what one might call, in an unWardian turn of phrase, a contemporary socialism of the ‘lifeworld’: a socialism of the local and convivial, of direct mutuality and democracy. His work will continue to provide rich material for reflection for those interested in building a socialism in which the social is not subsumed either by the market or by the state.