





# CONTRADICTIONS

A Journal for Critical Thought

2017 /2

# CONTRADICTIONS

volume 1 2017 number 2

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Graphic design © Markéta Jelenová

Printed by Tiskárna Nakladatelství Karolinum, Ovocný trh 3, Prague 1

Web design Karel Klouda

Published in Prague as the 475th title of © Filosofia, publishing house of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy, Jilská 1, 110 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic

This volume appears with financial support from the Czech Academy of Sciences.

ISSN 2570-7485

ISBN 978-80-7007-503-6

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## EDITORIAL

You hold in your hands the first volume of the journal *Contradictions*. We aim to provide a medium for texts that critically engage our history and our current moment, and which do so with intellectual rigor, but which are able to address readers beyond the limits of the academy. We offer our pages to writers who, without sacrificing scholarly focus and precision, react to contemporary social problems and contribute to the development of emancipatory critical thought.

*Contradictions* will be published in Prague, and we devote a significant portion of the journal to intellectual traditions of our region, known as Central or East-Central Europe. This means bringing these traditions to bear on the present, and it means bringing them into conversation with international discussions of emancipatory social change. We aim to analyze and formulate theoretical tools for grasping the past and present in their contradictory social dynamism, as manifestations of a contradictory social reality. Hence our name – *Contradictions*.

Thanks to the specific historical experience of our region, dominated in the recent past by the regimes of the so-called Eastern Bloc and by the market capitalist regimes that followed them, Central and Eastern Europe provide a distinctive standpoint from which to undertake social critique. The specificity of this East-Central European perspective thus makes it worthwhile to communicate the thought of the region to an international public. We hope in this way to move beyond the simple dichotomy of East vs. West and, in doing so, to go beyond the limits of what is known as “post-communism,” not by ignoring the specificity of this region, but by placing it in global historical context. We are convinced that the problems facing the East and the West are, in the world of globalized capitalism, analogous and interconnected.

*Contradictions* will be published once a year as a single volume comprised of two issues, one in English and one in Czech and Slovak. The Czech and Slovak issue is intended to cultivate critical discussion within this specific linguistic milieu, and to introduce Czech and Slovak readers to internationally significant intellectual trends. The English issue enables us to communicate in a larger linguistic space, where we bring together local and international debates, and where we introduce English-language readers to previously untranslated, and in some cases relatively unknown, works written in Slovak and in Czech. We hope in the future to add translations from other Central and Eastern European languages, and to offer a point of convergence for critical discussions in and about the region.

*Contradictions* will publish, above all, 1) articles that delve into the often overlooked or forgotten history of radical left thought in our part of the world, and which assess this legacy's contemporary significance; 2) articles that describe and develop related and parallel traditions of thought originating in other regions, bringing these traditions into conversation with the traditions of East-Central Europe; 3) articles that analyze Soviet-type societies and their troubled relationship with historical and contemporary movements for social emancipation; and 4) articles that critically engage with the ideological assumptions and social conditions of "post-communism."

Two principal motivations underlie the founding of this journal. Both derive from the specific historical conditions under which East-Central European thought has developed.

Our *first* motivation is to address the ways in which critical thought in the region has been shaped and concealed by restricted access to the public sphere. Shifting regimes of censorship and publicity have, at various times, placed publication off limits to an array of traditions and authors, who were compelled to carefully walk the lines between what could and could not be publicly said, and who were sometimes forced to develop their thought entirely out of the public eye. Many of the most compelling ideas developed in the region remained largely unknown. Yet even after the change in regimes beginning in 1989, many of the ideas that had been kept from public went still unnoticed, while many of the ideas that had entered the public sphere before 1989 were discredited by their association with a now-discredited regime. The fact that the regimes of the Eastern Bloc declared themselves to be Marxist led to a general discrediting of Marxism as such and of leftism more generally. As a result, intellectual traditions of emancipatory social critique remained underdeveloped and marginalized after 1989. *Contradictions* returns to these half-forgotten traditions in order to bring them back into public view.

But *Contradictions* is not only a historical project aimed at presenting intellectual traditions of the past. It also aims to develop these traditions further, facing the contemporary problems and contradictions of neoliberalism, that is, of capitalist society in the specific form it took during the period when Communist Party-rule in East-Central Europe ended and a new, more market-oriented economic system came to predominate in the region and in most of the world. This is why – and this is the *second* motivation behind the journal's founding – we devote considerable space to emancipatory theories developed internationally, including Marxism in its multiple varieties. In this region known as "post-communist," where governments in the recent past called themselves Marxist and proclaimed the goal of human emancipation, there is relatively little knowledge of a range of emancipatory social theories that have been extensively developed in other parts of the world.

Our journal's goal, put simply, is to provide a medium through which it may become possible to develop the best traditions of radical emancipatory thought that have been suppressed and repressed in East-Central Europe, and, by critically developing these traditions, to contribute to the development of emancipatory thought on a global scale



– to bring the specific perspective of East-Central Europe into contemporary discussions of radical critical thought, to develop a dialogue between traditions, and to provide a platform for this dialogue.

\*

At present, most critical thought is channeled into one of two genres of writing: on the one hand, there is academic writing; on the other, there is journalism. The former gives us clearly and cautiously articulated claims, carefully selected evidence, highly formalized arguments, and long discussions of “existing literature.” The latter gives us brief, suggestive, punchy interventions into the discussions of our passing moment. The former leaves little room for creativity of style. But the latter gives little time for elaborating arguments, developing ideas, and moving from momentary commentary toward general insight.

Both genres have their merits. But there is one important kind of writing that fits neatly into neither genre: the theoretical, philosophical essay. We have in mind here the genre of writing that includes most classic works in the modern history of ideas, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourses* through Walter Benjamin’s “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” to Karel Kosík’s *Dialectics of the Concrete*. This was once a genre of writing highly cultivated in Central Europe. Yet now, when we look around at existing publications, it strikes us that if a new Václav Havel were to write a contemporary “Power of the Powerless,” he would have almost as much trouble as his predecessor finding a journal to publish his work.

The pages of *Contradictions*, we hope, will help remedy this state of affairs, providing space for theoretical essays of high scholarly value that escape in one way or another the generic constraints of academia. We place these more freely written essays alongside more traditional scholarly articles, together with others that skirt the boundaries between these genres. We offer them all to a critical public both in and out of the academy. Our intellectual project aims both at the development of (largely academic) knowledge and at the informed critique of (largely extra-academic) society.

\*

The Czech and Slovak issue of *Contradictions* 2017 begins with a piece for discussion entitled “The Post-Communist Consensus and Historical Understanding,” by Petr Andreas, who argues that emotional and moral antipathy toward “communism” has inhibited many people’s ability to *understand* communist discourse, and, thus, to effectively analyze it and (we might add) to criticize it.

Adam Votruba then takes us from the examination of post-communist and “communist” discourse to an alternative conception of social emancipation. In his article “The Basis of Capitalism Is Interest,” he presents the thought of German-Argentine economist Silvio Gesell, whose work on debt and radical monetary reform – both issues of contemporary concern – remains largely unknown to Czech and Slovak readers.

Both of these main articles appear with abstracts in English.

We follow with a Czech translation of György Lukács's essay "What Is Orthodox Marxism?" The translation was first prepared by Lubomír Sochor in 1968–70, but it has remained unpublished until today.

This is followed by a 1993 interview with Karel Kosík by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt and Martin Traine entitled "A Free World Depends on Its Citizens," now translated from German to Czech.

Our series of book reviews includes an extended review essay by Juraj Halas on Michael Heinrich's introduction to the thought of Marx; Martin Vrba on a recent Czech translation of Alain Badiou's *Manifesto for Philosophy*; Martin Nový on Werner Bonefeld's *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political and Economy*; Miloš Caňko on *Texty v oběhu* (*Texts in Circulation*), a collection of Czech translations of radical literary theory, edited by Richard Müller and Josef Šebek; and Stanislav Holubec on Czech sociologist Miroslav Petrušek's *Texty z pozostalosti* (*Posthumous Texts*).

We conclude the Czech and Slovak issue with an article tracing the history of the term "ideology," especially as it appears in the work of prominent Marxists, written by Petr Kužel, Šimon Svěrák, Roman Rakowski, and Michael Hauser.

The English issue of *Contradictions* 2017 begins with a block of articles on the theme "Marxism after Marxism." Here Wolfgang Fritz Haug takes us through the contradictions and still-unrealized potential contained in the history of Marxism. Nick Nesbitt follows with an attempt to recuperate Marxism from its problematic history of (mis)interpretation. And Daniel Keil addresses a major contemporary school of thought, the so-called "New Materialisms" that have been proposed as an alternative, non-Marxist line of emancipatory critique. Keil points to problematic aspects of the New Materialisms and argues instead for a new interpretation of Marxism that responds to the New Materialisms' criticism.

Our second thematic block, "Hegelianism after Hegelianism," follows directly from the first. Djordje Popović and Eric-John Russell both call for a return to a kind of Hegelian Marxism, or Marxist-inflected Hegelianism, after the critique of Hegelian Marxism carried out by phenomenology and post-structuralism. Popović takes on Heideggerian phenomenology and Heidegger-inspired Marxism, calling for a return to Hegelian speculative thinking as a means for overcoming overly simplistic distinctions between materialism and idealism. Russell focuses especially on the limitations of Marxist interpretations of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* that have taken for their starting point the "Master-Slave Dialectic"; he calls instead for a reading of the *Phenomenology* inspired by György Lukács's concept of reification.

In one final article, Peter Steiner too draws on Lukács's concept of reification, finding in it a tool for understanding unexpected similarities in the thought of literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky and political theorist Carl Schmitt, whose subject matter, style, and political orientations were, at least on the surface of things, diametrically opposed. Both,

however, were given to privileging the singular over ordinary, familiar – in Lukács's terms reified – reality.

We follow these original articles with two interviews, one with Hungarian philosopher G. M. Tamás, conducted by Lukáš Matoška, and one with radical leftist Czech dissident and former member of the Fourth International Petr Uhl, conducted by Petr Kužel.

Next we publish a translation of Karel Kosík's 1958 article "Classes and the Real Structure of Society," an important contribution to the theory of class and of materialism, which has never before appeared in English.

We conclude with two reviews: Joseph Grim Feinberg's essay on Alexandros Kioupiolis and Giorgos Katsambekis's volume *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today*, and Mark Bergfeld's critical look at Ilja Trojanow's novel *Macht und Widerstand*.



# MARXISM AFTER MARXISM



# ON THE CONTRADICTIONS OF MARXISM\*

*Wolfgang Fritz Haug*

*Abstract: Since the beginnings of Marxism there has been a persistent demand to understand this theory, as well its practical and organizational development, according to the principles of Marxism itself. By "Marxism" I mean here historical materialism: not mechanical determinism but the interaction of transformational praxis with continually changing reality. This interaction may be confrontational and, as the poet-philosopher Bertolt Brecht said, "like everything that pertains to conflict, collision, and struggle, it cannot be treated without the materialist dialectic." (Gesamtausgabe, vol. 23 [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1993], p. 376.) In the following article I want to show that Brecht's thesis is also valid for the history of Marxism and its forms of motion.*

*Keywords: Marxism, left history, contradiction, Marxism, left history, contradiction, practical dialectics*

\* Paper presented at the First World Congress of Marxism, Peking University, October 10, and at Nanjing University, October 13, 2015. Translated from the German by Joseph Fracchia and reworked by the author, who would like to thank Joseph Grim Feinberg for his invaluable assistance. In what follows, the reader should keep in mind that, although theoretical, this is not an academic text but rather an attempt to speak about China's reality to representatives of the Chinese state. This is an encounter in which even thousands of years old civilizational founding myths can play their role.

### 1. The Marxian Method and Marxism

Since the early history of Marxism, there has been a persistent demand to conceptualize Marxism according to Marxism's own fundamental principles. In what follows, I shall respond to this demand, trying to develop an understanding of Marxism through the lens of what Marx called "my dialectical method."<sup>1</sup> Seeking to illuminate the relation between theory and practice, already in 1959 Henri Lefebvre attempted "to think the living and lived contradictions, that is: the dialectic" of being a Marxist.<sup>2</sup> And in 1978 Adam Schaff admonished that this dialectic "is unfortunately mostly ignored."<sup>3</sup> But how is the dialectic in this case to be understood? Obviously it has to present an alternative to a one-dimensionally determinist approach, since the determination of human reality results from the interplay of world-changing praxis with the world that is to be changed. This relationship is a polemical one – that is, one of contradictions and, as the great Marxist poet-philosopher Bertolt Brecht wrote in 1956, shortly before his death, "like everything that pertains to conflict, collision, and struggle, it cannot be treated without the materialist dialectic."<sup>4</sup> Brecht did not stand alone in this thought. In 1955 he stated: "the text that made the strongest impression on me in the past year is Mao Tse-tung's essay *On Contradiction*." In the first sentence of his essay, Mao states: "The law of contradiction in things, that is, the law of the unity of opposites, is the basic law of materialist dialectics."<sup>5</sup> I want to show that this is also valid for the forms of motion of Marxism itself, though this would have been unthinkable for traditional "DiaMat." Two prefatory clarifications are necessary: one on the concept of contradiction; and a second on the concept of dialectics.

Regarding contradictions, many treat them as something to avoid. And they are right if they mean striving for consistency in explanations and actions. But when Marx speaks of contradictions, he means real contradictions, comparable to Kant's notion of "real oppositions" (*Realgegensätze*).<sup>6</sup> Marx's analysis of the commodity provides an example

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1977), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *La somme et le reste* (Paris: Meridiens Klincksieck, 1959), p. 683.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Schaff, *Che cosa significa essere marxista. Saggi filosofici 2*, ed. and trans. Augusto Ponzio (Bari: Dedalo, 1978), p. 231.

<sup>4</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 23: Schriften 3. Schriften 1942–1956* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), p. 376.

<sup>5</sup> [[bibl., or [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1\\_17.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm)]] Mao substantiates this with a note from Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks: "Dialectics in the proper sense is the study of contradiction in the very essence of objects." (V. I. Lenin, "Conspectus of Hegel's Book *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*," in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 38 [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1958], p. 252).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, "An Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy," in Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, ed. and trans. David Walford (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 203–241, here 211. According to Kant's



that is fundamental for the critique of political economy. On the one hand, the commodity exists as use-value, as concrete wealth; yet, on the other hand, and primarily, it has value as abstract wealth, in which concrete wealth is negated. The reason for the coexistence of these contradictory forms of wealth is to be found in the relations of production. Although commodity production presupposes the social division of labor, it is simultaneously unsocial. In other words, the producer of the commodity produces for society, but he does so in order to fill his own pocket. Marx summarizes this and other characteristics of commodities when he writes that “the exchange of commodities implies contradictory and mutually exclusive conditions. The further development of the commodity does not abolish these contradictions, but rather provides the form within which they have room to move. This is, in general, the way in which real contradictions are resolved.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, these contradictions have to be analyzed in a logical, that is, non-contradictory way. Marx comments on the double meaning of the word contradiction, that it can refer both to the logic of assertions and to the structure of the asserted objects: “It goes without saying that the paradox of reality is also reflected in paradoxes of speech,” he says, “which are at variance with common sense and with what vulgarians mean and believe they are talking of. The contradictions which arise from the fact that on the basis of commodity production [...] the relations of people [present themselves] as relations between things and as things – these contradictions are innate in the subject-matter, not in its verbal expressions.”<sup>8</sup> The real contradiction can only be understood as the unity of unity and contradictory partition.

Now one might think that for Marx it is particularly capitalism that is afflicted by contradictions and that its overcoming will dissolve all contradictions. But in that case it would not be possible to understand why Marx sees in the “Hegelian ‘contradiction’” the “source of all dialectics,”<sup>9</sup> including his own, provided that Hegel’s concept was “detached” from its idealist foundation and reconstructed on historical-materialist ground. If we accept this “translation” of Hegel’s conception, we may say with Mao that contradictions are to be found in all things and all appearances.

Contradictions, however, are not only unavoidable, like an ontological<sup>10</sup> given; they also act as motors of development. At her trial, Rosa Luxemburg stated that an individual

conception, in a real opposition “one thing cancels that which is posited by the other; but the consequence is *something (cogitable)*.” (*Ibid.*)

<sup>7</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 198 (translation modified).

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value: Volume IV of Capital*, vol. III, trans. Jack Cohen and S. W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress, 1963), ch. XX.d., “Baily.”

<sup>9</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 744, n. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Marx’s rupture with metaphysics does not mean separation from the real, as we see it in Neo-Kantian epistemology, often disguised as discourse theory. On the contrary, Marx’s “ontology” is about *inter-action* (*Wechselwirkung*); it is *dynamic* (Balibar); it is about *becoming* (Bloch). “Talking to normal Marxists, you cannot pronounce the word ontology,” observed Ernst Bloch, author of

counts as being convicted when he gets trapped in contradictions. But for “human society as a whole,” she continues, this is different: it “develops continuously in contradictions, and rather than succumbing to these, it only starts to move when it meets contradictions.”<sup>11</sup> With Hegel she says: “Contradiction is the very moving principle of the world.”<sup>12</sup> This driving force plays a key role. The question about it leads to the second prefatory clarification concerning dialectics.

Notions that the Hegelian dialectic needs only “to be inverted,” because it was “standing on its head,”<sup>13</sup> lead toward errors. It may be true that Marx “detached” the Hegelian dialectic from idealism, but this detachment should not be seen as a simple inversion. My decades-long investigations of Marx’s praxis of the dialectic in *Capital* have led me to characterize it as a “dialectic of praxis.” “Praxis” means here behavior in certain relations that are the conditions of that behavior and at the same time are modified by it.<sup>14</sup> This understanding of praxis makes it possible to differentiate between theoretical and practical dialectics. The latter term refers to human action, particularly to organized action seen from the viewpoint of how it handles contradictions. Here a radical ambiguity of contradictions appears: they are both danger and opportunity in one. They threaten the capacity for action that can be attained through organization, while at the same time they point toward the moment of a possible leap onto a higher level. A note by Brecht from 1932 culminates in the sentence: in order to prevent contradictions from disrupting the unity of an organization, it is necessary to be able “to operate with antinomies.”<sup>15</sup>

the *Ontology of Not-Yet Being* (Ernst Bloch, *Zur Ontologie des Noch-Nicht-Seins, Philosophische Grundfragen*, vol. 1 [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1961]), which inspired Lukács to undertake his *Ontology of Social Being* (Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. I–II, *Werke*, vol. 13–14 [Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1984–1986]); “it reminds them of Heidegger,” Bloch continued, “of fundamental ontology.” Marxists are used to an ontology that is static, unchangeable, “the antithesis of becoming” (quoted by Frank Benseler, “Nachwort,” in Lukács, *Zur Ontologie*, vol. II, p. 744). But for Bloch and the late Lukács, the Marxian approach to being is to conceptualize it as a “permanent irreversible process” (Lukács, *Zur Ontologie*, vol. I, p. 308), far from an idea of the “fixedness of the thing” and its complementary opposite, the idea of the “immateriality of energy” (Lukács, *Zur Ontologie*, vol. I, p. 91). If dialectical thought is to grasp the real or claim “ontological” (that is, realistic) relevance, it cannot operate in a timeless, mechanical sameness. Yet, without some kind of ontology, Marxism does not reach the level of *reality*.

<sup>11</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg, Vol. I: Economic Writings 1*, ed. Peter Hudis (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 251.

<sup>12</sup> Cited from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Logic: Being Part One of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), para. 119, Zusatz, p. 174.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 103.

<sup>14</sup> To be sure, praxis doesn’t effectuate this modification as an individual strategy or action, but by virtue of a great number of diverging, but in their results converging, strategies of action in a given field.

<sup>15</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 21: Schriften 1. Schriften 1914–1933* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 578f. “Antinomy” means here that the Communist Party, in order not to be

In this sense, we can further differentiate between active and passive dialectics, an opposition which is basic for practical dialectics. Active dialectic can be compared to the art of riding the waves, the passive dialectic with being overwhelmed by the wave. For a political leadership that must constantly produce a new unity of differences, and often a contradictory unity of oppositions, the art of the active dialectic can be a matter of survival.<sup>16</sup>

Practically, then, it is a matter of strengthening our ability to perceive actual or potential manifestations of crisis from the perspective of their possible prevention and even of using these manifestations as an impetus for renewal. This may be the case when a concrete situation brings goals and paths, ends and means, into an unavoidable contradiction.

Practical dialectics formulates its concepts with an eye toward the contradictions with which world-changing practice must reckon. Its value for our problematic becomes evident when one sees that the portrayal of the “twists and turns,” the “zigzag ways,” of international socialism could be lost in millions of details. In order to prevent this, we must highlight the structural contradictions of the Marxist project – its internal as well as external contradictions. The internal contradictions of the Marxist project can be understood as long-range determinants that in changing conjunctures become virulent in various ways. In the following, I attempt to sketch aspects of a dialectic of Marxism, searching for its constitutive contradictions.

## 2. Contradictions of Marxism

The path from Marx’s formation of his theory to the actual historical birth of Marxism took nearly a half-century. The outlines of what would eventually become Marxism first appeared in the months before the bourgeois-democratic revolution of 1848 in the form of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that Marx composed in 1847 for a small secret group, the Communist League, founded in London. But this work, today one of the most

torn apart by contradictions, has to take into account mutually exclusive interests of different sectors of its class basis (e.g., employed vs. unemployed).

<sup>16</sup> European politics offer dramatic examples these days, to which all our concepts apply. After contributing to the creation of failed states in the Arab world, and after selling weapons to all contending parties to the ongoing wars in that region, the Europeans witnessed the arrival of large numbers of refugees. German chancellor Angela Merkel tried to “ride the Wave” with a spectacular act of welcoming them. After earning herself in Greece a reputation for cruelty for forcing extreme austerity policies on this country, her image abruptly changed. In some regions, she appeared suddenly as an unbelievable proponent of human solidarity, while in other regions like Poland – until recently Germany’s greatest ally – even the government now depicts her as a “Nazi.” No less abruptly, the astounding “culture of welcoming” the refugees, which was promoted by an impressive social movement, lost the initiative and gave way to the rapid ascent of the xenophobic party *Alternative für Deutschland*. Thus, facing a dramatic dynamic of opposites, and working through a passive dialectic of reversals (e.g., from inclusion to exclusion), Angela Merkel repeatedly tried to “operate with antinomies” but is threatened with being overrun by a wave that could bring the disintegration both of Europe and of her political basis in Germany.

widely read in the entire world, disappeared into oblivion for a quarter-century after its first publication. The second crucial moment in the formation of Marxism occurred seventeen years later, in 1864, when groups of radicals met in London in the aftermath of the Polish uprising of 1863, in order to coordinate their class experiences and practices on an international level. Toward the end of the planning process, Marx leapt in and formulated the meeting's "Inaugural Address,"<sup>17</sup> with which the "International Workingmen's Association" (IWA), later known as the "First International," announced its presence on the historical stage. This is the hour of the birth of the modern workers' movement, but not yet of Marxism. Though the IWA only remained in existence formally for 12 years (and practically only for eight), it can justifiably be said that this launching of the modern workers' movement was the "practical organizational work"<sup>18</sup> of Karl Marx, for which he made press-ready his major work, the first volume of *Das Kapital*. The First International had to make way for the henceforth rising *national* workers' parties.

When I spoke of the internal as opposed to the external contradictions and situated the external contradictions in relation to the social context, this was, strictly speaking, misleading. There is no "outside" of the world. What is external from the standpoint of Marxian theory is internal from the standpoint of Marxism, which is the becoming-real of Marx' theory. And what is external from the standpoint of Marxist organization is internal from the standpoint of its organized praxis, and so on. All things interact with one-another. This is already obvious in the formation-process of Marxian theory. Marxian theory was forged through the critique of other, contemporary theoretical conceptions.<sup>19</sup> In the reception of Marx's thought a contradiction emerges from this which, as long as it operates unnoticed, ignites a passive dialectic and throws Marx's followers back behind Marx himself. Critique is anti-thesis, and the thesis to which it opposes itself is that of the opponent. The first to point to this problem was Antonio Labriola. Engels' *Anti-Dühring*, he writes, "was not written for a thesis, but rather for an anti-thesis."<sup>20</sup> By introducing elements of the adversary's discourse into the Marxian theory, this threatens the autonomous development of what Labriola calls the "philosophy of praxis," which he sees as the very core of historical materialism. Later, Antonio Gramsci shared this understanding. Among Gramsci's contemporaries, it is once again Brecht who sees that "when we take a stand against the claims of our powerful opponents, the objections which we raise

<sup>17</sup> "Address" meant a kind of manifest, formulating basic principles and demands.

<sup>18</sup> Mats Lindberg, *Inledning till Kapitalet: Särtryck ur sjätte upplagan av första boken* (Stockholm: Arkiv förlag, 2013), p. XIV (Introduction to the new Swedish edition of *Capital*).

<sup>19</sup> Most widely debated is Marx's relation to Hegel, which tends to obfuscate Marx's own dialectical method; cf. Wolfgang Fritz Haug, "Marx's Learning Process: Against Correcting Marx with Hegel," trans. Eric Canepa, in *Rethinking Marxism* 18 (2006), no. 4, pp. 572–584 (online at <http://www.wolfgangfritzhaug.inkrit.de/documents/marxlearning-RM-06-haug.pdf> [accessed May 5, 2017]).

<sup>20</sup> Antonio Labriola, *Socialism and Philosophy*, trans. Ernest Untermann (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1912), p. 53.

must be formed from the material of our opponents' words and concepts."<sup>21</sup> Let me give an example: when Marx says "it is not the consciousness of people that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness,"<sup>22</sup> his counter-statement is posited as the antithesis of the thesis that it negates. Now, most of the time it became transformed into the thesis "being determines consciousness." By this, Marxism falls back in pre-Marxian metaphysics and involuntarily negates exactly what is essential to it, namely: world-changing praxis. The unrecognized contradiction catches Marxists on the wrong foot.

The history of the word "Marxist" leads to an antagonism in the emerging workers' movement. "Marxist" was a curse word that Marx's opponents in the First International aimed at his followers, until those followers, some years later, turned it into a badge of honor. At the foundation of the Second International, six years after Marx's death, all of the political organizations of the workers' movement that were represented committed themselves to Marxism. Our opponents "will go crazy over the fact that they have given us this name," Engels wrote.<sup>23</sup>

The fusion of a scientific theory with a proletarian movement gave birth to a Marxism that was a living contradiction, for which, theoretically, it was not prepared: for its indispensable *intellectual* – because scientific – element, there was no adequate conceptual place within its working class understanding. This unreflected contradiction between reality and self-understanding has done just as much damage as the lack of a Marxist theory of leadership. Both matters were first addressed by Antonio Gramsci while in a fascist prison at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, but his texts did not become known until after the Second World War, and in many countries they still cannot be read in a reliable critical edition (the first such edition did not appear in Italian until 1975; in German, one did not appear until the end of the 1990's).

A third contradiction resulted from the interaction of Marxism with its environment. The Marxian theory of capitalism brilliantly exposed the general contradictions of capitalism and its forms of movement, but it had no appropriate concept of how its own becoming-practical would alter capitalism. The historical materiality of a rapidly changing world distanced the classical texts ever further from contemporary actuality. In particular, the revolution of 1917 greatly enhanced this distance. This is expressed in Lenin's reproach against Bela Kun for criticizing the politics of the Comintern "on the basis of citations from Marx that refer to a situation completely dissimilar to the present one." Lenin insisted, by contrast, that "the concrete analysis of a concrete situation" is

<sup>21</sup> Brecht, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 21, p. 585 (trans. author).

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, „Preface“, in Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Nahum Isaac Stone (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1904), pp. 11–12 (translation modified).

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Letter to Laura Lafargue, June 11, 1889* (online at [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1889/letters/89\\_06\\_11.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1889/letters/89_06_11.htm) [accessed May 20, 2016]; translation modified).

“the living soul of Marxism.”<sup>24</sup> In each epoch such an analysis has to establish anew the strategy of the workers’ movement. Even the handling of this contradiction can become a danger, as the late Lukács notes in 1966: with Stalin, he says, under the “predominance of tactics over the principles of theory,” these principles “sink down to [...] an adornment,” putting the final nail in the coffin of both theory and praxis.<sup>25</sup>

The amalgamation of scientific theory and the proletariat brought Marxism as it was practiced into opposition to Marxism as theory. Rosa Luxemburg viewed this as the “vengeance” taken by the “social conditions of proletarian existence [...] first elucidated by Marxian theory, [...] by the fate they impose upon Marxian theory itself.”<sup>26</sup>

It was Marxism’s success that tumbled the Marxism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century into its first crisis, as the opposition between (actually attained) reform and (delayed) revolution became virulent. Luxemburg, in her polemic against Bernstein in 1899, developed the opposition between short-term and long-term goals in a rather unreflected manner. Four years later, however, she developed the necessity of holding together increasingly distant poles in a manner that renders to Realpolitik what belongs to Realpolitik but ties pragmatism to the goals that push beyond that which is *only* pragmatic. For the handling of this contradiction she coined the notion of “revolutionary Realpolitik.”<sup>27</sup> It is supposed to maintain the “tension-filled context of mediation between short-term and long-term goals” and to prevent organized Marxist praxis from losing its identity.<sup>28</sup> This “tension between path and goal,”<sup>29</sup> between the present day and an ultimately uncertain future, runs through the history of Marxism.

<sup>24</sup> V. I. Lenin, “KOMMUNISMUS. Zeitschrift der Kommunistischen Internationale für die Länder Südosteuropas“, *Lenin Werke*, vol. 31 (Berlin, DDR: Dietz Verlag 1966), pp. 153–155, here 154. Translation by WFH from the German original. (The article also appears in English, where this line is translated, somewhat imprecisely, as V. I. Lenin, “KOMMUNISMUS: Journal of the Communist International,” in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 31, trans. Julius Katzer [Moscow: Progress, 1965], pp. 165–167.)

<sup>25</sup> Georg Lukács, “Gespräche mit Hans Heinz Holz, Leo Kofler und Wolfgang Abendroth (1966),” in Georg Lukács, *Werke, Vol. 18: Autobiographische Texte und Gespräche* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag Bielefeld), pp. 349f.

<sup>26</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, “Stagnation and Progress of Marxism,” in David Ryazanov (ed.), *Karl Marx: Man, Thinker and Revolutionist*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: International Publishers, 1927) (online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1903/misc/stagnation.htm> [accessed May 20, 2016]).

<sup>27</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, “Karl Marx”, in Rosa Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1, 2 (Berlin, DDR: Dietz Verlag, 1970), p. 373.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. Frigga Haug, *Rosa Luxemburg und die Kunst der Politik* (Hamburg: Argument, 2007), pp. 57–94 (Chapter 2: “Revolutionäre Realpolitik”).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3. Towards a Dialectic of Marxism

Contradictions must not be misunderstood as mistakes. Mistakes occur in the *treating* of contradictions. If there are “no things that do not contain contradictions within themselves,”<sup>30</sup> the ability to operate with them is a necessary condition for politics. Contradictions are to be feared only like a *test* that one must pass in order not to perish.<sup>31</sup>

If the art of surfing teaches one to move on the tipping point, keeping the always-looming contradiction from swamping the surfer, then *antinomies*, in the ancient meaning that one has to obey two equally imperative and mutually exclusive norms, are contradictory waves that cannot be surfed, contradictions that cannot but swamp us. To be broken by antinomies is the theme that gave the political drama of Greek antiquity its tragic character. *Antigone* by Sophocles offers a much discussed example. Antigone’s brother, Polynices, raised his sword against the ruler. He is defeated and killed, the burial of his corpse forbidden. In this case two equally untouchable moral laws enter into conflict: the law of the state, embodied in its ruler, forbids the burial of the seditionist. But the moral law demands equally unconditionally the burial of the dead man by his sister according to cultic ritual. By having obeyed this commandment, Antigone violates the state’s prohibition and is condemned to be “buried alive.” Then the un-reconciled antinomy produces catastrophe upon catastrophe. Antigone commits suicide, followed in this by her fiancé, Haimon, the son of the ruler; and Haimon is in turn followed by his mother, Eurydice, the wife of the ruler.

The logic of the *ability to operate with antinomies* which otherwise are pregnant with catastrophe is, in contrast, attributed by Aeschylus to Heracles. Prometheus (whom the young Marx called “the grandest saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar”<sup>32</sup>) was to be “chained” to a rock in the Caucasus for the rest of his life. That was his punishment for having violated the prohibition, issued by Zeus, against teaching human beings how to use fire – a violation that, of course, brought about a great leap in the development of the human species. According to Aeschylus, Prometheus knows that the ruler and,

<sup>30</sup> Mao, *On Contradiction* (*Über den Widerspruch, Ausgewählte Werke*, vol. I, [Beijing: Verlag für fremdsprachige Literatur, 1968], pp. 365–408, here 371).

<sup>31</sup> Even when contradictions indicate pent-up necessities for change, danger represents, at the same time, an opportunity. For that reason, the maxim with which Bertolt Brecht prefaced his *Dreigroschenprozess* (1931/1932) is valid not only in terms of the contradictions of the opponents of Marxism but also for Marxism itself: “Die Widersprüche sind die Hoffnungen!” “The contradictions are the hopes!” (Brecht, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 21, p. 448). But mere hope is of course “nothing but an inconstant joy,” as Spinoza said – because we are to some degree in doubt about the actual outcome (Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethics*, Book III, “On the Origin and Nature of the Affects,” Proposition 18, Scholium II, in Edwin Curley (ed.), *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, trans. Edwin Curley [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994], p. 165).

<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx, “Draft of a New Preface,” in Karl Marx, *Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 1: The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (Moscow: Progress, 1902), electronic version cited, formerly available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/410.htm>, no longer accessible; no page no. (translation modified).



with him, the entire ruling order will fall. And in response to the question of who will effect this downfall, Aeschylus lets the enchained Prometheus answer: the ruler himself, whose “own light-witted decisions will undo him.”<sup>33</sup> The ban of the antinomy is broken by Heracles. Clever as a fox, he respects the literal verdict and yet simultaneously not only liberates the enchained Prometheus but also preserves the ruling order and Zeus himself from imminent downfall by a symbolic compromise: Prometheus must for all eternity bear a ring in which a piece of that rock in the Caucasus is embedded.

In his great three-volume novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The Aesthetic of Resistance*, the German-Swedish, Marxist writer Peter Weiss set himself the herculean task of creating a narrative mode for the antinomies of his own time. It gives the impression that Weiss followed in a literary manner Brecht’s maxim about being able to operate with antinomies.<sup>34</sup> He lets historical Marxist antagonists of that time have their say in such a way as to respect their irreconcilable antinomies. Therein appears a glimpse of a future Marxism that has learned not only to admit its contradictions, but also to look them in the eye.<sup>35</sup> In this regard, the history of Marxism seems to resemble that of the liberated Prometheus – even if only in literary-imaginative anticipation and in remembrance of so many victims.

<sup>33</sup> Aeschylus, “Prometheus Bound,” line 762, trans. Richmond Lattimore, in David Green and Richmond Lattimore (eds.), *Greek Tragedies I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 99.

<sup>34</sup> Actually, Weiss could not have known it; he died in 1982, shortly after he finished his book, while this maxim was first published ten years later.

<sup>35</sup> In 1983, Klaus Holzkamp, the founder of Marxist critical psychology in West Berlin, stated, playing off a famous formulation from Marx: “The prehistory of Marxism is not yet over.” (Klaus Holzkamp, “‘Aktualisierung’ oder Aktualität des Marxismus?“, *Aktualisierung Marx, Argument Sonderband* 100 [Berlin, West: Argument Verlag, 1983], p. 64).



# MARX AFTER MARXISM

## Value, Critique, Crisis

*Nick Nesbitt*

*Abstract: The article distinguishes between two fundamental dynamics in Marx's critique of capitalism: the humanist, cyclical, perpetually-renewed struggle between capitalists and wage labor over profits, wages, and the distribution of social wealth more generally and what I term a "posthuman" dialectic between humans and machines, unfolding as the unilinear historical dynamic of automation and the corresponding decreases it brings to the capacity of living labor to produce surplus value. The consequence of this posthuman dialectic is both the growing superfluity of living labor relegated to a planet of slums and the actual and coming collapse of valorization as a global process (as opposed to its operation in any single unit of capital). If the former, humanist dialectic remained predominant in what Moishe Postone has termed "traditional" Leninist Marxism, the contemporary context of the "Second Machine-Age" and the expanding automation of virtually all production and services points to a collapse of valorization that philosophers such as Michel Henry and Robert Kurz identified in Marx's conceptualization of capitalism as "the moving contradiction."*

*Keywords: Value theory, automation, economic crisis*

*The thought of a theory of collapse elicits knowing winks even from so-called radicals, even though the problem has never been conceptually or theoretically explained, but has merely languished in the swamp of empirical surface reality.*

(Robert Kurz, *Vies et morts du capitalisme*)

*Le marxisme est l'ensemble de contresens qui ont été faits sur Marx.*

(Michel Henry, *Marx*)

Marxism, Michel Henry asserts, is the name for nothing other than the collection of misinterpretations that were made of Marx across the twentieth century, a period that we can now delimit as the reign of so-called traditional Marxism, stretching roughly from Lenin's call for political action to overcome capitalist exploitation in *What is to be Done?* (1901) to the collapse of the so-called "socialist" (in reality state-capitalist) regimes in 1989.<sup>1</sup>

The object of this critique is Leninism in its broadest sense: the struggle over the just distribution of the production of social wealth and the fullest and most rapid possible development of the industrial production of this wealth, with both goals to be achieved via revolutionary struggle culminating in the political domination of the working class.

<sup>2</sup> Henry's critique of this general state of misinterpretation unfolds, like that of subsequent thinkers such as Moishe Postone and Robert Kurz, whom I will discuss below, as a methodical reconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy. In opposition to the postwar strain of humanist Marxism that focused on Marx's early writings, such as the *1844 Manuscripts* and the exploitation of the working class by capitalists, this "categorical" school of critique addresses the conceptual categories that Marx developed in *Capital*.

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of Henry's meticulous, highly original, and much neglected 1,000-page 1976 study of Marx in comparison with the thinkers discussed below, see my forthcoming chapter, "Value as Symptom," in Nick Nesbitt (ed.), *The Concept in Crisis: Reading Capital Today* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> The classic statement of Lenin's productivist orientation is undoubtedly his famous assertion that "Communism is Soviet power plus electrification. [...] For this we must place the economy of the country, including agriculture, on a new technical basis, that of modern large-scale production. [...] Only when the country has been electrified, and industry, agriculture and transport have been placed on the technical basis of modern large-scale industry, only then shall we be victorious." (V. I. Lenin, "Address to the Eighth Congress of Soviets, December, 1920," in Robert C. Tucker [ed.], *The Lenin Anthology* [New York: Norton, 1975], p. 494). See also Lenin's 1921 *Pravda* article on "The Importance of Gold Now and After the Complete Victory of Socialism," where he links the initial (1917–1920) Bolshevik imperative to "restore large-scale industry" to a renewed call to "revive [...] capitalism, while cautiously getting the upper hand" through the development of "an excellently equipped large-scale machine industry" accompanied by "a rise in the productivity of labor" (Tucker, *The Lenin Anthology*, pp. 512, 515, 516).

What I would refer to, following Postone, as a categorial reconstruction has underscored a long-neglected yet absolutely crucial dimension of Marx's critique of capitalism that will be the focus of this essay: a terminal structural dynamic both Henry and Kurz underscore, arising from an absolute limit inherent to the expansion capacity of capital, or, more precisely, in the capacity of capitalism as a whole to continuously expand the production of surplus value in totality.

Though Marx clearly identified this dynamic in a number of places, it remained largely implicit and underdeveloped in *Capital*.<sup>3</sup> It received its most succinct and best-known formulation in the "Fragment on Machines" from the *Grundrisse*, where Marx famously described capitalism as the "moving contradiction, in that it presses to reduce labor time to a minimum, while it posits labor time, on the other side, as the sole measure and source of wealth."<sup>4</sup> In this view, capitalism possesses a "moving" dynamic that is unilinear and, implicitly, terminal, as opposed to the more visible cyclical crises of expansion and contraction that have plagued capital in every period of its development, and which are and always have been readily apparent to capitalism's subjects across the ideological spectrum. The implication of this simple dialectic is ineluctable: at some unpredictable future point in the history of capital, the contribution of living labor power to commodity production will be so reduced that "labor time" (what Marx would come to call socially-necessary "abstract labor" in *Capital*) would cease to create value in the face of automated production processes and the social structure that continues even today to depend upon labor power as the source of value will collapse.

In what follows, I wish to distinguish these two fundamental structural processes by identifying them, respectively, as "humanist" and "posthuman" dialectics of capital. The phenomenology of cyclical crises and exploitation that forms the substance of traditional Marxist analyses is humanist, in this view, in so far as it locates the system's dynamic in the class struggle to control the wealth of society and its mode of production and, above all, its mode of distribution. This humanist dialectic pits capitalists against workers in the fight against exploitation and for universally humane and egalitarian wealth distribution. It is fundamentally cyclical in so far as it is manifest in the theoretically unending struggle within capitalism between two principal actors, capitalists and wage laborers, over empirical conditions such as wages, profits, and working conditions.

In contrast, in what Marx called the "moving contradiction" of capitalism, machines continuously appear as the fruit of science and industry under the control of capital,

<sup>3</sup> On the fragmentary and incomplete nature of Marx's conceptualization of the structural limits of capital and, more generally, of his theory of crisis, see Robert Kurz, *Dinheiro Sem Valor: Linhas Gerais para uma Transformação da Crítica da Economia Política*, trans. Lumir Nahodil (Lisboa: Anígon, 2014), Chapter 13, "O character fragmentário e a recepção redutora da teoria marxiana da crise."

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 706.

displacing humans from newly invented and reconfigured processes of automation in the struggle to achieve increases in relative surplus value. This dialectic is tendentially “posthuman,” I am arguing, in that it enjoins a historically unilinear, if fitful, elimination of humans from the production of wealth, while capitalism as a general and predominant social relation continues to depend upon living labor as the substance of value, driving a now-superfluous humanity into what Mike Davis famously called a “planet of slums.”

This crucial structural movement that Marx first described in the fullest genius of insight was for the most part empirically invisible in his time, and largely ignored across the twentieth century. This lack of interest in a theory of an absolute structural limit to capitalist expansion is readily understandable, as the repeated creation of successive Fordist production processes – from automobiles to the televisions and refrigerators purchased globally from Manhattan to Manaus – increased global demand for living labor after 1945 even as automation displaced that labor from one job to the next, making it appear as if Schumpeter’s “creative destruction” were a transhistorical feature of capitalism, rather than a mere epiphenomenon of nineteenth- and twentieth-century industrialism.<sup>5</sup> If this Fordist dynamic of labor recuperation collapsed in the 1970s, it is arguably only since the turn of the present century that the present or near-future automation of virtually every production and service process has made the crisis of value production empirically visible as the conjoined global immiseration and superfluity of living labor, today rapidly becoming a matter of broad social concern beyond a core of structuralist and (I might say) quasi-structuralist Marxist thinkers such as Henry, Postone, and Kurz.<sup>6</sup>

In the wake of the historical collapse of Leninist productivism and its attendant politics since 1989, as global capital lurches from one crisis to the next and human suffering under its yoke expands unabated, it becomes ever more essential to distinguish Marx’s monumental and unparalleled study of the structural and historical nature of capitalism from the distortions and misinterpretations to which his thought was subject in traditional Marxism, and to elucidate, develop, and – where necessary – extend the conceptual apparatus and categorical critique of *Capital* for the twenty-first century.

<sup>5</sup> See Ernst Lohoff and Norbert Trenkle, *La grande dévalorisation: Pourquoi la speculation et la dette de l'état ne sont pas les cause de la crise*, trans. Paul Braun, Gérard Briche, and Vincent Roulet (Fécamp: Post-éditions, 2014), especially pp. 39–48, Chapter 2.1, “La pénétration du monde par le capitalisme lors du boom fordiste de l’après-guerre.”

<sup>6</sup> See Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014); Martin Ford, *The Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of Mass Unemployment* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015); Carl Benedict Frey and Michael A. Osborne, *The Future of Employment: How Susceptible are Jobs to Computerisation?* (Oxford, Eng.: University of Oxford, 2013) (online at [www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/The\\_Future\\_of\\_Employment.pdf](http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/The_Future_of_Employment.pdf) [accessed Jan. 6, 2015]); and the special report “Technology and the World Economy”, *The Economist* October 4–10 (2014), p. 52.

To begin to do so, I wish to argue in what follows that it is the concept of *value*, the conceptual kernel of what I am calling capitalism's posthuman, terminal dialectic, that constitutes the single most essential Marxian category to be developed for any contemporary critique of the limits of global capitalism in the twenty-first century. Few of the various Marxist-Leninist categories of analysis and militancy that dominated the twentieth century, from labor, socialism, nationalization, modernization, the proletariat, and the state, to the very category of revolution – traditionally understood – itself, have retained their critical valence in the decades since the fall of Eastern European state-capitalism. This can be affirmed as a categorial tendency of late capitalism: the very real successes and advances of the modernizing revolutions – not only the Bolshevik, but also the French, Haitian, and even American, as well as the anticolonial struggles that sought a more egalitarian redistribution of social wealth to be achieved through industrialization – those two and a half centuries of advances in the form of modernization are simply no longer available, for better and worse, in a world in which industrial production, and human labor more generally, produce ever less surplus value.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, both the anticolonialist and the anticapitalist revolutions, while often instantiating real advances in social justice (as in post-slavery Haiti, including the first postcolonial land reform) and in the distribution of wealth (as in the former Eastern Bloc), remained structurally incapable of extracting themselves from the telos of global capital, the universal compulsion to valorize value. Such was the destiny of orthodox Marxism as Moishe Postone analyzed it two decades ago in *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, where the author's meticulous reconstruction of the conceptual, categorial logic of *Capital* revealed how central the "moving contradiction" – a concept ignored by orthodox Marxism – is to Marx's analysis of the developmental dynamic of capital itself.<sup>8</sup>

Postone identified orthodox Marxism, somewhat abstractly and reductively, with what Badiou has called *The Century*, as an undifferentiated, wrong-headed totality, a 150-year revolutionary movement uniformly oriented toward what he, Postone, called social critique from the standpoint of labor, rather than a critique of labor itself. In this view, labor,

<sup>7</sup> Dani Rodrick has argued that the process of deindustrialization has become global, and not merely limited to the post-industrial North Atlantic States. "Countries are running out of industrialization opportunities sooner and at much lower levels of income compared to the experiences of earlier industrializers. [...] The evidence suggest both globalization and labor-saving technological progress have been behind these developments." Dani Rodrik, "Premature Deindustrialization," *NBER Working Paper No. 20935*, February, 2015 (online at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w20935>, p. 2 [accessed April 28, 2015]).

<sup>8</sup> Marxian thought (in contrast to that of Marx himself) has been characterized by a distinct failure to attend to the impact of increases in relative surplus value, caused by automation, upon value itself, at least until this deficiency was addressed by Negri in the 1970s, the German school of Value Critique (*Wertkritik*) in the 1980s (Neil Larsen, et al. [eds.], *Marxism and the Critique of Value* [Chicago: MCM, 2014]), and Moishe Postone (*Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996]).

along with its fundamental empirical forms, from the proletariat and its dictatorship to the state itself, stand not as the antithesis to capital, not even as fundamentally antagonistic to capital, but rather as features of the social objectivity of capital, as constitutive elements in the growing perfection of capital toward what Marx called its most “adequate,” automated and posthuman form.<sup>9</sup> Even when the proletariat (or, later, “the multitude”) seems to oppose work, in Postone’s view labor and the class struggle in fact drive forward the organic composition of capital to further the universal compulsion to valorize value.

Marx developed this theme in his discussion of the struggle for the ten-hour workweek in mid-nineteenth century Britain. Marx’s point has often been missed, because his discussion is divided between the analysis of absolute surplus value and the struggle over working conditions (Chapter 10, “The Working Day”), and the subsequent exposition of the concept of relative surplus value. The latter is presented first in theoretical abstraction (Chapter 12), followed by three chapters on co-operation, manufacture, and industry. After this long theoretical and analytic development, however, Marx returns to his earlier historical discussion of the workweek, and offers the following conclusion on the outcome of labor’s “successful” struggle to limit working hours: “Capital’s tendency, as soon as a prolongation of the hours of labor is once and for all forbidden, is to compensate for this by systematically raising the intensity of labor, and converting every improvement in machinery into a more perfect means for soaking up labor-power.”

Despite the fact that Postone’s dismissal of a century of Marxist-Leninist and Stalinist thought is stated in absolutist and abstract terms, to a large extent it would seem to be warranted. One is hard pressed to find more than a few lone voices in twentieth-century Marxism who sustained Marx’s critique of value and labor rather than relying upon a transhistorical understanding of labor as a human constant.<sup>10</sup> There were of course

<sup>9</sup> While Christopher Taylor revealingly underscores C. L. R. James’s influence on the refusal of capitalist labor and the valorization of value in the work of Negri and Italian *Operaismo*, he, like Kathi Weeks (*The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* [Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001]), significantly misreads Postone’s argument, for whom capitalist labor (no matter whether it is that of the Caribbean slave for James, of the “proletarian” for the Negri of the 1970s, or of the “multitude” in Negri’s later works) in its struggle to refuse work actually spurs on the *development* of capitalism. Precisely because of the continuing global hegemony of capital, even the *antagonism* of labor to capital and the refusal of work drives capital on to the automation of labor, toward the development of what Marx called “the necessary tendency of capital, [...] its most adequate form,” (Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 693–694). When human labor (as in the exhortations of James, Negri, and Weeks) refuses work in its perpetual struggle with capital, it actively compels and accelerates, Postone argues, the automation of production to assure continued increases in relative surplus value, furthering in the process its own becoming-superfluous to capital in a world in which wages nonetheless remain the basis of human survival (Christopher Taylor, “The Refusal of Work: From the Postemancipation Caribbean to Post-Fordist Empire,” *Small Axe* 44 (2014), pp. 1–17).

<sup>10</sup> In 1943, the Soviet bureaucracy actually came to admit in an anonymous article published in the theoretical mouthpiece of the Soviet Communist Party, *Pod znamenem marksizma*, that the

those few who condemned global Stalinism as what Castoriadis and CLR James alike called state-capitalism, but even rarer were those voices, largely unheard and marginal, that went even further, not only rejecting Stalinism but specifically criticizing a trans-historical affirmation and glorification of labor: one thinks in particular of CLR James and Raya Dunayevskaya's visionary, but long-forgotten critique of the political economy of state-capitalism in *Invading Socialist Society* from 1947, which replicated essential elements of Postone's argument half a century ahead of *Time Labor and Social Domination*, before retreating into the familiar celebration of the world-historical mission of the proletariat in its conclusions.<sup>11</sup>

Marx's original analysis of value contains three basic aspects. The first, most familiar dimension describes the realization of relative surplus value, articulated in volume I of *Capital*, while the second, the Law of the Falling Rate of Profit that Marx repeatedly reaffirmed as "the most important law of political economy" and the very key to all of political economy since Adam Smith, is developed in Chapters 13–15 of Volume III. The third and least familiar element of the theory of value occurs in the famous "Fragment on Machines" from the *Grundrisse*, where Marx describes the fundamental compulsion of capitalism that is the basis of Postone's elaboration: capital as the "moving contradiction."<sup>12</sup> Beyond this now-familiar dialectic, Kurz has also pointed to the finite character of the ever-increasing organic composition of capital as automation replaces living human labor. At some point, in this view, as we approach the total automation of labor (a point that Kurz believed global capital has already gone beyond), the process of the accumu-

"law of value" did in fact apply to socialist economies. Already in 1939 the XXIIIrd Party Congress had assigned the Soviet economy the task of "attaining and surpassing the per capita production level of the principal capitalist countries" and, by 1948, Soviet economists such as Ostrovityanov and Voznesensky were openly calling for the monetary evaluation of "socially necessary labor" in the planning process. It goes without saying that this was a purely ideological, rather than critical, project: by applying value-form analysis to the domain of the distribution of wealth alone, rather than to its mode of production, Soviet economists could maintain the fiction that the "law of value" operated differently in socialist and capitalist economies. (Michael Kaser, "The Debate on the Law of Value in USSR, 1941–53," in Vincent Barnett and Joachim Zweynert [eds.], *Economics in Russia: Studies in Intellectual History* [Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate, 2008], pp. 141–156, here 142, 146). Raya Dunayevskaya first developed a prescient and detailed critique of the functioning of the value form in Soviet state capitalism (explicitly referencing the *Pod znamenem marksizma* article of 1943) in a series of extraordinary articles from 1941–1948, including "Can the Law of Value Be Uprooted?" (1944), "The Nature of the Russian Economy" (1946), and "Uprooting Capitalism's Law of Value" (1948). All are available online in the Raya Dunayevskaya Archive at Marxists.org.

<sup>11</sup> On James's critique of Stalinist state-capitalism, see C. L. R. James, *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1986), and, above all, the "Appendix" to James and Dunayevskaya's 1947 *Invading Socialist Society* (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), which initiates, in schematic terms, the critique of Stalinist political economy (state-capitalism) from the perspective of the value-form in terms remarkably similar to those of Postone.

<sup>12</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 706.



lation of surplus value will begin to collapse.<sup>13</sup> It is this global collapse of the process of valorization that has finally made discernable the labor-ontological horizons that have limited the scope of historical revolutions, in spite of the very real revolutionary progress in universal equality and social justice they achieved.

Although James and Dunayevskaya, like many subsequent Western Marxists from Althusser to Negri, criticized various aspects of labor in capitalist society, they nonetheless remained trapped in an ontology of labor, positing labor as the essential, transhistorical source of value rather than as the nexus of Marx's critique of capitalism. It is arguably only with figures such as Postone and Robert Kurz that we see a critique of the capitalist valorization of value as a whole, and only in light of *this* critique does Marx's single most important critical concept come to the fore: the concept of value. Only now have these critiques begun to seriously challenge the dominance within Marxism of the critique of the distribution of wealth from the standpoint of labor.<sup>14</sup> Of those theorists who offer thoroughgoing critiques of the concept of value, Moishe Postone, Guglielmo Charchedi, Andrew Kliman, and David Harvey continue to maintain that global capital still possesses the capacity to restore profitability through remedies such as financialization, exploitation of global inequalities in the value of labor power, and massive devaluation.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, Robert Kurz has argued that in addition to this cyclical dynamic, capitalism possesses an internal structural limit to the valorization of value. In this view, the second machine

<sup>13</sup> Robert Kurz, *Vies et mort du capitalisme* (Paris: Lignes 2011), pp. 16, 82, 92, 96, 140; see also Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1975), pp. 198, 204. Both Kurz and Mandel fail to distinguish clearly, as Marx did, between the number of human beings actually working (if in conditions of ever increasing misery) – which has indeed continued to rise since the 1960s – and the contribution of that mass of living labor to the creation of *surplus value*, which continues to fall, both relative to a given mass of capital and, eventually, with increasing automation and (what amounts to the same) the changing organic composition of capital (see above, note 11).

<sup>14</sup> The most sophisticated analysis of the value-form in the Stalinist period, I. I. Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*, though first published in 1928, was not translated into English until 1972. While Rubin goes some way to critiquing the purely empirical conception of value as allowing for the determination of prices from labor inputs to production (the "transformation problem", see I. I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* [Delhi: Aakar Books, 2008], p. 125), his conception of *labor*, from the perspective of the Stakhanovite, Stalinist USSR of 1928, remains resolutely humanist in the terms I have adopted above, always being undertaken by living, human laborers. Rubin never seems to conceive that the development of capitalism and the value form itself, as Marx develops the concept, involves a dialectic between living and automated forms of labor historically limited to capitalism: "All the basic concepts of political economy express [...] social relations among people. [...] Labor as the expenditure of physiological energy is a biological presupposition of any human economy" (*ibid.*, pp. 63, 137). While he rightly observes that it is incorrect "to view Marx's theory [of value] as an analysis of *relations between labor and things*" if by things we mean commodities ("things which are products of labor"), this says nothing about the two types of *productive* labor Marx describes, living and machinic (*ibid.*, p. 67, emphasis in original).

<sup>15</sup> Guglielmo Charchedi, *Behind the Crisis: Marx's Dialectic of Value and Knowledge* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).



age of the twenty-first century, in which virtually all labor processes have been or are on the verge of being digitalized, robotified, and dematerialized, has already brought global capital past a point of collapse in the global production of surplus value.<sup>16</sup>

It becomes more apparent every day that we now live in a world in which living labor has become, as Marx long ago predicted in the *Grundrisse*'s "Fragment on Machines," an "infinitesimal, vanishing" component of production. As discussed above, Marx sees this as the root of a fundamental, "moving contradiction" of capitalism leading toward the gradual collapse of the capacity for global capital in aggregate to realize surplus value.<sup>17</sup> The "infinitesimal" – defined as an immeasurably small magnitude, so small that it cannot be distinguished from zero – is a remarkably apt description on Marx's part of the destiny of industrial capitalism's capacity to produce surplus value.<sup>18</sup> In the *Grundrisse*'s "Fragment on Machines" at the end of Marx's Notebook VI and beginning of Notebook VII of these preliminary studies for *Capital*, Marx describes the historical dynamic of what he will come to place under the concept of the "organic composition" of capital – of what I am calling a "posthuman" dialectic between living labor and the machine automation of the production process – as a dialectic in which living labor is increasingly rendered superfluous to production while remaining the source of value in the social relations that constitute capitalism. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx emphasizes the domination of automation processes as the "culmination" of "the production process of capital" in which the human is displaced from production to become the mere "watchman and regulator" of the "virtuoso" machine, such that machinery "confronts [the human laborer's] individual, insignificant doings as a mighty organism, [...] a power which rules" over living labor.<sup>19</sup> Crucially, Marx identifies this as a universal tendency toward the development of automation as capitalism's "most complete, most adequate form, [...] the necessary tendency of capital."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See Kurz, *Vies et mort*; and Anselm Jappe, *Crédit à mort* (Paris: Lignes, 2011); and, for an English language selection of the work of Kurz, Jappe, and other members of the Value Critique school of thought (*Wertkritik*), see Larsen et al. (eds.), *Marxism and the Critique*. For a lucid overview of Kurz's thought, see Anselm Jappe, "Kurz: A Journey into Capitalism's Heart of Darkness," *Historical Materialism* 22 (2014), nos. 3–4, pp. 395–407.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 694. Kurz (who died in 2012) analyzes at the level of theory the failure to rigorously address this dimension of Marx's thought and to develop a production-based theory of crisis across the spectrum of traditional Marxism, from Eduard Bernstein, Karl Kautsky, and Nikolai Bukharin to Rosa Luxemburg and Henryk Grossman (Robert Kurz, *The Substance of Capital*, trans. Robin Halpin [London: Chronos Publications, 2016]).

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 694. The original German in fact refers to the *unendlich Kleines* or "infinitely small" rather than the mathematic and scientific concept of the *infinitesimal* contribution of living labor to the production process in fully developed capitalism; in this case, the English translation arguably improves upon Marx's original draft.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 694, 705.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 692.

Marx would later elaborate on the structural dynamic of organic composition at length in various sections of *Capital*, but the condensed, dramatic rather than analytical presentation of this dialectic in these pages of the *Grundrisse* sheds light on the crucial feature of this structure: the way in which a general and universal (if always uneven) tendency of development implies an inherent structural limitation to the creation of surplus value. Here, the creation of surplus value appears not merely as a (perpetually correctable) *falling rate of profit* but as a diminishing *total aggregate mass*. “The value objectified in machinery,” Marx writes, “appears as a presupposition against which the value-creating power of the individual [human] labor capacity is an infinitesimal, vanishing magnitude [*als ein unendlich Kleines verschwindet*].”<sup>21</sup>

Marx was concerned with describing the actual dynamic of liberal capitalism, and he was naturally unable to imagine the ways that automation would, in the twenty-first century, come to rule over domains of labor that even a few years ago were thought unimpeachably human. The implication of his claim that living labor would become “infinitesimal” is, however, blatant: if the contribution of living labor to the (general, global) production process at some point became infinitesimal or “infinitely small” [*unendlich Kleines*], humans across the planet would only create surplus value in “infinitely small” amounts.<sup>22</sup> Although humans would continue to work, in necessarily greater numbers and ever-worsening conditions of exploitation in competition with increased automation, little of this work would in fact contribute to the production of surplus value, simply because the level of socially-necessary labor for any given commodity in an automated world would have shrunk to “infinitesimal” levels.<sup>23</sup> In other words, ever-greater empirical masses of living labor would be required to continue, let alone increase, surplus value production in the face of machinic automation.<sup>24</sup>

The implication of Marx’s formulation of the “infinitely small” or “infinitesimal” is that, in a way analogous to the strange behavior of the “infinitely small” particles of quantum mechanics, this “quantum capitalist economy” in which humans work and continue to be exploited, yet produce virtually no surplus value, would begin to show bizarre, seemingly countersensical characteristics before collapsing altogether. Perhaps

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 612.

<sup>22</sup> Kurz initially put forward this thesis in his 1986 article “The Crisis of Exchange Value: Science as Productivity, Productive Labor, and Capitalist Reproduction,” while Claus Peter Ortlieb offers a detailed analysis of the logic of the collapse of surplus value production in “A Contradiction Between Matter and Form: On the Significance of the Production of Relative Surplus Value in the Dynamic of Terminal Crisis,” both translated in Larsen et al. (eds.), *Marxism and the Critique*.

<sup>23</sup> “Higher levels of productivity become a new general standard,” writes Robert Kurz. “When, in a crisis, capital is devalued or destroyed, the standard of productivity remains the same, because it is inscribed in aggregate knowledge and know-how. Simply put: capitalism cannot return from the standard of microelectronics to that of the steam engine.” (Kurz, *Vies et mort*, p. 15).

<sup>24</sup> Marx argues this often-overlooked point unambiguously: “As the mass of constant (fixed and circulating) capital set in motion by this labor grows, so there is a fall in the ratio between this

these “quantum” effects of the collapse of value include already today the ways in which virtual commodities such as smartphone apps can suddenly minimize earlier limits on geographical distribution, capturing and completely dominating global markets, infinitely reproducing themselves at infinitesimally small cost, liquidating all competitors (what is the #2 competitor with Facebook?) in a way previously impossible for tangible commodities located in brick and mortar sites of purchase.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, although this “second machine age” enables capitalism to overcome previous physical limits placed on it, it may also bring capitalism up against the very structural limitations of capitalism itself in its capacity to expand and even maintain the production of surplus value.

The picture of capitalism at the point of its structural limits finds compelling visualization in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. While the calamity that has befallen planet earth prior to the film’s narration is never made explicit, it is visualized as a combination of ecological, nuclear, and economic disaster, the latter of which could be interpreted as a global collapse of valorization, that is, of capital’s ability to extract surplus value from living labor. Most significantly, the film imagines a world that, in the face of exponential increases in the organic composition of capital via technological revolutions of automation, is unable simply to function by the employment of living labor. In this world, even massive devaluations of capital (perhaps via nuclear holocaust, hyperinflation, or other processes unidentified in the film) have proven unable to restore the centrality of living labor to post-calamitous society. In this sense, what is perhaps most striking in the visual composition of *Blade Runner* is the glaring coexistence of massive economic collapse amid stunningly advanced levels of scientific production in the form of the replicants, who labor tirelessly within a world of global economic impoverishment and near-universal misery.

*Blade Runner* shows a world without political struggle, a world in which struggle is reduced to the mere survival of humans in competition with replicants. In this sense, the film visualizes the collapse of capitalism not as a result of internationalist political struggle, but due to its own contradictions, a situation that Anselm Jappe has described:

The current decomposition of the system is in no sense due to the efforts of its revolutionary enemies, nor even to passive resistance, for example to work. [...]

The collapse [of global capitalism] bears no necessary relation to the emergence

magnitude and the value of the constant capital. [...] The decline is relative, not absolute, and it has in fact nothing whatsoever to do with the absolute amount of labor set in motion. [...] The number of workers employed by capital, i.e., the absolute mass of labor it sets in motion, and hence the absolute mass of surplus labor it absorbs, the mass of surplus value it produces, *can* therefore grow, and progressively so, despite the progressive fall in the rate of profit. This not only can but must be the case – discounting transient fluctuations – on the basis of capitalist production.” (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. III [London: Penguin, 1991], pp. 322–324, emphasis in original)

<sup>25</sup> Brynjolfsson and McAfee, *The Second Machine Age*, Chapter 10.

of a better organized society:[...] capitalism has had sufficient time to crush other forms of social life, of production, and of reproduction that would have constituted a point of departure for the construction of a post-capitalist society. When its end comes, there will only remain a scorched earth where the survivors will fight over the debris of capitalist “civilisation.”<sup>26</sup>

While never thematized explicitly, the economy visualized in *Blade Runner* is consistent: the film depicts the exponential advance of what Marx termed “science as a business,” science subsumed, that is to say, to the demands of valorization (in *Blade Runner*, it appears in the guise of the Tyrrel Corporation, manufacturers of the replicants). This leads not to a workerist, socialist utopia but to its opposite, to global collapse and the immiseration of a human species utterly marginalized from the production (and possession) of wealth. This is a humanity forced all the same to labor, in ever more misery, but for mere animal survival, expelled into global slums of universal misery.

The collapse of the valorization process is even more explicitly thematized in the play that partially inspired *Blade Runner*, Karel Čapek’s prescient 1920 drama *R.U.R.*<sup>27</sup> In his protean invention of the “robot” (Čapek famously coins the term in this work), Čapek makes explicit the connection Marx had theorized between increasing automation and the collapse of the rate of profit. The play opens with a group of industrialists discussing, in staccato, pseudo-American Czech, the invention of robots by a scientist named “Reason” (in Czech he is called “Rossum,” an Anglicized allusion to the word *rozum*, “reason”), machines able to perform all labor necessary for production and, thus, able to replace human workers. “It was the dawn of a new industrial era. [...] The human machine finally had to be discarded. Too inefficient. Couldn’t keep up with the new technology. Acceleration means progress. When it comes to modern labor rhythms, nature hasn’t a clue.”<sup>28</sup>

The industrialists of *R.U.R.* discuss the most immediate effect of the total automation of labor: the becoming-infinitesimal of the value of labor power, which is manifest to the industrialists as a fall of the price of the robots who undertake that labor in place of now-superfluous humans: “We sell them so cheaply! One item fully clothed – just a hundred and twenty dollars! Fifteen years ago that would have been ten thousand.” This depreciation of labor value rapidly spreads throughout the global production process via what Marx described as the structural compulsion to produce at socially necessary levels of productivity: “Factories all over the place either stock up on Robots or go bust!”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Anselm Jappe, *Crédit à mort* (Paris: Lignes, 2011), pp. 40, 46.

<sup>27</sup> Karel Čapek, *Four Plays*, trans. Peter Majer and Cathy Porter (London: Bloomsbury, 1999); Karel Čapek, *Hry* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1956).

<sup>28</sup> Čapek, *Four Plays*, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

At the same time, total automation of production drastically reduces the price of commodities more generally: "In five years' time prices will have fallen another seventy percent. In five years, we'll be drowning in wheat, cloth..." and, adds Helen, the young humanitarian English girl who is appalled at the effect of the changes she witnesses, "the workers will be on the scrap heap."<sup>30</sup> Čapek vividly imagines the result of total automation as the collapse of commodity exchange ("Reason's Robots will be producing such vast quantities of everything you can think of that commodity prices will be irrelevant! Everything will be produced by machines.") along with intimations, even in the heads of industrialists, of the global devastation that would result – "Horrible things may happen" – before humans could ever reach the utopia Čapek's industrialists promise, in which each will obtain as much as he needs ("Nyní ber každý, kolik potřebuješ.").<sup>31</sup> "People will no longer be laborers and secretaries, digging the streets, sitting at desks, paying for the bread they eat with their lives and with hatred, destroying their souls with work."<sup>32</sup> This day of course never arrives, and the falling value of labor and of general commodity prices brought on by automation, which had so preoccupied the industrialists in the first act, suddenly becomes of secondary concern when Čapek accelerates the process of breakdown by staging a revolution of the enslaved robots, who rise up and kill off the humans in the play's second half.

One might still argue that the absolute collapse of valorization predicted by Kurz, and intimated by Čapek and Scott, remains a decade or two ahead of us. Automation continues its course, and the various palliatives Marx listed in his discussion of the tendency of the falling rate of profit,<sup>33</sup> from financialization and the expansion of global markets to the depreciation of the value of labor, lose their effect. Since the turn of the century, much of the science fiction depicted in *R.U.R.* and *Blade Runner* has, nonetheless, become the norm.<sup>34</sup> While the absolute mass of humans working continues to increase, as Marx

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Lit. "All take as much as you need." This is Čapek's rendering of the old socialist phrase, famously employed by Marx in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875). There Marx had described the second phase of a future communist society, beyond the inequities of a mere direct exchange – in which the worker receives back "the same amount of labor which he has given [...] in another [form]" – a superior form of equality and social justice in which society will be able to apply the principle, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" (Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm> [accessed May 14, 2015]).

<sup>32</sup> Čapek, *Four Plays*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, Chapter 15.

<sup>34</sup> Perhaps one measure of when this process became dominant is the fact that, since 1997, growth in median wages (which might be said to reflect increases in *human* labor) has no longer tracked growth in productivity, as it largely had over the previous century, but has instead tended to decline (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, *Second Machine Age*, pp. 127, 143). One recent study by two Oxford University researchers concludes that a stunning 47% of all job categories in the US economy

predicted, their *relative* contribution to the creation of surplus value, and thus to the rate of profit *per given mass of capital*, tends ineluctably to decrease with the progress of socially necessary levels of productivity.

In twentieth-century Marxist philosophy, value remained deeply inscribed within a humanist horizon of living labor. The dynamic of the growing organic composition of capital that Marx described remained completely invisible within the Leninist ontology of labor and the Socialist drive for recuperative modernization,<sup>35</sup> class struggle, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and nationalization (summed up in Lenin's call for "electrification plus soviets"). In this sense, traditional Marxism falls behind even the thought of the Russian bourgeois economist Vladimir Dmitriev, whose 1904 *Economic Essays* at least attempt to formalize mathematically the implications for the rate of profit of the completely automated, post-human economy that Marx's theory implicitly predicts.<sup>36</sup> In fact, I would argue that the labor theory of value has remained unable to this day to transcend this anthropocentric horizon, even in its most recent developments in the thought of writers as diverse as Postone and Chris Arthur. Instead, value continues to be grasped, in Rubin's phrase, uniquely as a "social relation among people" rather

will become automatable in the next *two decades* (Frey and Osborne, "The Future of Employment").

<sup>35</sup> I take the concept of recuperative modernization from Robert Kurz. See his discussion on the limits of twentieth century Marxist anticolonialism: Robert Kurz, "On the Current Global Economic Crisis: Questions and Answers", in Larsen et al. (eds.), *Marxism and the Critique*; pp. 331–356. See also Kurz, *Vies et mort*. See also the writings of Anselm Jappe, including *Crédit à mort*. For a critique of industrialist modernization in twentieth century state socialism from a feminist and antiwork perspective, see Kathi Weeks' expansion of the Postonian critique of traditional Marxism (*The Problem with Work*, Chapter 2, "Marxism, Productivism, and the Refusal of Work"). Weeks' powerful critique of productionism pays virtually no attention, however, to the antagonistic relation of antiwork and automation.

<sup>36</sup> V. K. Dmitriev, *Economic Essays on Value, Competition, and Utility* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1974). "It is theoretically possible to imagine a case in which all products are produced exclusively by machines, so that no unit of *living labour* (whether human or of any other kind) participates in production, and nevertheless an industrial profit may occur." This is a totally automated economy, in which machines produce all commodities, including the machines of production itself (machines producing further "machines of an even higher order") (p. 64). Dmitriev's formalization, while announcing the science fiction of Čapek and Philip K. Dick, makes the elemental error of continuing to presume that in such a situation, self-replicating machines would continue to have a price beyond the merely transferred value of the raw materials and energy involved in their production (the prices of which might themselves collapse as well in such a machinic age); a price, in other words, representing surplus value embodied in the commodity; Dmitriev thus takes for granted precisely what needed to be proven in any situation of near-total automation. See Andrew Kliman, *Reclaiming Marx's "Capital": A Refutation of the Myth of Inconsistency* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 43. Čapek's *R.U.R.* is more perceptive on this count than the Russian mathematician, recognizing that in a situation of total machinic production prices will collapse catastrophically.

than as the dialectical relation between humans and machines that Marx describes as the growing organic composition of capital and the attendant collapse in the capacity to valorize value.

Crucially, value and the value-form constitute a problem that would arguably remain invisible until Moishe Postone's 1993 analysis of the value form in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. In fact, the distinction between wealth and value, rigorously developed by Marx in the opening chapters of *Capital*, will constitute one of the fundamental interventions in Postone's critique of what he called "traditional Marxism," which criticized society from "the standpoint of labor" rather than undertaking a critique of labor itself as Postone argues Marx himself did. This distinction between wealth and value, which Postone shows was important for Marx, would remain a stumbling block for thinkers such as Habermas and Deleuze and Guattari when each attempts to consider the creation of value in the face of the ever-increasing automation of production that would begin to appear as a *problem* for capital only in the 1970s.

Marx's distinction between wealth and value was no less a stumbling block for thinkers in the Eastern Bloc in the 1960s and 70s than it was for Western critical theorists. Witness, for example, the attempt made by Radovan Richta and his colleagues in the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences to theorize the postwar "technological revolution" and the incipient automation of post-Fordist production in the 1966 collaborative study *Civilization at the Crossroads: Social and Human Implications of the Scientific and Technological Revolution*. In celebrating the growing capacity to increase the production of material wealth (use-values) through the application of science to production processes, Richta and Co., for all their many and varied citations of Marx, systematically exclude any consideration of value as a category distinct from both use- and exchange-value, a distinction any reader of the first five pages of *Capital* will have been forced to register. In this reductive formulation, what the study terms the "automatic principle" – the historical tendency toward "the elimination of man from participation in immediate production" – can be presented as an unproblematic social good.<sup>37</sup>

When Marx's most fundamental category does ever rear its head in the volume's 400-some pages, it is taken uncritically to have been automatically superseded – the tyranny of value magically rendered in a past tense as if it were a mere fungible technical component of industrial production rather than the dominant social relation Marx described, as if it were something that could be eliminated in the chemist's and computer scientist's lab in the supposed passage from industrialism (whether capitalist or socialist) to the new age that is the object of the study: "In the [previous] industrial model [of production], man's sole value for the growth of the productive forces was essentially that of a unit of simple labor power. With the scientific and technological revolution, however, the

<sup>37</sup> Radovan Richta, *Civilization at the Crossroads: Social and Human Implications of the Scientific and Technological Revolution* (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1969), p. 28.



reverse is true: now the leading factor is the extent to which the content of science – as a productive force – is harnessed by human activity.”<sup>38</sup> This blindness to the problem of valorization culminates in a call for socialist society to discover new means “to achieve a steady maximum growth in productivity” and “expanding consumption,”<sup>39</sup> given the absence of a market dynamic enforcing increases in relative surplus value through competition between capitals.<sup>40</sup>

In light of these implications of the posthuman dialectic of humans and machines that Marx called capitalism’s “moving contradiction,” the very concept of “development,” largely unquestioned across the political spectrum from Lenin and Trotsky to neoliberalism today, calls for unsparing critique. In traditional Leninist Marxism, the process of “development” contained within Trotsky’s concept of Uneven Development – in Trotsky’s original, pre-1917 formulation, as well as for Lenin from the point of the “April 1917 Theses” that rally to Trotsky’s formulation – remained unquestioned.<sup>41</sup> The concept of development (as socialist industrialization) remains a pre-critical normative horizon, both for Trotsky and Lenin’s appropriation of the concept of uneven development. The perspective of “development” in this view then travels throughout the century, as Löwy shows, to serve a plainly ideological function in “third world” industrializing socialist revolutions.<sup>42</sup> The theory of uneven and combined development, in this view, serves as the primary ideological justification for peripheral socialist revolutions as the struggle for recuperative modernization, while it never calls into question the norm of development itself, but merely addresses the social distribution of wealth resulting from industrial development.

If this is the case, does Marx suggest a critique of uneven development analogous to the categorial critique of labor and valorization that Postone identifies in his critique of political economy? What, in other words, can a reading of *Capital* today – in contrast to the labor-centric perspective of Trotsky’s theory and its traditional, peripheral reception – bring to bear on the concept of uneven development? While I can here only suggest the mere sketch of an answer, we find that answer suggested in Marx’s formulation of unequal development:

<sup>38</sup> Richta, *Civilization at the Crossroads*, p. 43. Cf. Kliman, *Reclaiming Marx’s “Capital”*, pp. 47–51 and 65–67.

<sup>39</sup> Richta, *Civilization at the Crossroads*, p. 75.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75–80.

<sup>41</sup> On the history of the concept of uneven and combined development, see Löwy’s penetrating exposition: Michael Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development* (New York: Verso, 1981).

<sup>42</sup> While Postone and Kurz’s critiques of “traditional Marxism” and “recuperative modernization” (respectively) both remain abstract and historically unsubstantiated, in the first (English) edition of his study, Löwy investigates in detail the Yugoslav, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban revolutions and, unconsciously, as it were, confirms the similar claims of Kurz and Postone.



In the non-developed country [Marx writes], where the first composition of capital represents the mean, the rate of profit would be  $66 \frac{2}{3} \%$ , while it would be  $20 \%$  in the country where production stands at a much more elevated stage (etc.).<sup>43</sup>

In other words, for Marx the “development” in uneven development is a purely analytical, categorial measure. That is to say, uneven development indicates for Marx, unlike for Trotsky and traditional, peripheral Marxism, the uneven *organic compositions of capital and, especially, value of labor globally*. These differences allow for the crucial recovery of profitability in the face of the tendency of falling rates as capital searches out across the globe for every remaining “underdeveloped” site in which labor-power can be made subject – through competition with machinic automation – to super-exploitation. This is a contemporary world in which living labor is subject to pay rates, in other words, that are at starvation levels below even the value of its reproduction.<sup>44</sup>

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Ultimately, the concept of labor, by definition the key component of Marx’s labor theory of value, remains utterly mystified in traditional, humanist Marxism. In response, instead of attempting to transcend Marx’s labor theory of value to argue, for example, that machines can in fact create value in the face of the collapse of human labor, the crisis of value in the twenty-first century impels us to return again to Marx, to construct a non-anthropocentric and neo-structuralist concept of value. When, as in the current and near-future context, human labor – not empirically, but in its capacity to produce surplus value – becomes vanishingly infinitesimal, the system itself necessarily enters into crisis. Faced with the enormous empirical complexity and even obscurity of this dynamic, today more than ever a return to Marx is essential, a Marx read after the collapse and the errors of Marxism, to develop out of his thought a posthuman, categorial understanding of the labor theory of value, to begin to construct a critique of the quantum economy of massive inequality and global slums that lies ahead.

<sup>43</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, p. 557.

<sup>44</sup> See John Smith, *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism’s Final Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016).



# THE ONTOLOGICAL PRISON

## New Materialisms and their Dead Ends

*Daniel Keil*

*Abstract: The emergence of the New Materialisms from a critique of the cultural or linguistic turn in social theory and its inability to adequately deal with questions of matter seems to be quite similar to the starting point of historical Materialism. But, in its reformulation of such crucial concepts and relations as subject-object- or nature-culture divisions (or, in that case, non-divisions), as well as its emphasis on the concept of contingent assemblages as an ontology of the emergence of matter and things, it is no longer human praxis which is being highlighted but the event (Ereignis) of materialization of non-human/human assemblages. Thus, it is only the contingency of matter which is leading to changes. Hence, the ontology of New Materialisms is deeply problematic.*

*Therefore, the paper aims to provide a critique of the main concepts of the New Materialisms by means of Marxian approaches. The theses are, first, that the New Materialisms de-socialize things through de-socializing categories and concepts; second, that they can be assumed to represent more of an “ontological turn” than a “material turn,” which has serious epistemological consequences; and, third, they are mirroring in their negation of the subject the methodological individualism of neoliberal theory because both approaches define a non-society of super-individual processes, a kind of spontaneous order which cannot be controlled by humans. In order to substantiate these assumptions the paper first traces back the main categories of New Materialisms, then takes a deeper look at the subject-object- and the nature-culture relation before relating it to neoliberal society. Finally, the ontology of open-endedness and contingency will be criticized as an ontological apologia of what is.*

*Keywords: New Materialisms, the ontological turn, Marxism, critical theory*

The so-called New Materialisms emerged, especially, from a critique of the cultural or linguistic turn in social theory and its inability to adequately deal with questions of matter. The origins of New Materialism are very diverse, but are nevertheless deeply rooted in feminist theory<sup>1</sup> and feminist science studies<sup>2</sup> as well as in a re-reading of theorists like Spinoza, Bergson, or Deleuze. Its aim is to give answers to “the most fundamental questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world,”<sup>3</sup> thus all of the New Materialisms focus on the emergence and agency of matter in assemblages with or without human beings. In a truly radical and – for critical theory – challenging way, the New Materialisms try to rethink questions of “how matter comes to matter”<sup>4</sup> as well as how major divisions in science and society (like the subject-object division) are emerging out of specific constellations of embodied and embedded humans and scientific-technologist apparatuses. Out of this rethink of the mattering of matter and the emerging of divisions various approaches have been derived that tackle a wide range of problems ranging from epistemology to the emergence of social entities. The starting points of the New Materialisms seem quite similar to those of historical materialism – for instance, its critique of certain kinds of idealistic philosophy that single out the human spirit as the primary factor in the world’s constitution – but the conclusions reached by the New Materialisms are quite different.

Surprisingly enough, while there are approaches trying to bring matter back in, there is little discussion of New Materialism’s own relation to historical materialism even though the influence of Marx is recognized through the mediation of structural Marxism<sup>5</sup> – that

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Myra Hird, “Feminist Matters: New Materialist Considerations of Sexual Difference,” *Feminist Theory* 5 (2004), no. 2, pp. 223–232; Nina Lykke, “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism,” *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 18 (2010), no. 2, pp. 131–136.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988), no. 3, pp. 575–599; Karen Barad, “Agential Realism: How Material-Discursive Practices Matter,” in Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 132–188.

<sup>3</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1–43, here 3.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Barad, “Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialization of Reality,” in Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, pp. 189–222, here 191 and 207.

<sup>5</sup> One exception is Hanna Meißner, who discusses Marx and the possibilities of connecting his insights with Foucault, Butler, and Barad. However, her focus is not to tackle all the problems and differences of Marxian/historical materialist approaches but to rethink the possibilities of a critique of society. I will try to problematize one crucial point in the section on epistemological consequences (Hanna Meißner, “Feministische Gesellschaftskritik als onto-epistemo-logisches Projekt,” in Corinna Bath et al. [ed.], *Geschlechter Interferenzen: Wissensformen – Subjektivierungsweisen – Materialisierungen* [Berlin: LIT, 2013], pp. 163–208).

is, early Althusser<sup>6</sup> and those influenced by him. Hence, neither is there substantial discussion of Marxian critiques of idealism and philosophical materialism. The theoretical tradition of the New Materialisms can be traced back to post-structuralism, vitalism (for instance Bergson), Deleuze/Guattari, and Heidegger.<sup>7</sup> The major motives in developing a new perspective on matter are to overcome “dualisms of object/subject, knower-known, nature-culture, and word-world,”<sup>8</sup> thus to understand constellations of matter and humans as assemblage as contingent and open-ended ontological processes in which matter has its own agency.<sup>9</sup> According to such assumptions it is no longer human praxis, as in historical materialism, but the event (*Ereignis*) of materialization of assemblages which is highlighted.<sup>10</sup> Thus, New Materialism tries to provide a novel approach to social ontology and it could be said, though it would be a kind of exaggeration, that in this new approach coincidence becomes the motor of history in the last instance.

In this article, my aim is to provide a critique of the main concepts of the New Materialisms by means of Marxian approaches as developed by the Frankfurt School. My theses are first that the New Materialisms de-socialize things through de-socializing categories and concepts; second, that they can be assumed to be more an “ontological turn” than a “material turn,”<sup>11</sup> which has serious epistemological consequences; and, third, in their negation of the subject they mirror what neoliberal theory accomplishes through methodological individualism, defining a non-society of super-individual processes, a kind of a spontaneous order which cannot be controlled by humans. In order to substantiate these assumptions, I will first trace the main categories of the New Materialisms and then take a deeper look at the subject-object and nature-culture relation before finally relating it to historical materialism. To sharpen my argument and, indeed, provoke the readers of this article, the ontological turn will be criticized as being, in general, a dead end for emancipation.

<sup>6</sup> “Early” Althusser mainly refers to those of his works that bore directly on Marx and on the state. The late Althusser turned away from that kind of structuralism. His late theory is based on a specific concept of contingency that is very close to the New Materialisms. See the next footnote.

<sup>7</sup> Althusser, for instance, included Heidegger in what he called the “underground current of materialism of the encounter” (Louis Althusser, “The underground Current of the Materialism of Encounter,” in Francois Matheron and Oliver Corpet [eds.], *Philosophy of the Encounter Later Writings, 1978–87* [Verso: London New York, 2006], pp. 163–207).

<sup>8</sup> Barad, “Agential Realism,” p. 147.

<sup>9</sup> This is, obviously, according to Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* [Oxford: University Press, 2005], p. 63f).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Andreas Folkers, “Von der Praxis zum Ereignis,” in Tobias Goll, Daniel Keil, and Thomas Telios (eds.), *Critical Matter: Diskussionen eines neuen Materialismus* (Münster: Edition Assemblage, 2013), pp. 16–33.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Steve Woolgar and Javier Lezaun, “The wrong bin bag: A turn to ontology in science and technology studies?” *Social Studies of Science* 43 (2013), no. 3, pp. 321–340.

### The Foundations of the New Materialisms

It is hardly possible to trace all the trajectories of the various concepts that merged into New Materialism. Thus, and to be clear, there is not one New Materialism but many different approaches. Some main principles, however, can be found which I believe play a constitutive role. If I had to draw a rough historical line of its emergence, it would start with a criticizing of the economism in Marxism, which was identified with a type of structuralism, the critique of which led to post-structuralism, post-modern theory, linguistic, and discourse theories, and which finally led to the new material (or ontological, as I would say) turn that brought the New Materialisms to life. In spite of the multiple genealogies underlying the New Materialisms, one thing that the various New Materialisms share is a re-reading of minor (non-dominant) traditions in philosophy (such as Spinoza or Bergson, sometimes reaching back to Epicurus). Nevertheless, there is a varying range of genealogies in which four central points can be summarized. These four points include: first, the recognition of matter as active, not just passive and inert; second, the dissolution of the nature-culture dichotomy and the conceptualization of the relations between matter and non-matter in other than causal or mediated relations; third, the rejection of the subject-object dichotomy, negating this fundamental tenet of Cartesian thought; and, fourth, the consideration of history not as linear or causal but as contingent, occasional, an emergence of assemblages of singular unities. These four points, which are deeply intertwined, are, hence, the theoretical foundation of all New Materialist approaches.

### As Assemblages Emerge – What’s the Matter?

Because the crucial theorems of the New Materialisms are heavily interwoven, it is hardly possible to illustrate them in a linear way. In the following section, they will therefore be presented both as a whole and as distinct conceptualizations. One important thesis of the New Materialisms, and thus to give justification for starting at this point, is the new position assigned to matter or non-human objects in Science and Technology Studies. As Latour states, “we should [...] find a place in a new social theory for the non-human masses that beg us for understanding.”<sup>12</sup> The new role of “objects” is to be found in highlighting their own agency, which changes the relations in science to the objects of knowledge. Haraway, further, questions the possibility of pure epistemological objectivity, emphasizing partial perspectives, limited locations, and situated knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Objects become actors herein. With the notion of an “apparatus of bodily production,” Haraway emphasizes the object of knowledge as a “material-semiotic actor”<sup>14</sup> which is conceived

<sup>12</sup> Bruno Latour, “Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts,” in Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law (eds.), *Shaping Technology / Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), pp. 151–180, here 153.

<sup>13</sup> Haraway, “Situated Knowledges.”

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 595.

as a “meaning-generating part of the apparatus.”<sup>15</sup> Referring to Latour, she tries to reject nature or society as transcendental categories and instead takes a partial view of actor-actant relations without reproducing binary oppositions such as culture-nature, science-society, and others.<sup>16</sup> Objects only become objects in networks of material-semiotic interaction. Subsequently, the New Materialisms radicalized the concept of matter as an actor with its own agency. Especially Jane Bennett’s vitalist theory is centered on “thing-power”.<sup>17</sup> “The curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”<sup>18</sup> For Barad, in contrast to Bennett, “matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency.”<sup>19</sup> In the concept of matter’s own agency and the focus on the network in which objects become objects, or in which matter becomes matter, matter itself is not passive, but rather produces its own historicity without a need for human beings. Matter “does not require the mark of an external force like culture or history to complete it. Matter is always ongoing historicity.”<sup>20</sup> Overall, the focus is on the becoming of matter, understood neither as passive and inert stuff nor as merely produced by humans but as processes of different agents or agential forces, where the relata do not precede their relations. Haraway especially hit an important point in her rethinking of scientific modes of knowledge and in grasping those modes as apparatuses of bodily production, where boundaries are emerging and bodies are produced through practices of knowledge-production. But in rejecting the dualisms of hegemonic sciences, it appears to me that the New Materialisms too strictly identify knowledge production with techno-scientific practices, and that this leads to certain problems when the critique of science is transferred to a critique of society as a whole (and not just of society as a product of scientific knowledge production).

### The Subject-Object and Nature-Culture Division and the Gathering of Things

Perhaps the lastly mentioned problem will be uncovered by taking a deeper look at the rejection of some dualisms, namely the nature-culture division as well as the subject-object division. The argument is, very briefly, that in conceptualizing culture and nature as well as subject and object as transcendental binaries, all potentials of acting are placed on the side of humans and thus this blinds us to the agency of matter (see, for example, Haraway 1995). It is argued that those binaries are disappearing outside

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Donna Haraway, *Monströse Versprechen: Coyote-Geschichten zu Feminismus und Technowissenschaft* (Hamburg: Argument-Verlag, 1995), pp. 186f.

<sup>17</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 4f.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Barad, “Agential Realism,” p. 151.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

of the premises of enlightenment and modernity. Instead of reproducing such binaries, the perspective of the New Materialisms is to emphasize the crucial role of matter and non-human actors in the production of knowledge as well as the role of relations between humans and non-humans. The division of nature-culture or subject-object is losing its sense, replaced by a flat ontology that does not privilege one part of being over another.

The problem is that in identifying those divisions as binary dichotomies, derived especially from the Cartesian subject and the philosophy of enlightenment in general,<sup>21</sup> the understanding of matter as an agency and a force dissolve those binaries in an ontological way. It does not ask about the social foundation of Cartesian thoughts but rather contrasts them with ontological assumptions about the being and becoming of matter and its knowledge. This is quite contrary to the procedure of sublation (*Aufhebung*) in a Hegelian way; thus, it is more a going back to before the philosophy of the Enlightenment<sup>22</sup> in order to conceptualize the production of matter-human networks as a fundamental structure of being. For the New Materialists, there is no longer any division between the cognitive subject and the passive object; rather, there is a network that emerged contingently and which is in all parts seen as productive. Those networks, hence, are taken as contingent (networks of) singular entities and grasped as assemblages.<sup>23</sup> Assemblages can be understood as gatherings of things (from atoms to human beings) – concrete, singular, and contingent singularities – which have “neither subject nor object.”<sup>24</sup> The relations of the parts of such an assemblage are grasped as: “Relations

<sup>21</sup> In fact, the Cartesian model of perception is crucial as one starting point of the New Materialisms (cf. Barad, “Agential Realism,” and Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*), the critique of which is entangled with an anti-Hegelian and anti-Marxian approach; it is not surprising then that they do not recognize the critique of Descartes formulated, for instance, by Critical Theory: “The inability to grasp in thought the unity of theory and practice and the limitation of the concept of necessity to inevitable events are both due, from the viewpoint of theory of knowledge, to the Cartesian dualism of thought and being. That dualism is congenial both to nature and to bourgeois society in so far as the latter resembles a natural mechanism.” (Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell and others [New York: Continuum, 2002], pp. 181–243, here 231.)

<sup>22</sup> This is indicated in several expressions. First, in the references to authors of anti- or irrationalist traditions in philosophy and, second, in identifying the criticized binaries of culture-nature or subject-object with enlightenment and modernity (e.g., Haraway, *Monströse Versprechen*) and to identify those with Western and male domination. That the critics of the Enlightenment are very important towards understanding mechanisms of power, domination, and expropriation cannot be contested, but to grasp it in that way of identification runs the risk of returning to some kind of pre-Enlightenment philosophy because, in criticizing nature-culture and subject-object divisions as binaries, they become hypostasized as some kind of wrong epistemology without reconnecting those dualist reflections to the societal conditions in which they are founded.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* 2 (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987), pp. 4f; Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 3.



of exteriority. These relations imply, first of all, that a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different.”<sup>25</sup> Assemblages can each be taken as a singular multiplicity that has to be separately focused on their becoming. This way of thinking shall avoid both totalities and essences, so it takes multiplicities as contingent sets of things gathering without subject or object; a multiplicity has “only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature.”<sup>26</sup> So it refuses to think in generalizing categories and it states that the relations between the singular parts of a multiplicity are not relations of mediation, but are exterior relations<sup>27</sup> or relations of “intra-action,”<sup>28</sup> that is, “relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions. Crucially, then, intra-actions enact agential separability – the condition of exteriority-within-phenomena.”<sup>29</sup> The point is to construe a concept of phenomena or multiplicities that emerge contingent in each specific form with specific boundaries. Each assemblage emerging out of intra-active agency is also to be grasped as a phenomenon of emerging cuts and boundaries, of excluding agents or actants from the assembling. Taking assemblages as apparatuses of bodily production, the emerging bodies are specific ones in excluding other “things” from being part of that body.

### Contingency and History

Notwithstanding the creation of boundaries, the main feature of assemblages still is contingency, which has a deep impact on the understanding of history, that “history of contingency.”<sup>30</sup> It refers to the concept of *clinamen*, the name which Lucretius gave to the swerving of atoms, in which one contingent deviation causes impacts.<sup>31</sup> The second point is that we see here a fundamental ontological assumption similar to the assumptions of classical ontology, that the world is not only actual but also virtual, which means that there are potentials and possibilities which may not become actual in emergent assemblages. We have here a difference between being and existence, in which being, despite all contingency, structures the emergence of actual existence. DeLanda presents this as the difference between “individual singularities” of existent assemblages and “universal singularities,”<sup>32</sup> the latter of which are described in Deleuzian terms as “equivalent of

<sup>25</sup> DeLanda, *New Philosophy*, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> DeLanda, *New Philosophy*.

<sup>28</sup> Barad, “Agential Realism.”

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>30</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Vorwort zur italienischen Ausgabe,” in *Tausend Plateaus: Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie*, (Berlin: Merve, 1992), pp. i–iii, here p. ii. My translation.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Folkers, “Von der Praxis”; Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 361; Althusser, „The underground Current.”

<sup>32</sup> DeLanda, *New Philosophy*, pp. 30f.

body-plan.”<sup>33</sup> Contingency becomes restricted by being itself, which is structuring the possibilities of emerging assemblages in general. It is not by accident that this reminds one of Heidegger: “Being is the enabling-favoring, the “may be” [*das “Mög-liche”*]. As the element, being is the “quiet power” of the favoring-enabling that is, of the possible.”<sup>34</sup> This is “being itself.”<sup>35</sup> The New Materialisms are following Heidegger, albeit not explicitly. They also follow Heidegger in focusing on the emergence of existence, the becoming of assemblages. Crucial here is the notion of the event (“*Ereignis*”), which implies contingency as well as the exterior relations of the parts of emerging multiplicities. If there is neither subject nor object, the coming of being into existence means that all parts equally produce the emerging existence, whatever the assemblage will be: a forest, a spider web, a city, society. All parts are producing the assemblage, but they are not mediated through it. If, for instance, society is not a category and reality of mediation any longer, it is not structuring the relations of things and humans either. In addition, the already-mentioned term of “gathering” is important here since it reveals the sometimes-hidden role of Heidegger in the concept of assemblages. Latour, for instance, is referring directly to Heidegger’s concept of gathering and the “thinging of things” when he develops the idea that every thing is, at the same time, a gathering.<sup>36</sup>

### The De-Socializing of Things and Relations and a Hidden Problem

According to such concepts of assemblages and gatherings of things, the social itself is conceived of in new ways. In emphasizing the agency of matter, the concept of society is thus questioned at its core. In redefining the social, the concept of society is grasped as one of the above-mentioned transcendentals to be overcome. Latour underlines this in his aim to renew social theory. “There is no way to succeed in renewing social theory as long as the beach has not been cleared and the ill-fated notion of society entirely dissolved.”<sup>37</sup> Hence, society is dissolved into assemblages and gatherings, and the dualisms of subject-object and nature-culture are therefore dissolved into the ontological foundations of becoming things and gatherings. I would grasp this as a de-socializing of things and relations, because the fundamental structuring of relations through society is negated in reifying the difference of the social and societal in order to redefine society as just being the contingent outcome of the “thinging” of things. The specific social form of things and relations is negated as well. To make this clear with an example: the

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” in Martin Heidegger *Heidegger: Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 239–276, here 243.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Bruno Latour, “Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), no. 2, pp. 225–248, here 235.

<sup>37</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 164.

New Materialisms' emphasis on the ontological becoming of assemblages reveals the difference between their approach to becoming and the concept of becoming in historical materialism. In historical materialism, becoming is not taken to be ontological but instead emphasizes the movement of contradictory elements (like nature-culture or subject-object) in constituting those contradictions through human praxis. The crucial point is that the relations which humans have to take on to reproduce themselves under the conditions of capital are becoming objectified and reified forms that seem to be external to the individuals. Humans are dominated by their own social relations that also determine their immediate perception of reality. Otherwise, those objectified and reified relations – social forms – have to be reproduced themselves through the practice they dominate. Those social forms include the value-form, the political form, and law with its specific form of the subject. Historical materialism, hence, deciphers these forms as societal relations. This is also the place where mediation becomes crucial in Critical Theory. Mediation does not involve establishing strict binaries; rather, it defines how societal relations are congealed objectifications of human praxis working through contradictions. Thus, things, relations, and humans-as-subjects are taking a specific societal form that is negated when one falls back on an ontological concept of becoming and rejects the concept of mediation. With the rejection of mediation, specifically societal (as opposed to “social”)<sup>38</sup> structuring cannot be seen anymore. This is what I call the de-socialization of things and relations.

A further problem is that understanding being as an event in a Heideggerian sense means positing a mystic dimension of the event, as a presencing of being (“*Wesung des Seyns*”<sup>39</sup>), which also implies a closure of history: the open-ended processing of history in that sense does not recognize historical development because history is nothing more than a succession of events.<sup>40</sup>

The undiscussed<sup>41</sup> and therefore unconscious tradition of Heidegger on the ontological path of the New Materialisms poses yet another problem, because the concept of event has been developed in a hidden political context that was structured by a strict Manichaeism in the history of being (between good being and evil existence). In 1938 Heidegger developed this in thinking about National Socialism, where he took that strict

<sup>38</sup> This difference is very important, because the New Materialisms are surely thinking about the social but in a way which negates society. So the concept of societal relations has to be distinct from the concept of social relations. That is because for the New Materialisms something can be social, but without society.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Rüdiger H. Rimpler, *Prozessualität und Performativität in Heideggers “Beiträgen zur Philosophie”: Zur Zeitigung von Sinn im Gedanken an die Wesung* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008), p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> To be clear, Heidegger is discussed sometimes, but the specific problem that I want to tackle stays undiscussed.

difference to proclaim a decision that should not be made between war or peace, democracy, or authority, but: reflection and the search for the beginning event of being or the delusion of the final humanization of the uprooted human being.<sup>42</sup> The strict differentiation between a primal being and modern society, which Heidegger states here, is not only the basis for his antisemitism, but it also connects the concept of the event with the historically concrete phenomenon of National Socialism. This is so in a two folded manner: first, the event appears in a philosophical sense as another beginning (Greek philosophy was, for Heidegger, the first beginning) made by the Germans – as liberation, which has to be thought as “*Gründung in das ungehobene Wesen, die ihre Weisung aus der bodenständigen Nähe zum Ursprung [empfängt – DK]*.”<sup>43</sup> Second, the event appears in a political sense, as Heidegger adopted National Socialism as this event of another beginning;<sup>44</sup> this was thought as having the potential to reject the mere appearance of liberation, which would be a path to the disrooted outland.<sup>45</sup> The connection of foundational ontological considerations with National Socialism in Heidegger’s work does not make the ontology of the New Materialisms in and of itself National Socialist, but this connection cannot be evaded simply by not discussing it. This is, moreover, the real underground current of the ontological tradition, in its assuming (whether explicitly or not) a somehow primal being which is then, however, meaningful. This is echoed, for instance, in Barad’s term of a “primary ontological unit”<sup>46</sup> and it is also the source of the anti- or posthumanist approach, in understanding the binaries as “enlightenment values”<sup>47</sup> that have to be rejected in order to negate those binaries. Adorno’s critique of ontological jargon can also be applied here:

<sup>42</sup> Peter Trawny, *Heidegger und der Mythos der jüdischen Weltverschwörung* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2015), p. 24; Martin Heidegger “Überlegungen IX,” in Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 95, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2015), pp. 191f.

<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, cited by Trawny, *Heidegger und der Mythos*, p. 76. The text is hard to translate, but it means that the second beginning of philosophy as liberation is a foundation in the unexposed essence, which receives its directive from the rooted-to-the-soil nearness to the origin.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Dirk Pilz, “Ein anderer Anfang: Die Schwarzen Hefte von Martin Heidegger,” *Frankfurt Rundschau* Mar. 16, 2014 (online at <http://www.fr-online.de/literatur/die--schwarzen-hefte--von-martin-heidegger-ein-anderer-anfang,1472266,26569072.html> [accessed Oct. 29, 2015]).

<sup>45</sup> The notion of the “disrooted outland” or the “uprooted human being” is nothing but an anti-Semitic code in this context. It contrasts a natural nation bounded by blood and soil to unbound cosmopolitanism, which is thought as decomposing the natural order. The code functions so well that there is no need to mention Jews explicitly. On antisemitism cf. Detlev Claussen, *Grenzen der Aufklärung: Die gesellschaftliche Genese des modernen Antisemitismus, Erweiterte Neuausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Barad, “Agential Realism,” p. 139.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Whatever praises itself for reaching behind the concepts of reflection – subject and object – in order to grasp something substantial, does nothing but reify the irresolvability of the concepts of reflection. It reifies the impossibility of reducing one into the other, into the in-itself. This is the standard philosophical form of underhanded activity, which thereupon occurs constantly in the jargon. It vindicates without authority and without theology, maintaining that what is of essence is real, and, by the same token, that the existent is essential, meaningful, and justified.<sup>48</sup>

In turning the concept of becoming, which is also crucial in historical materialism, into the ontological concept of event, the concept of becoming itself is thus irrationalized. A critical concept is hence turned into an affirmative one because being is affirmed as primal to all emerging events of gatherings. Haug compares this form of turning concepts into irrationality with pre-fascist incorporations of moments of materialist theory in the praxis of stabilizing capitalist domination.<sup>49</sup> It is a form of materialist legitimation and affirmation of the existent world.

### Epistemological Consequences: The Ontological Turn

By going back behind the concepts of reflection, the question of the possibility of knowledge and perception of the world is also given over to new discussions. Therein a shift from epistemology to ontology can be recognized, which is why I would grasp the turn provided by the New Materialisms as being rather more ontological than material. “It is an effort to circumvent epistemology and its attendant language of representation in favour of an approach that addresses itself more directly to the composition of the world.”<sup>50</sup> Crucial are the attempts to overcome dialectics, especially the specific, perceived Hegelian tradition, in order to re-establish ontological models of cognition. The theory of assemblages, or multiplicities, was created “precisely in order to escape the abstract opposition between the multiple and the one, to escape dialectics.”<sup>51</sup> In this case, dialectical thinking is assumed to be producing organic totalities, where in every part the whole is essentially existent. In general, dialectics are equalized with models of organic totalities that have to be overcome.<sup>52</sup> According to this, Marxian and Hegelian

<sup>48</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 121.

<sup>49</sup> Wolfgang Fritz Haug, “Mensch, Natur und Technik im Hightech-Kapitalismus, Teil 1,” *Das Argument* 58 (2015), no. 1 (313), pp. 315–337, here 334.

<sup>50</sup> Steve Woolgar and Javier Lezaun, “The Wrong Bin Bag: A Turn to Ontology in Science and Technology Studies?” *Social Studies of Science* 43 (2013), no. 3, pp. 321–340, here 321f.

<sup>51</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 33.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Graham Harman, “DeLanda’s Ontology: Assemblage and Realism,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 41 (2008), no. 3, pp. 367–383, here 371.

Dialectics are seen as focusing on a concept of synthesis which has been replaced by other models.<sup>53</sup> And, third, dialectics are seen as reproducing dualisms, which the New Materialisms are arguing against.<sup>54</sup> Before criticizing this reductive understanding of dialectics, I will try to summarize the consequences of this for epistemological questions.

At least three main theoretical considerations ground the questions of knowledge: first, the agency of matter, the generativity of things, which “act” in networks; second, the going back behind the nature-culture divide; and, third, bypassing the subject-object division. By refusing the concept of mediation, the relations between the parts of the emerging assemblages must be generating the possibility of knowledge in some other way. For Barad it is a “feature of the world”:

But in my agential realist account, intelligibility is an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation. It is not a human-dependent characteristic but a feature of the world in its differential becoming. The world articulates itself differently.<sup>55</sup>

Every social structure is, hence, a contingent result of this emergence of articulations, but it has also abandoned any thinking about the possibilities of knowledge. Moreover, the possibilities of knowledge are bound to a “plane of immanence” (Deleuze and Guattari) which has to be understood as a monist concept of contingent becoming, as being which determines the knowledge of being through being.<sup>56</sup> This is based on two assumptions: first, the Bergsonian concept of intuition<sup>57</sup> in which a mystical real process of a unity of matter and spirit is developed<sup>58</sup> and, second, Heidegger’s considerations that human beings have to dwell in “the nearness of being.”<sup>59</sup> In consequence, it is not just repeating the radical de-socialization that Adorno criticized – intuition as a form of abstract negation of mediation – which falls into the cult of a pure actualism and praises,

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Manuel DeLanda, “Interview with Manuel DeLanda,” in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (eds.), *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2010) (online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/11515701.0001.001/1:4.2/-new-materialism-interview-s-cartographies?rgn=div2;view=fulltext> [accessed May 17, 2017]), pp. 38–47, here 39.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, “The Transversality of New Materialism,” in Dolphijn and van der Tuin (eds.), *New Materialism* (online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/11515701.0001.001/1:5.2/-new-materialism-interviews-cartographies?rgn=div2;view=fulltext> [accessed May 17, 2017]), pp. 93–114, here 97f.

<sup>55</sup> Barad, “Agential Realism,” p. 149.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Elmar Flatschart, “Matter that really matters? New Materialism und kritisch-dialektische Theorie,” in Goll, Keil, and Telios (eds.), *Critical Matter*, pp. 96–112, here 104.

<sup>57</sup> On the influence of Bergson on Deleuze/Guattari and New Materialism cf. Elizabeth Grosz, “Bergson, Deleuze and the Becoming of Unbecoming,” *parallax* 11 (2005), no. 2, pp. 4–13.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” p. 261.

at the least, conformism<sup>60</sup> but also the reestablishment of some kind of nativeness, of a pure immediateness. “The human being is not the lord of beings. The human being is the shepherd of being. [...] The human being is the neighbor of being.”<sup>61</sup> Insofar as the intelligibility of the world – or of being – is a feature of the becoming of the world, all disturbing distractions (like dialectics) have to be abolished to get to the unmediated dwelling in being. The world in its articulation is no longer a place of conscious changes but only some contingent plane of mythological events. “Philosophical banality is generated when that magical participation in the absolute is ascribed to the general concept – a participation which puts the lie to that concept’s conceivability.”<sup>62</sup>

### Nature – Second Nature: The Loss of Labor and Spontaneity

The ontological hypostasis of being, although and because of the centrality of becoming, results in a reabsorption of the subject into nature. Going back in this specific way to a moment before the nature-culture division means obliterating the specific sociality of all relations in order to establish some primal figures. If “matter is worlding in its materiality”<sup>63</sup> and all differences are contingently emerging through this worlding, then there is an undivided nativeness which also affects the differentiation of nature and culture. Culture is no longer understood as an achievement resulting from the carving out of the compulsion of nature; it is merely a result of the blind processes of being. Thus worlding matter is equated with nature: “What I am calling vital materiality or vibrant matter is akin to what is expressed in one of the many historical senses of the word nature.”<sup>64</sup> Nature itself becomes a “continuous stream of occurrence.”<sup>65</sup> Humanity, thus, is conceptualized as “an embodied humanity enveloped in nature, rather than as external to inert stuff it dominates.”<sup>66</sup> This is situated before all societal forms, which just become the outcome of contingency or nature. This does not mean that the social-culture comes after nature for these authors; rather, the social appears as a kind of naturalization of societal forms. This can be recognized as a reflection of Spinozian substance, an extension of *natura naturans*.

In such reduction, crucial categories of theoretical reflection are abandoned, among them the concept of labor. What we have here is a materialism that radically abstracts the main aspects of historical materialism by reducing substance to extension – it neglects

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, “Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie,” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), p. 54.

<sup>61</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” pp. 260f.

<sup>62</sup> Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, p. 51.

<sup>63</sup> Barad, “Agential Realism,” p. 181.

<sup>64</sup> Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 117.

<sup>65</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Diana Coole, “The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh,” in Coole and Frost (eds.) *New Materialisms*, pp. 92–115, here 113.



the subjective-active side of materialism.<sup>67</sup> According to Adorno, when reductions are made in order to overcome the culture-nature division, subjectivity becomes nothing more than receptivity; all spontaneity (in a Kantian sense) or what appears as work/labor in Hegelian philosophy, is dispensed with.<sup>68</sup> As a result of such omissions, the New Materialisms disregard the concept of second nature and its consequences. Society, hence, disappears in New Materialist theories as does historical materialism's attempt to grasp the relations of humans to nature in terms of mediation, involving concepts like "second nature." The idea of second nature suggests that, in the process of social organization, humans carve themselves out of the constraints of blind processing nature. Yet, at the same time, social organization is construed by people as a continuation of blind coercion within social constraints. Societal praxis condenses into social forms which are confronting human beings as reified nature-like things. So critical theory does not focus on nature as a substance, but rather on the constellation of nature, humans, and society, which produces nature as distinct from societal praxis. Actually, second nature is prior to "first" nature,<sup>69</sup> because to determine nature as the other of culture it is necessary that the separation between nature and culture be mediated – by second nature. This is the necessary condition for the possibility of grasping the mediated as the other in apparent immediacy. That means, nature – both first and second – appears unmediated, but it is, hence, conceptualized as mediated immediacy.<sup>70</sup> Taking, for instance, Spinozian substance, as Bennet does, to negate all elements of the specific praxis of human beings is to fall back behind the insight of Marx and Engels, who deciphered Spinoza's substance as "metaphysically travestied nature severed from man."<sup>71</sup> The ontological turn of New Materialism negates, in other words, mediation and reifies the apparent immediacy as an ontological first. In all emphases on becoming, agency, and so forth, New Materialism conceals its incapability of reflecting its own conditions and outcomes as duplication of nature-societal constraints. Adorno suggested that the success of ontology is brought by an ontological need<sup>72</sup> derived from the curious knot of some kind of nonconformist thinking and its recoiling into conformism; in other words, ontology as a kind of a phil-

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Winfred Kaminski, *Zur Dialektik von Substanz und Subjekt bei Hegel und Marx* (Frankfurt am Main: Haag und Herchen, 1976), p. 42.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ontologie und Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), pp. 142f.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Die Idee der Naturgeschichte," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), pp. 345–365.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, "Konstellationen der zweiten Natur: Zur Ideengeschichte und Aktualität der Dialektik der Aufklärung," in Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, *Gesten aus Begriffen: Konstellationen der Kritischen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1997), pp.19–50, here 26.

<sup>71</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Critique* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), p. 186.

<sup>72</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 1973), pp. 61f.



osophical conformist rebellion. “The categorial structure that had been uncritically accepted as such, as the skeleton of extant conditions, was confirmed as absolute, and the unreflective immediacy of the method lent itself to any kind of license.”<sup>73</sup> Then, as a second moment of the ontological need, ontology is expressed in a body of theory that reflects the real powerlessness of the subject at the present historical moment, and which articulates this in an affirmative philosophy.<sup>74</sup>

### Some Short Remarks on the Necessary Critique of the Powerlessness of the Subject – Connections to Neoliberalism

Although Dolphijn and van der Tuin state that New Materialism “is thus not necessarily opposed to the crude or Historical/Marxist materialist tradition” but “carefully ‘worked through’ all these traditions,”<sup>75</sup> it is hard to find evidence of this “working through.” On the contrary, the arguments of New Materialist authors against dialectics and Marxism/Historical materialism do not appear to be the result of sympathetic, constructive criticism, but rather reproduce common anti-Marxist arguments. Some authors merely mention Marx in passing, as does Bennet when she refers to “Marx’s notion of materiality — economic structures and exchanges that provoke many other events,”<sup>76</sup> a very simplified view (that emerged from restricting Marx’s Materialism to the preface of the 1859 version of the *Critique of Political Economy*) which fails to grasp the importance of praxis as materiality as developed in the “Theses on Feuerbach” and *The German Ideology*. Others engaged in direct attacks on Marx; DeLanda, for example, wants “to liberate the left from the straitjacket in which Marx’s thought has kept it for 150 years.”<sup>77</sup> His main argument is that Marx’s theory of value was anthropocentric: “only human labor was a source of value, not steam engines, coal, industrial organization, et cetera.”<sup>78</sup> The concepts inherent in the “‘mode of production’ do not fit a flat ontology of individuals,”<sup>79</sup> so DeLanda wants to “create a new political economy” based upon other “redefinitions of the market, like those of Hayek.”<sup>80</sup> Yes, he is proposing Hayek to overcome Marxian thinking. This is far from being a coincidence, but is instead the logical consequence of abandoning the subject-object problem as well as the culture-nature problem. In negating

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>74</sup> Adorno, *Ontologie und Dialektik*.

<sup>75</sup> Dolphijn and van der Tuin, “Transversality,” p. 89.

<sup>76</sup> Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, p. XVI.

<sup>77</sup> Manuel DeLanda, John Protevi, and Torkild Thanem, “Deleuzian Interrogations: A Conversation with Manuel DeLanda and John Protevi,” *Tamara: Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science* 3 (2005), no. 4, pp. 65–88, here 68.

<sup>78</sup> DeLanda, “Interview,” p. 42.

<sup>79</sup> DeLanda, Protevi, and Thanem, “Deleuzian Interrogations,” p. 82.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

mediation in general, in rejecting the asymmetric relations of humans to their conditions of existence in order to establish a flat ontology of symmetric agents in emerging assemblages, in de-socializing all categories, the New Materialisms ontology simply reiterates the real powerlessness of the subject in an affirmative way. And yet the power of things is nothing more than the power of social forms. If this is understood – as it is in historical materialism – as the real rigidification of second nature, its assertion can be read critically as identification with powerlessness, which “reinforce[s] the spell of the second nature.”<sup>81</sup>

New Materialism is then a consequent continuation of the postmodern liquidation of the subject, which proposes a conformist theory as the latest trend in radical philosophy. This is mirroring neoliberalism in three ways. First, in negating the subject, it parallels neoliberalist theory, whose methodological individualism also negates the rationalist tradition of philosophy and grasps reason and the attempt to collectively shape history and society as authoritarian. For neoliberal theory, the individual is nothing but a social atom that has to act in conformity to the world it is living in.<sup>82</sup> Hayek is proposing the concept of a spontaneous order, which emerges out of the assembled actions of social atoms that is quite similar to the concept of assemblage.<sup>83</sup> But, according to Zuckermann's polemic against postmodern theory, the negation of societal praxis and the subject can be described as an ideological form of late capitalism in (post)neoliberal times.<sup>84</sup> Second, to wrap up human beings in nature-being and all relations that emerge as an outcome of contingent agency of symmetrical actors<sup>85</sup> is to reproduce and naturalize the real reversal of the social context as produced by societal praxis to its preponderance over the individual subject. It is to disregard the fact that the societal praxis has come to be understood as based in the objective subject, in a social doing which is not aware of itself, which is a *hypokeimenon*.<sup>86</sup> Third, neoliberal society in its real processing is more and more constituted as an order of competition in which the possibilities of interfering

<sup>81</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 68.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Gerhard Stapelfeldt, *Neoliberaler Irrationalismus: Aufsätze und Vorträge zur Kritik der ökonomischen Rationalität II*, (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovac, 2012), pp. 349f.

<sup>83</sup> Friedrich A. von Hayek, *Recht, Gesetzgebung und Freiheit, vol. I: Regeln und Ordnung* (Landsberg am Lech: Verlag Moderne Industrie, 1986).

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Moshe Zuckermann, “Ohnmacht als ideologischer Lustgewinn: Kritische Anmerkungen zum Subjektdiskurs der Postmoderne,” in Volker Weiß and Sarah Speck (eds.), *Herrschaftsverhältnisse und Herrschaftsdiskurse: Essays zur dekonstruktivistischen Herausforderung kritischer Gesellschaftstheorie* (Berlin: LIT, 2007), pp. 1–11, here 3.

<sup>85</sup> On the critique of this moment of flat ontologies, see Haug, “Mensch, Natur und Technik,” pp. 328f.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Hans-Jürgen Krahel, *Konstitution und Klassenkampf* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1977), p. 139.

actions are limited through the depoliticization of more and more areas of society, which reinforces its ideological claim to be based on atomized individuals who have to act in ways of voluntary conformism.

Instead of affirming the real powerlessness of the subject, it would be truly radical to renew critical theory in these times of a rising Counter-Enlightenment. There is a spark of truth in the critique of dialectical and Marxian thinking provided by New Materialism that has to be recognized. Dialectical and materialist theory cannot simply combine philosophies of identity with crude economism. Especially the network-theory has some plausibility as a way of accounting for various changes in societal processes.<sup>87</sup> But if, for instance, the world economy appears as a global net with thicker knots in some regions, it should not be taken for granted that this appearance is also the complete truth. Society should be thought of in another way. The rejection of the dialectical mediation of subject and object is based on a simplified model of dialectics. As shown above, dialectics is equated with totality and dualism, with divisions that the New Materialists are trying to avoid. So the problem is to think of totality as well as the essence-appearance relation in a non-simplified way. This begins by stating that historical Materialism is not just another *prima philosophia* (like ontology always is) because, with the fundamental role of human praxis as constituting and changing both object and subject, “it has become impossible to give any supreme principle as such the final word”.<sup>88</sup> In consequence, the concept of totality is affected by this, because the final identity posited by Hegel – the absolute spirit as subject-object of history as a self-identical whole – has to be criticized. Adorno develops a critique of Hegel in his attempt to build an anti-systemic theory centered on the concept of constellation. Adorno’s theory helps to avoid construing society as an immanent logical system in which all the parts are an appearance of one essence. It means rather that society should be understood as totality and rupture at the same time. The synthesis of the multiplicity is processed through antagonisms which disrupt the synthesis. This process is the becoming that is at the center of historical materialism, the processing of antagonisms, which are not just the capital-relations; society is a constellation of many processes, reifications, condensations, and institutionalizations, where unity arises out of irreconcilable coercion. Social synthesis has to be grasped as a “negative unity of society in its general bondage.”<sup>89</sup>

<sup>87</sup> For instance, the transnationalization of capital involves complex processes of de- and reterritorialization of states and economies. In this regard, the concept of networks hits upon a certain point, but if this point is overemphasized, then reterritorializations and their impact on social structures tend to be overlooked.

<sup>88</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, pp. 10–46, here 25.

<sup>89</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente einer Theorie der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), p. 114. All quotes from German resources are translated by the author.

Open-Endedness as a Dead End: The Ontological Apologia of What Is

*In all its embattled trends, which mutually exclude each other as false versions, ontology is apologetical.*<sup>90</sup>

By returning to irrational ontology, the New Materialisms legitimize the kind of negative unity of society criticized by Adorno. At the same time, the New Materialisms declare the death of Critical Theory and the “old” form of critique associated with it. Latour<sup>91</sup> is providing such a claim in asserting that the old form of critique is a kind of anti-fetishism, which just wants to unmask projections – as in the critique of God as a projection of the human. This assertion itself is reducing the problem of fetishism to a relation between critics and criticized. What is not recognized by Latour is the specific constitution of things in and through human praxis as materialization. For example, commodity fetishism is criticized by Marx not just as a misunderstanding of the true being of the thing as commodity, but as it is constituted in praxis. So when commodities are fetishized, the process of their determination is not correctly understood. What had to be changed, according to Marx, in order to change the form of commodities is human praxis. But Latour understands anti-fetishism simply as a pure attitude of knowing better, which he can declare as obsolete.

Furthermore, the ontological turn is a falling-back into something already criticized by Marx while discussing Lucretius and Epicurus, in which “the atom as the immediate form of the concept is objectified only in immediate absence of concept, this same is true also of the philosophical consciousness of which this principle is the essence.”<sup>92</sup> According to this, the concepts of matter in New Materialism just remain in absence of concepts for social forms. In de-socializing all categories, the social basis for itself is not open to reflection at all.

The argument in favor of such de-socialization is to declare open-endedness as a way of thinking change and not to stay in some kind of pessimistic totality.<sup>93</sup> It may be very attractive to detach change from human practice and to emphasize the contingency of history, making possible a new way of defining change. But this leads to an understanding of change in terms of being, to withdrawing the concept of change from any human influence so that the only thing to be done is waiting for an event. Through negating social mediation, it falls into the void of irrationality and conformism because its apparent open-endedness is nothing but a closure. It is similar to Adorno’s critique

<sup>90</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 61.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Latour, “Why has Critique Run Out of Steam?”

<sup>92</sup> Karl Marx, “Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy”, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1927]), pp. 403–509, here 416.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Folkers, “Von der Praxis zum Ereignis.”

of Bergson's concept of the spirit: in abstract negation of its social foundation, it is inextricably held captive by the concealed violence of social reality.<sup>94</sup> The other way round the New Materialisms' de-socialization of categories, objects, and humans – and the strong influence of irrational philosophy – has to be read through recent forms of socialization. According to Adorno's<sup>95</sup> insight that Heideggerian ontology – and its success amongst many scholars – not only fits a need but also reflects the real powerlessness of the subject unconsciously, the ontological turn can be reflected as it is found in recent social relations and forms. Crucially, the thinking in assemblages, in contingent emerging clusters of diverse quasi-objects where humans are just one part among many, can be linked back to the neoliberal form of capitalism. De-socializing the categories is somehow echoing Margaret Thatcher's claim that "there is no such thing as society," and contingent emerging assemblages are arguably analogous to the neoliberal spontaneous order that emerges out of many actions of unconscious, atomized individuals without being planned or intended by them or by institutions.<sup>96</sup> As mentioned above, DeLanda refers to Hayek in order to bring down Marx; this is not just a coincidence, but reveals the unconscious trace of neoliberal socialization in New Materialist theory. Beyond the dead-end of contingency there is no possibility of getting out of the false world of exploitation and authority. The powerlessness of the Subject and the superiority of the material world – that is, the quasi-autonomous processes of socialization – are going to be transfigured as something higher in bringing down the subject to a mere institution of registry which just repeats the objective execution of supra-individual processes. On the contrary, Historical Materialism tries to hold onto the idea of a reasonable life in a reasonable world. In so doing, it remains the only materialist theory that points toward its own abolition through changing the material world at which it is directed:

If the material conditions of humankind will come into their own, freeing the reproduction of the human species and the satisfaction of needs from exchange-value and the profit motive, then humankind no longer will live under material coercion, and the fulfillment of materialism will be the end of materialism at the same time.<sup>97</sup>

It is still the task of materialism to contribute to the emancipatory change of the world by ending unreasonable forms of socialization, and every materialism that fails in this task turns into conformism and affirmation.

<sup>94</sup> Adorno, "Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie," p. 54.

<sup>95</sup> Adorno, *Ontologie und Dialektik*, p. 143.

<sup>96</sup> On neoliberalism see Stapelfeldt, *Neoliberaler Irrationalismus*.

<sup>97</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 277.



# HEGELIANISM AFTER HEGELIANISM





# MATERIALIST REGRESSIONS AND A RETURN TO IDEALISM

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*Abstract: Over the last decade or two, judging by the frequency and jubilation of its sundry invocations, “materialism” seems to have finally returned from discursive exile, having barely survived and only with aid from the most unlikely ally. That this new materialism is barely recognizable matters little, for the stories of conceptual adventure and the promise of a world beyond our wildest conceptual grasp are so captivating that most fail to notice that the human never appears in them. That is precisely the point. Under the guise of materialism, a redemptive nihilism has taken the place of the revolutionary hubris that once struck fear in ruling classes and ideas alike. How did it come to this? The stodgy old materialism did not so much lose to the imposter in some marketplace of ideas as it was systematically appropriated, its concepts expropriated, aspirations falsified and entire traditions effaced. A sustained philosophical and political effort to weaken the Left Hegelian tradition – the concept of alienation in particular – preceded today’s ontological restoration, enabling new “materialists” to maintain what is entirely an absurdity (materialism that resides solely and immanently in the object) and an obscenity (radical politics built on arch-conservative principles). This essay will identify a few points of ontological infiltration and argue that critical social theory, for the sake of materialism and not against it, must recuperate the*

*prohibitively idealist conceptual framework – one that is by no means foreign to it and that once went by the name of Reason in History.*

*Keywords: Materialism, idealism, Left Hegelianism*

*Neka Bog kojeg nema  
Blagosilja zemlju koje nema  
Jer čega god ima i čega god nema  
Sve je milost Božija.*

Muharem Bazdulj, “Odlazak u noć” (2010)<sup>1</sup>

A distinction commonly drawn in thinking about the concept of alienation pits materialist political economy against idealist philosophical anthropology, history against nature, in a way that is not particularly helpful to understanding how the social and historical process of separation from an earlier or “first nature” has itself become naturalized or, in other words, how alienation has become a “second nature.” This distinction is even less useful to the task of overcoming alienation in history, not through some mythical return to a pristine state of immediacy, but through the production of a new nature, which is to say, through the means of alienation itself. This is so by design, for this distinction and its many real expository merits are themselves predicated on an outright dismissal of traditionally metaphysical questions about truth, essence, origins and the transcendence of reality. No longer burdened by metaphysical longings, discussions of alienation appear free to move from an idealist to a fully materialist formulation, shedding their original naiveté along the way. The textbook example of this distinction has Feuerbach throwing the first punch at Hegel’s abstract and speculative view of alienation [*Entfremdung*], only to have Marx complete the beating so that the Master could not tell his head from his hind. An apocryphal ending to the story adds that, while victorious, the pupil left the ring so confused that he could no longer differentiate between *Entfremdung* and *Entäusserung* (externalization) and thus thought it best to abandon both terms after 1845. Following the “epistemological break” this apparently caused, alienation is either made to disappear as a legitimate theoretical concern<sup>2</sup> or

<sup>1</sup> “May God who is not / Bless the country that is not, / For all that is and all that is not / By the grace of God is so” (trans. author). I am grateful to Timothy Brennan, Robin Brown, Keya Ganguly, Alice Lovejoy, Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo and Marla Zubel for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this essay. I would also like to thank two anonymous readers at *Kontradikce* whose thoughtful reviews I found most useful.

<sup>2</sup> For Althusser, alienation is a “pre-Marxist ideological concept” (Louis Althusser, *For Marx* [London: Verso 2005], p. 239.), an unscientific and politically dangerous idea, abandoned by Marx in his Mature Works and then resuscitated by Althusser’s “petty-bourgeois” interlocutors who, as he says elsewhere, “like to weep over the ‘reification’ and ‘alienation’ of objectivity (as Stirner used

– in an even stranger historical turn – it attains such a degree of concretization that it effectively becomes the *prima materia* of fundamental ontology. While the first of the two after-lives came as an open Structuralist provocation to the “simple,” “young” and “primitive” in thought and was as such vehemently contested, the other after-life went largely unnoticed, spreading unchecked even to the gardens and intellectual traditions once considered safe from ontology. It is for this reason that I will frame my essay in terms of the damage that the ontologizing of alienation under a materialist guise has done not only to the concept of alienation, but also to the very possibility of conducting a materialist study of alienation and, more generally, a critical theory of society. In other words, a thorough assessment of the current state of critical social theory begins not with a survey of recent theoretical literature, nor with an empirical accounting of broken promises on this somber anniversary of the demise of state socialism;<sup>3</sup> it begins instead with a methodological discussion of the alienation of materialism itself. I propose we recall Horkheimer’s well-known distinction between traditional and critical theory and ask, anew, to what extent do human beings “as producers of their own historical way of life in its totality” remain the object of critical theory?<sup>4</sup> The answer to this question takes a longer historical view and a distinctly philosophical detour.

to weep over ‘the Holy’), no doubt because they attach themselves without any embarrassment to the very antithesis which constitutes the basis of bourgeois legal and philosophical ideology, the antithesis between *Person* (Liberty = Free Will = Law) and *Thing*” (Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism* [London: New Left Books, 1976], pp. 116–117). In terms less acidulous, Althusser appears to suggest that the concept of alienation carries hopelessly within itself the ideological assumptions imbedded in the empiricist-idealist model of knowledge production (“empiricism of the subject implies idealism of the essence”) and that even in its inverted, purportedly materialist form, alienation betrays the humanist conceit of the subject-object dialectic (Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 228). The concept of alienation cannot be salvaged if there is any hope for a new science of history – a point Althusser not only made repeatedly but also attributed to Marx. In fact, the much-debated “epistemological break” of 1845 – when Marx is said to have broken “radically with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man” and where this very “rupture” with “philosophical anthropology or humanism” is seen as *the* “scientific discovery” that marks the birth of the true science of Historical Materialism – is dated to the precise moment in which Marx abandons the language and the problematic of alienation (*ibid.*, pp. 227, 190). The other side of the epistemological “intervention” Althusser staged in the 1960s (“the confrontation between Marx and Hegel”) also had alienation as its object of criticism, this time as a formal historical category that bespoke the essence of history and not only of man (*ibid.*, p. 12).

<sup>3</sup> I presented an early draft of this essay at a roundtable titled “For Marxism after Marxist States” at the 46<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the *Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies* in San Antonio, TX, on 21 Nov. 2014. The theme of the conference was celebratory: “25 Years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall: Historical Legacies and New Beginnings.” I am indebted to Rossen Djagalov and Marina Antić for organizing this panel.

<sup>4</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Postscript,” in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell and others (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), pp. 244–252, here 244.

### Lines of Succession, Lines of Argument

To argue that the concept of alienation gradually gains in materialist determinations what it lacked at the moment of its inception in Hegel's *Phenomenology* is neither a recent nor an entirely unjustifiable proposition. In the extant pages of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* – to mention only the most obvious example – Marx appears to situate his own intellectual formation and his own contributions to the study of alienation within such a trajectory.<sup>5</sup> If the evidence (Marx in his own words) is too overwhelming to ignore, it is also a bit too convenient to accept without also accounting for the polemic context and the exact charge he leveled against the Young Hegelians: Marx mocked them and their “theological” or “critical criticism” not simply for their “moribund idealism” but also, paradoxically, for not being Hegelian enough with respect to their “idolatry” of the ostensibly Hegelian abstraction.<sup>6</sup> A simpler way to say this is that critique takes an idealist turn not with Hegel – who already “conceives the self-genesis of man as a process, conceives objectification [*Vergegenständlichung*] as loss of the object, as alienation [*Entäusserung*] and as transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of this alienation” and who “thus grasps the essence of *labour* and conceives the objective man (true, because

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 66–125, here 67–70 (“Preface”) and 106–112 (“Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole”). Ever since it appeared in 1927 and in 1932 (the first “complete” edition), the *Manuscripts* has become one of Marx’s most widely circulated and discussed works. In spite of this, the work remains difficult to understand without taking into account its complicated publication and interpretation history (for an excellent primer on these issues, see Marcello Musto, “The ‘Young Marx’ Myth in Interpretations of the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*,” *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 43 [2015], no. 2, pp. 233–260), and its presentation as a single, if incomplete, philosophical work. The *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* dealt with the latter problem by publishing “The Manuscripts” in two separate forms (see *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, vol. I/2 [Berlin, DDR: Dietz Verlag, 1982], pp. 187–444).

<sup>6</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,” pp. 69, 107. This point is as important as it is difficult to parse in Marx’s early prose. Objective idealism was in terminal decline on the Hegelian left. It reverted to subjective (Fichtean) idealism because its adherents had failed to grapple with the Hegelian dialectic. Due to a set of distinct historical reasons, the Young Hegelians responded to what they saw as Hegel’s political accommodation by denying Reason’s unity with what exists. They realized that absolute unity was the lynchpin of Hegel’s philosophy, but they failed to notice that without this seemingly conservative thesis the critique also loses its radical character. A purely negative critique carried out by an infinite self-consciousness is thus born anew. In the context of the Prussian political restoration this may have appeared a radical gesture, but it remained nonetheless mired in exactly the kind of dualism Hegel attempted to overcome. The political futility is tied here directly to the philosophical naïveté. All of this, in short, is what I think Marx means in this rather cryptic passage from the *Manuscripts*: “For to the theological critic it seems quite natural that everything has to be *done* by philosophy, so that he can *chatter* away about purity, resoluteness, and utterly critical criticism; and he fancies himself the true *conqueror of philosophy* whenever he happens to *feel* some ‘moment’ in Hegel to be lacking in Feuerbach – for however much he practices the spiritual idolatry of ‘*self-consciousness*’ and ‘*mind*’ the theological critic does not get beyond feeling to consciousness” (*ibid.*, p. 69).

real man) as the result of his *own labour*" – but with the Young Hegelians.<sup>7</sup> What thus appears as a materialist correction of the Hegelian abstraction is in fact Marx's critique of the idealist regression among the epigones or the "Hegelian Diadochi" – a phrase Engels used to explicitly tie the question of materialist methodology to the struggle over lineage and succession in intellectual history.<sup>8</sup> Again, none of this is to suggest that Marx's notes and manuscripts from 1844 are not open to other interpretations. A more skilled reader, and certainly one with different intellectual and political commitments, will easily identify numerous other passages where Marx appears to directly contradict my line of argument. But even in the passages where Marx himself speaks of settling accounts with the Hegelian dialectic, we should learn to recognize an essentially Hegelian insight and, obviously, a dialectical operation at work. Marx turns to Hegel and, in particular, to the category of alienation through which Hegel first broached the question of the reciprocal mediation of subject and object in order to advance a conception of history that, as Marx says, is neither idealist (left-Hegelianism) nor materialist (classical political economy) and that yet expresses the unifying truth of both. Marx's term for his methodological breakthrough, viz. "consistent naturalism or humanism," is well known.<sup>9</sup> What is less known and perhaps even purposefully obfuscated by the tale of materialist inversion is that this "consistent naturalism or humanism" simply expresses the truth of Hegel's critique to an age that had succumbed to the empty promises of immediacy and immanence. One part of that truth consists of recognizing, as Adorno does a full century after Marx, that "the central idealist motor of Hegel's thought is at the same time anti-idealist."<sup>10</sup> Note that Adorno does not say that Hegel's idealism *becomes* or is *transformed* into anti-idealism upon the pounding it receives from Marx;

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112 (trans. modified).

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Engels, "Karl Marx: A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 16 (New York: International Publishers, 1980), pp. 465–477, here 473: "The rule of the Hegelian Diadochi, which ended in empty phrases, was naturally followed by a period in which the concrete content of science predominated once more over the formal aspect. Moreover, Germany at the same time applied itself with quite extraordinary energy to the natural sciences, in accordance with the immense bourgeois development setting in after 1848; with the coming into fashion of these sciences, in which the speculative trend had never achieved any real importance, the old metaphysical mode of thinking [...] gained ground rapidly. Hegel was forgotten and a new materialism arose in the natural sciences."

<sup>9</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," p. 115.

<sup>10</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1963), pp. 1–52, here 31. A more obvious point of reference in discussing the "inner connection between revolutionary theory and Hegel's philosophy" is Marcuse's extraordinary essay on the *1844 Manuscripts*: Herbert Marcuse, "The Foundation of Historical Materialism," in Herbert Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy* (London, New Left Books: 1972), pp. 1–48, here 48. Published the same year the *Manuscripts* appeared in Germany (1932), Marcuse's essay is to my knowledge the first to show the depth of Marx's philosophical engagement with the *Phenomenology* and its significance to Marx's examination of political economy – a methodological

no, it is anti-idealist already in Hegel's idealism. Why insist on this? What can possibly be at stake in dwelling on the questions of affinity and succession between Hegel and Marx, the site of many a past theoretical battle? Why do so now? Why reintroduce the relic of Hegelianism at the moment when materialism seems to have finally returned from "discursive" exile, having barely survived and only with assistance from the most unlikely pre- and non-Marxist allies? I do so because I believe idealism still holds the key to the future of materialism, a future in which materialism must address itself not only to the enemy formations of yore but also to the "materialist" imposters who have returned home with the wildest stories of conceptual adventure.

### A Matter of Lexical Discretion

The textbook example I mentioned at the outset was not just a figure of speech. One such case of the propaedeutic division between the idealist and materialist approaches to the question of alienation is found in Gajo Petrović's entries on "Alienation" in two widely used works of reference: Paul Edwards's *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967) and Tom Bottomore's *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (1983). I have already expressed my reservations about making this distinction and only bring this up again to note a striking difference between the two entries. In the latter, explicitly Marxist compendium, following the standard account of materialist progression in thinking about alienation, Petrović suddenly introduces Martin Heidegger as a "non-Marxist" thinker "who gave an important impulse to the discussion of alienation" when, "in *Being and Time*, he used *Entfremdung* to describe one of the basic traits of the inauthentic mode of man's Being."<sup>11</sup> Petrović is justified in pointing to Heidegger's use of *Entfremdung* – a practice to which we shall return below. It is less clear, however, what "important impulse" Petrović has in mind until one reads about an apparent "analogy between Marx's self-alienation"

link Lukács will further elaborate in *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics* (1968). According to Marcuse, Marx recognized the "revolutionary concreteness of Hegel's *Phenomenology*" and saw that in it, "praxis" was already the "inner meaning of objectification and its supersession" and thus the "leading concept through which the history of man is explicated" (*ibid.*, pp. 46–47). Since my emphasis in this essay differs from Marcuse's in that I wish to focus on the idealist side of the methodological link, I decided to go with Adorno's formulation. To wit, in even starker idealist terms than the above: "The farther Hegel takes idealism, even epistemologically, the closer he comes to social materialism [...] Spirit's confidence that the world 'in itself' is spirit is not only a narrow illusion of its own omnipotence. It feeds on the experience that nothing whatsoever exists outside of what is produced by human beings, that nothing whatsoever is completely independent of social labor" (Theodor W. Adorno, "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy," in Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 68). Incidentally, Marcuse's essay remains relevant to our current task for another reason since he, too, appears to direct his critique at "people who believed they could reduce Marx's relationship to Hegel to the familiar transformation on Hegel's dialectic" (Marcuse, "The Foundation," p. 48).

<sup>11</sup> Gajo Petrović, "Alienation," in Tom Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), pp. 11–16, here 14.

and Heidegger's concepts of "*Heimatlosigkeit*" (homelessness) and "*Seinsvergessenheit*" (oblivion of being), as well as "between revolution and Heidegger's *Kehre*" (turning).<sup>12</sup> Although Petrović did not consider himself a Heideggerian Marxist, he insisted throughout his life on drawing parallels that could be productively pursued between the works of Marx and Heidegger. Petrović felt this task was bequeathed to him by Heidegger's own failure to adequately do so in his "Letter on 'Humanism.'" <sup>13</sup> The task was one of the utmost philosophical importance (primarily for Marxism) and it held a promise of conceptual clarification forfeited by more doctrinaire approaches to either thinker. In most of his other works, encounters between Marx and Heidegger function as occasions for Petrović's own careful critique of the "dis-comforting" ramifications of fundamental ontology and, by extension, of his own comparatist approach.<sup>14</sup> This moment of critical intervention is absent in the 1983 entry on "Alienation." A reader simply consulting the authoritative work of reference on "Marxist Thought" will wait in vain for Petrović's critique. Perhaps this is because such an emphatic intervention would not fit the dictionary genre (assuming that staging unorthodox encounters is not in itself emphatic); or because the "analogy" is meant merely as a provocation or food for thought (assuming that all one consumes will amount to nourishment and not poison)? Are there other explanations? It is hard to know with certainty. An answer specific to the Yugoslav case, where even a hint of structural alienation could go a long way in assailing exaggerated claims of actually-existing socialism, is too narrow to explain this omission in the entry never intended for domestic consumption.<sup>15</sup> My guess is that most of the people using Botto-

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> See Gajo Petrović, "Izreka Heideggera [Heidegger's Saying]," *Praxis* 6 (1969), nos. 5–6, pp. 781–798. The essay was written in German as "Der Spruch des Heidegger" for a collection dedicated to Heidegger's 80th birthday. Reprinted in *Prolegomena za kritiku Heideggera: Odabrana djela u četiri knjige* [*Prolegomena to a Critique of Heidegger: Selected Works in Four Volumes*], vol. 4 (Zagreb and Beograd: Naprijed/Nolit, 1986), pp. 283–309.

<sup>14</sup> Gajo Petrović, "Praksa i bivstvovanje [Praxis and Being]," *Praxis* 1 (1964), no. 1, pp. 21–34, here 32 (translation modified to reflect that Petrović is referring to Heidegger's use of *unheimlich*). An even earlier essay, the 1959 "Marksova teorija alijenacije" (*Filozofija* 1959, nos. 3–4, pp. 34–40), is as instructive here since it effectively shows Petrović working on the questions of alienation and essence from the outset of his career without once romanticizing Heidegger's contribution. The essay is also available in English, see Gajo Petrović, "Marx's Theory of Alienation," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 23 (1963), no. 3, pp. 419–426. Petrović's views did change over time but not in this respect. For example, even in the retrospective "Preface" he wrote for the fourth volume of his collected papers, *Prolegomena to the Critique of Heidegger*, Petrović maintained that while "unavoidable," Heidegger's thought is still "significantly different" and "even opposed" to that of Marx – and this is explicitly extended even to the areas of kinship Petrović previously identified between the advent of Being (*Die Ankunft des Seins*) and the "thinking of the revolution" (Petrović, *Prolegomena za kritiku*, p. 5).

<sup>15</sup> To be clear, Petrović rejects Heidegger's view of alienation as a "necessary structural moment of man's existence" (Petrović, "Marx's Theory," p. 423). He does so again in a rather equivocating



more's *Dictionary* over the last thirty years are not thinking about Petrović's lifework or about the trials and tribulation of the Yugoslav Praxis Group. Instead, in an entry on one of the most critical and controversial terms in Marxism, after barely encountering Lukács, Bloch or Lefebvre, the readers stumble across clear and much more detailed praise of the "important impulse" Heidegger's treatment of alienation delivered to the body of Marxist thought. What I think we can see in this case of lexical discretion is a small example (the most well-intentioned of the five examples I will mention in this essay) of a sustained effort, spanning at least two continents and three generations of scholars, to weaken the left-Hegelian tradition not by opposing it, but by appropriating it. The example also shows, I think, that two seemingly disconnected intellectual endeavors – dissociating Marx from Hegel and delivering alienation to Heidegger – may have something to do with each other and that the future of materialism may depend on our ability to stop both of these operations.

### Stress Test

While there is something reassuring about the account of materialist theodicy of alienation that allows each new generation to so easily atone for the sins of their fathers, I suspect that we would gain more from this common genealogy if we instead attempted to understand the dynamic of knowledge production implicit in this tale and, more importantly,

distinction he sets up in Bottomore's *Dictionary* between the "existentialist" views on the permanence of alienation and those of "Engels and many present-day Marxists" who believe in the non-alienated pristine condition and thus in man's capacity to return to it (Petrović, "Alienation," p. 15). Petrović dismisses both of these positions on the basis of their inadequate understanding of human essence and temporality, and in their place proposes an alternative: "Man's essence [...] as his historically created human possibility" (Petrović, "Marx's Theory," p. 422). Petrović points out, correctly I think, that his new position is "in the spirit of Marx's whole philosophical conception." What he does not say, however, is that one could as easily arrive at the same position, at least the way it is formulated, via Heidegger (which is what Petrović does) or via Hegel (the "real" in Hegel is not what *is*, but a possibility embedded within it once it is grasped by the subject). Petrović himself explains what is at stake and – just like the Young Hegelians before him – appears to side with the empty political promise of a pure abstraction: "That man alienates himself from his nature would mean, then, that man alienates himself from the realization of his historically created human possibilities. 'Man is not alienated from himself' would *not* mean: man has realized all his possibilities; *on the contrary, man is at one with himself if he stands on the level of his possibilities, if in realizing his possibilities, he permanently creates new and higher ones*" (*ibid.*, emphasis added). Elsewhere, he speaks of man's ecstatic nature as an act of "living as a revolutionary" in the "never-ending process [...] of the socialist revolution" ("The Philosophical Concept of Revolution," in Mihailo Marković and Gajo Petrović [eds.], *Praxis: Yugoslav Essays in the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences* [Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing, 1979], pp. 151–164, here 160). The entry on "Alienation" is less incendiary, but it makes the same point in privileging the notion of "relative" over "absolute de-alienation" since, as he argues, "from a factual standpoint, it is easy to see that in what is called 'socialism' not only 'old', but also many 'new' forms of alienation exist" (Petrović, "Alienation," p. 15).



its dismissal of idealism with prejudice. In posture and inclination we have all become materialists, and I am not thinking only of the new materialisms, thing theory, and object-oriented ontology, or of the old facticity and historicity, but of a methodological reaction formation according to which most of us know to reproach outdated idealist tendencies for positing too much. Yet, if I can be so crude as to offer a basic test, materialism entails an analytic that purports to understand reality in terms of the change in its material conditions. Whether these changes are understood as natural or historical, materialism has to account for them even when it limits itself to the immediately given versus developed and true actuality in the Hegelian sense. In fact, it is precisely because of the seemingly static quality of its organizing trope (matter) that materialism must account for change. This is a contradiction (moving matter) that classical idealism can afford to disregard simply because it thinks in the concepts that, again, in the crudest possible sense and in contrast to matter, already account for motion (idea, will, God, etc.; whether these are immutable or not has no bearings on positing of motion). Since this may sound counter-intuitive, I will restate it in the following way: in a philosophical concept such as, for example, the “unmoved mover,” motion is already happening and all idealism has to explain is why this motion does not extend to its proto-principle. Idealism tends to lead to metaphysics precisely because the world is already understood to be in motion. Unlike the world of the “unmoved mover,” the world of “moving matter” is understood to be primarily static so that the defining problem of materialism then becomes that of change or of setting undifferentiated mass into motion.<sup>16</sup>

The second basic test I propose follows from this. Neither idealism nor materialism should be evaluated solely in terms of what they purport to deliver at the end of their analyses (permanence and change, respectively), but also in terms of the pre-analytical assumptions they make about the world to which they are historically delivered (change and permanence). Asking about ideological functions of knowledge is important but only one part of what I am suggesting. Metaphysical naiveté will teach us little about Platonic Ideas or about God, but it may disclose a lot about the conditions from which these ideas had to develop. The same goes for materialism and, in particular, for its sophisticated permutations we are dealing with today – permutations largely unaware of the extent to which they proliferate and repeat the lines of argument from the mid-ninetieth century as well as from the inter-war period of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> I bring up old philosophical

<sup>16</sup> If I were to think of a pre-Socratic – for Heidegger, this meant pre-metaphysical – counterpart to my Aristotelian example of *kinoun akinēton*, it would probably have to be Anaximander’s *apeiron*, an undifferentiated and indefinite mass from which all matter is derived and to which all forms of life return following their destruction. I do not think it is a coincidence that it is precisely Anaximander to whom Heidegger “returns” and who Nietzsche praises for his fatalism.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy Brennan has made this argument convincingly both in his *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) and in *Borrowed Light, Vol. 1: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

quibbles not because I am particularly vested in Greek antiquity, German Idealism, or Weimar culture, but because I think that the adjustment entailed in the second materialist test can help us explain what, in Walter Benjamin's turn of phrase from the *Arcades Project*, is the "Hell" we live in, where we are not simply dealing with halted motion, but with motion that is itself halting.<sup>18</sup> In due course, this sentence will make more sense conceptually and grammatically.

The third test is perhaps the most rudimentary and yet it is the easiest to miss in the age of Dasein's ecstatic essence, history without a subject, and posthumanism. No materialism can afford *not* to account for the way the subject interacts with or – in the prohibitively bourgeois language of German Idealism where, we are told, trade and commerce express repressed sexual desires – engages in intercourse [*verkehren*] with the object. This is not to hypostatize the subject; on the contrary, to prevent hypostatization one ought to be clear that the material is acted upon either through a seemingly passive cognition or through a transformation in the process of labor. Whatever limitations the subject brings to this interaction – and there are plenty, and all are historically and socially mediated – these limitations cannot be placed under a duplicitous half-measure of erasure<sup>19</sup> nor willed away by appealing to some ur-principle of indeterminacy, an origin that was never lost and that unbeknownst to us has always kept all things, human beings included, safe

<sup>18</sup> "Hell," for Benjamin, "is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now" (Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999], section N9a.1). As a dialectical image, it is usually traced to Benjamin's discussion of "modernity [as] the time of hell" (i.e., a temporality that appears dynamic and yet transfers nothing) in what Adorno famously called "the glorious first draft of the *Arcades*" (Walter Benjamin, "Early Sketches," in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 827–868, here 842; for Adorno's comment see Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno [eds.], *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], p. 496). The extent to which the image of Hell is preserved in Benjamin's later drafts remains contentious. Adorno lamented its omission (*ibid.*), while Susan Buck-Morss demonstrated, convincingly I think, that it remained central to Benjamin's conception of natural-history (see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991], pp. 121–124). Yet Benjamin had something even more ambitious (and retrospective) in mind. "Theology of hell," he wrote, was the theme "common" to both the *Arcades* and the *Trauerspiel* book, a methodological approach that united his entire opus (Benjamin, "Early Sketches," p. 854).

<sup>19</sup> This is what happens when one confuses the question of meaning (and language) with logic. "Erasure" is a typographic device that is supposed to signify that a term is "inaccurate yet necessary," to use another handy Heideggerian phrase made famous by Spivak's preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Gayatri Spivak, "Translator's Preface," in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976], pp. IX–LXXXVII, here XIV–XV). "Inaccurate yet necessary" to what, one should obviously ask? To the meaning of "correspondence" – both in terms of the actual letter Heidegger is writing to Ernst Jünger where this phrase originates and in terms of the correspondence theory of truth. Or, in Derrida's even more extreme and fatalistic view: "inaccurate yet necessary" to all of signification. The materialist stress test I am proposing here reverses Spivak's phrase to its original, which is to say, Hegelian formulation, where an objective limitation is seen as *accurate yet unnecessary*.

from history.<sup>20</sup> To continue to paraphrase Adorno, one can reject the solipsistic premise of constitutive subjectivity and still insist the subject remain the agent of the object.<sup>21</sup> Once the subject is removed through what often amounts to incantation, the object that supposedly awaits the new materialism is not purified but falsified – a product of subjective manipulation that dare not speak its name.<sup>22</sup> In programmatic terms, there can be no materialism without subjective mediation of the object.

### Materialist Regression

The three materialist tests I briefly outlined here – the account of change, pre-analytic inversion, and role of a historical subject – amount to the following: without a philosophy of history and a clear political position, all materialisms with all their thisness, thatness, and givenness will relapse *not* into idealism, for even that is too philosophically advanced, but into blind affirmation (positivism, vitalism, romanticism, etc.) or into what today passes for the philosophy of immanence and fundamental ontology. I have recently written about the latter in terms of its impact on Slavic Studies<sup>23</sup> so here I will only briefly comment that much worse than Nietzsche's arch-conservative affirmation of life and rejection of transcendence is a Heideggerian trick, whereby affirmation of the chasm of modern subjectivity – Dasein coming to "understand" and, by virtue of this understanding, "choose" itself as a fundamentally alienated being – is itself understood as transcendence.<sup>24</sup> In other words, affirmation does not supplant transcendence with-

<sup>20</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 90.

<sup>21</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "On Subject and Object," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 245–258, here 254. In his 1959 lectures on Kant's first critique, Adorno goes even further than this: "I would almost be willing to say," Adorno tells his students, "that [transcendental] idealism may be false when understood as an abstract system, as a scheme of knowledge that asserts itself once and for all. But I would insist that it is undoubtedly true as the index of a specific state of the self-consciousness of spirit and, at the same time, as a mediated stage in the history of thought, that is to say, one that does not naively oppose itself to reality. [...] I should certainly like to underline the fact that no philosophy which does not possess these mediations can claim to have moved beyond Kantianism and idealism. This remains true regardless of whether philosophies that imagine they have been cured of idealism call themselves an 'ontology' or 'dialectical materialism'. Rather, all such philosophies regress to a more primitive stage. To echo Feuerbach's saying [about religion], the challenge is not to be *against* idealism but to raise *above* it. This means that the themes of idealism should be integrated into theory, but without their being given the status of absolutes" (Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Rodney Livingstone [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002], p. 136).

<sup>22</sup> Adorno, "On Subject and Object," p. 253.

<sup>23</sup> Djordje Popović, "Circuits of Influence: Joseph Brodsky's Platonov and the Ontology of Alienation," in Asher Ghaffar (ed.), *History, Imperialism, Critique: New Essays in World Literature* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, rev. Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), p. 287. The best example of Nietzsche's affirmation is the first *amor fati* passage in

in Heidegger's system; affirmation, instead, becomes transcendent. This "radical but imaginary overcoming," as Bourdieu calls it in *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, leaves both the inauthentic Dasein and the fallen world intact, but it does so while posturing as a negative and materialist philosophy.<sup>25</sup> It is thus not enough to agree with Bourdieu that in "identifying ontological alienation as the foundation of all alienation," Heidegger effectively "banalized and yet simultaneously dematerialized both economic alienation and any discussion of this alienation, by a radical but imaginary overcoming of any revolutionary overcoming."<sup>26</sup> While it is certainly the case that what is once ontologized cannot be overcome, we have to look past the affirmative moment in Heidegger (ontologizing of alienation) and recognize that Heidegger, unlike Nietzsche, pretends to offer a negative moment or to supplant the affirmation of life with its negation. Both are thinkers of some primordial immediacy, but only Heidegger locates it in the future. This is not a minor difference between two conservative authors, for it explains why the Heideggerian system appears to be more dynamic and why it had historically appealed to those whose political affinities should be elsewhere. Ontologizing of alienation in Heidegger is not simply a condition to diagnose, but itself becomes a remedy for those "lesser" forms of alienation Bourdieu mentioned above. This is precisely why Heidegger qualifies the "always already" fallen essence of Dasein not only as an "initial" condition, implying that some other condition is to supersede it, but also as a necessary one: "not-being-its-self [*Nicht-es-selbst-sein*] functions as a *positive* possibility of beings [*Seienden*] which are absorbed in the world."<sup>27</sup> Impressions are important in the folksy German and the impenetrable English translations of Heidegger's prose, and the impressions his philosophical system leaves are those of motion, agency, and even betterment. These are not the function of his ahistorical notion of "historicity" as it is often observed. One can readily see through historicity as Bourdieu does in a memorable turn of phrase: "historicity" amounts to the "eternalization of history" in order to avoid the "historicization

his 1882 *Gay Science*: "I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be my only negation" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* [New York: Vintage, 1974], p. 223, emphasis in original). The first cryptic reference to "accusation" stands for "negation," while "I do not want to accuse those who accuse" is a reference to *Aufheben*, understood as a negation of negation. *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* is precisely the work and the above may even be the passage that Adorno wishes to repudiate in the opening words of his *Minima Moralia*: "*Die traurige Wissenschaft...*" (Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott [London: Verso, 2005], p. 15).

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 68.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 176, emphasis in original. The translation is misleading here but I do not know how to render it less so. "*Das Seienden*," or the entities that are absorbed in the world so that they are essentially "nonbeings," is Heidegger's way of talking about reification.

of the eternal.”<sup>28</sup> Rather, these seductive impressions stem from Heidegger’s seeming embrace of some mechanism by which fallen existence can transcend or switch into an authentic mode *within* the ontic or experiential realm. This mechanism consists, as I said above, in Dasein’s coming to “understand” and, through this understanding, “choose” itself as a fundamentally fallen or guilty/indebted being.<sup>29</sup> This new understanding or what Heidegger called in a coded swipe at conceptual thinking, “a modified grasp of everydayness,” makes Dasein quite literally “answerable” (*verantwortlich*) to the guilty summons.<sup>30</sup> Note that Dasein is not found guilty as charged (of some infraction); the charge itself is that of guilt, which means that Dasein is guilty of being. I will refrain from elaborating on the creeping anti-Semitism of these paralegal formulations and will instead offer a contemporary analogy that more fully captures what is conceptually at stake in this confounding of epistemological and ethical categories. To assert that authenticity consists of assuming responsibility for one’s own fallen existence is tantamount to mistaking a confession produced by torture for an ethical position. Heidegger takes this a step further when he uses this newly manufactured ethical selfhood of tortured Dasein – the new transcendental subject in the age of catastrophe – to unite all that remained disjointed within his system. In Heidegger’s own language, the temporalities of history and historicity come together once again in the ethical position of resoluteness. Attaining authenticity is thus a matter of affirmation – not overcoming – of the ontic-ontological difference, and, as such, it has no impact on the absolute triumph of inauthenticity in life. Both inauthenticity and authenticity can and indeed must coexist side by side in a strange arrangement wherein actualization is understood as negation of Being in history while ethical thinking becomes transcendent in its affirmation of alienation. One should recognize in this depiction the elements of the anti-political view I take to be prevalent in the current theoretical and historical moment: politics is by definition a failure that led to the present condition; ethical posturing is a solution that can lead us out of it. More importantly for our present purposes, one should also recognize that the prescription embedded in ontology takes the form of Hegel’s philosophy. To understand the extent of damage this maneuver has caused we ought to look a bit more closely at the poison pills that fill this prescription.

### Ontology as Primitive Accumulation

Two quick examples of Heidegger’s use of language will each demonstrate the Hegelian ground in which Heidegger stakes out his claim as well as what he leaves behind in this garden. We have already come across one of these in Petrović’s dictionary article.

<sup>28</sup> Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology*, p. 63.

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 287.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

"Alienation," as *Entfremdung*, is explicitly used in *Being and Time* to designate the most extreme stage in Dasein's "entanglement" in the world or what Heidegger calls Dasein's falling away from itself/falling prey to the world.<sup>31</sup> Both in terms of its seeming "worldishness" and in terms of its place within Heidegger's hierarchy of all that could go wrong in one's way of being in the world, *Entfremdung* appears in a vaguely familiar form until we realize that *Entfremdung*'s sole purpose in this schema is to get "factual" Dasein to "fall into the disowned way of being himself," that is, to accept alienation as his own ontological category.<sup>32</sup> It turns out that Dasein was "always already" alienated not due to its place in the world, but because of his ecstatic essence, and that Dasein's alienated way of being in the world ends with his internalization of alienation (a new and more profound understanding of himself in terms of potentiality and not actuality). Heidegger thus appears to follow the contours of the *Phenomenology* only to return Dasein to a place more backwards than the one he "always-already" finds himself "thrown" in. In Hegelian terms, we see here a counter-revolutionary thrust that takes the world of the self-alienated spirit following the breakup of the ethical substance *not* towards enlightenment and revolution as Hegel does, but backwards to a pre-rational (pre-idealist) state of unhappy consciousness – a being internally divided against itself who projects into a transcendent category his own alienated essence. There is further significance to the precise stage within the *Phenomenology* to which Heidegger's appropriation of *Entfremdung* has delivered us. If we now notice that the final few paragraphs of "Unhappy Consciousness"<sup>33</sup> already contain Feuerbach's basic assertion that "the divine being is nothing else than [...] the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective – i.e., contemplated and reversed as another, distinct being," we will begin to surmise the dangers in the materialist theodicy of alienation I announced at the outset.<sup>34</sup> As was the case with Petrović's take on Marx, there is nothing in itself wrong with Feuerbach's position. It only becomes wrong when we mistake what is but a moment within the *Phenomenology* for a (materialist) correction of Hegel's speculative whole. To put this a bit more abstractly and in terms that will only be fully defined by the end of this essay, Hegel would agree with Feuerbach's criticism that it is not *Idee* that is alienated in man, but man who is alienated in the *Idee*. This is indeed an important moment within the dialectic and Feuerbach is right to emphasize it. But, the moment Feuerbach forgets how to understand his own fix speculatively, he risks handing the

<sup>31</sup> The difference between *abgefallen* (falling away) and *verfallen* (falling prey) is important but immaterial to our discussion here.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 176, 179. The hierarchy I referred to above spells out three stages in Dasein's entanglement in the world: temptation, sedation and alienation, where alienation is said to trigger the final Fall or what is often called the plunge.

<sup>33</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §223–230.

<sup>34</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 14.

control of his materialist method to the wizards of the Schwarzwald, who are going to turn his emancipatory gesture to nefarious ends.

Another place to witness Heidegger's appropriation of the Hegelian tradition is in the word *Dasein* itself.<sup>35</sup> In Heidegger's idiom, *Dasein* refers specifically to a human being, that is, a being unique among all other entities because he always has his own being to be. *Dasein*'s essence is in existence, as Heidegger famously said, and this means that his essence is nothingness. *Dasein* is a common German word but, as a philosophical concept, it is taken directly from Hegel (and Feuerbach) to designate precisely what Hegel does *not* mean by it. In Hegel, *Dasein* is a word for any determinate [*bestimmtes*] being or entity, which is to say that it is an *Objekt*. The anthropomorphizing of *Dasein* by the author of "Letter on 'Humanism'" – where Sartre's humanism is accused of positing too much ("reversal of metaphysics [...] remains metaphysics")<sup>36</sup> – should not distract us from detecting an even more serious transgression. As a determinate being, Hegelian *Dasein* is explicitly a sublated form of a more immediate or indeterminate being, which passes over into nothing precisely because it has no qualities. Not only is Hegel's *Dasein* thus a negation of Heidegger's *Dasein*, but the fact that pure being has nothing but potentiality is a problem that Hegel's *Dasein* solves, whereas in Heidegger this problem becomes a definition of (all) Being. To explain this in more convoluted philosophical terms or, as Hegel would say, "with the strenuous effort required to think in terms of the concept," one can say that Heidegger's *Dasein* is an in-itself [*an sich*], an empty or indeterminate essence, a pure form.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, Hegel's *Dasein* is a being-in-itself once it becomes a for-itself [*für sich*], a being that receives its determinations or content in relation to other beings (being-for-itself is being-for-another). There is, however, an additional step in Hegel's thinking about existence that finds an even more surreptitious reformulation in Heidegger. Hegel's determinate *Dasein* returns to its essence, that is, the content acts on the once empty form and in doing so it becomes a being that is in-and-for-itself

<sup>35</sup> I will differentiate between Hegel's and Heidegger's use of the word by italicizing Hegel's *Dasein* since, in terms of his use, it remains a foreign word that is usually translated as "determinate being," "existence," "embodiment," and is sometimes used in place of *Objekt* and even *Realität*. I treat Heidegger's *Dasein* as an English word, for it has in fact become that, and am thus not italicizing it.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism,'" in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: Harper, 1977), pp. 213–265, here 232.

<sup>37</sup> I am using A. V. Miller's 1977 translation of *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, changing as little as possible along the way. In the quote above (§58) and throughout the essay I use the term "concept" for Hegel's *Begriff* since Miller's ethereal "Notion" communicates neither the philosophical rigor nor the tactile sense of German *Begriff*, understood in terms of the physical act of grasping or comprehension. Miller's decision was apparently influenced by Kant's interchangeable use of *Begriff* and Latin *notio*, which then leads to a whole new series of problems because it suggests a false equivalence between Kant's (passive) and Hegel's (active) role of concepts. Michael Inwood's *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992) and *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1999) are also useful in making and maintaining these distinctions, as is the volume Jon Stewart (ed.), *The Hegel Myths and Legends* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996).



[*Anundfürsichsein*]. Another word Hegel uses for this is *Beisichsein* or “being at home” with oneself in the other. Being is thus at home in Hegel’s system only once it, its surroundings, and other beings are all transformed. In contrast to this dynamic vision of homecoming, Heidegger’s *Dasein* dwells in language, the proverbial “house of Being,” that in his words is guarded by those who think and create with words, a creative class of poets-cum-landlords.<sup>38</sup> We can see here that a fundamentally historical, material, and social process in Hegel is transformed into an inward psychological drama of an individual *Dasein* coming to terms with his own death (through the death of others, of course, since *Dasein* can never experience what is his “ownmost,” his death).<sup>39</sup> There are other examples one can develop but I think the point is sufficiently clear: Heidegger and his disciples intentionally make their mark within the left-Hegelian tradition.<sup>40</sup> This fact alone is our curse – a word that is perhaps overly dramatic but appropriate inasmuch as

<sup>38</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” p. 217.

<sup>39</sup> Heidegger’s valorization of death as *Sein-zum-Tode* is obscene not only because of what his fellow party members would do a few years after he wrote about death as the possibility of being with others, but also because of the understanding of ownership and property advanced implicitly through *Dasein*’s internal structural relationship to nothingness. When death is said to be *Dasein*’s “ownmost,” i.e., the only property he has any claim to, property then no longer designates a social relation as it does in Hegel but merely an internal paradox unaffected by the world dominated by private ownership of the means of production.

<sup>40</sup> Lucien Goldmann already sensed this in 1944 when he noticed that the true target of *Being and Time* – from the transposition in its title to the smug reference on its final page – was Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, while Heidegger’s true philosophical task was the appropriation and the rethinking of reification along ahistorical, immaterial, and ultimately anti-Hegelian lines. Even Benjamin, who was apparently the member of this tradition least familiar with Hegel’s work, felt himself keenly a target of Heidegger’s infiltration. One can thus find in his correspondence a stream of invectives directed against the threat posed by Heidegger, some as early as 1920. For example, in a 1930 letter to Scholem, Benjamin confesses bluntly that Brecht and he “were planning to annihilate Heidegger” (*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940* [New York: Schocken Books, 1989], p. 365). Since Adorno’s critique of Heidegger is well known, I will only note that it spans Adorno’s entire career. As for Heidegger’s response, it came a few weeks after Adorno’s death when, in a 1969 TV interview with Richard Wisser, Heidegger explained that he had no interest in acquainting himself with the work of a “mere sociologist” (this description of Adorno is a reference to the “cat burglar” passage in Adorno’s inaugural lecture of 1931, and it perhaps shows that Heidegger had indeed already “acquainted” himself with Adorno’s work) who also happened to act with malice and was a dilettante: “With whom did Adorno study philosophy,” Heidegger asked Wisser rhetorically; “Did he study under anyone at all?” (Richard Wisser, “Das Fernsehinterview,” Günther Neske [ed.], *Erinnerung an Martin Heidegger* [Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske, 1977], p. 284; quoted in Iain MacDonald, “‘What Is, Is More than It Is’: Adorno and Heidegger on the Priority of Possibility,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19 [2011], no. 1, pp. 31–57, here 31.) MacDonald is at the center of an international group of scholars trying to reconcile Heidegger and Adorno through what else but a “novel concept of *possibility* that is central to both their thoughts” (emphasis added). This, in a single sentence, is the truth of academic production today. Under the ambiguity of *potenza* all cows remain black.



it points back to my earlier reference to Benjamin's Hell. It is through Heidegger's expropriation, openly sanctioned by contemporary theory's insistence on endless proliferation of meaning, that we can catch another glimpse of this Hell.

### Hell of Immanence

A word or two about Benjamin's own use of this image is in order. In writing about Hell, Benjamin was not only or even primarily talking about the Hell of the commodity form. While he certainly maintained that the commodity form had taken the place of the dissociative and estranging effect of the allegorical mode of apprehension, most of his writings, and the two methodological expositions in particular – the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to the *Trauerspiel* study and "Konvolut N" of the *Arcades Project* – are also concerned with a failure of epistemology and philosophy of history, which is to say, with a subjective failure.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the very next fragment after his invocation of Hell reads as follows: "It is good to give materialist investigations a truncated ending [*abgestumpft Schluss*]."<sup>42</sup> Benjamin's call for the "truncating" of materialist study is often mistaken for an unqualified endorsement of fragmentation. We probably owe this mistake to the formalist bias in our interpretive predisposition that (close) reads only with difficulty anything that is beyond the formulaic. Thus, since the same phrase in an even more fragmented form appears at the end of Benjamin's *Zentralpark*,<sup>43</sup> where it effectively brings his study to an untimely end, we tend to conclude that Benjamin is doing little more than extolling the virtue of fragmentation and implementing it, ironically, in his own writing in a feat of stylistic virtuosity. If one can speak of irony at all – and I tremendously dislike doing that – it consists here in suddenly seeing a subject make an appearance in a system supposedly known for its "epistemological asceticism and anti-subjectivism."<sup>44</sup> We will meet this subject soon enough, but not before we address the question of fragmentation,

<sup>41</sup> The subtitle of "Konvolut N" is "*Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts*." While Benjamin's language is directed against Neo-Kantians, Heidegger was never entirely off his mind – just look at N8a.4 on verso.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, section N9a.2; also in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 592.

<sup>43</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4: 1938–1940 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 161–199, here 191.

<sup>44</sup> "In keeping with his epistemological asceticism or anti-subjectivism," Benjamin apparently "remained a staunch foe of the primacy in modern philosophy of epistemology over ontology." Thus argues Richard Wolin in his "Experience and Materialism in Benjamin's *Passagenwerk*," in Gary Smith (ed.), *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 210–227, here 213. Apart from his oblique reference to Heidegger (ontology over epistemology), Wolin is not entirely wrong, for already in the *Trauerspiel* study one reads that "the only element of an intention" – that is, subjective intention – in the scholastic *tractatus* is the "authoritative quotation" (Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [London: Verso,

the self-estranged aesthetic, epistemological, and historical form, that has garnered this poor man so much recognition precisely when he needed it the least and when he could no longer defend himself against it.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that Benjamin has become the most trafficked of the left Hegelian thinkers in the humanities. We have become entranced with the *figura* of the martyr standing in resolute opposition to any totalizing scheme to impose order on the radically heterogeneous, eccentric, and fragmentary material. This position is not without some merit (see fn. 44), but it errs when it mistakes the fragmentary form of Benjamin's prose, as well as his discussion of allegory and ruin, for an emancipatory gesture in itself. This has become such a common scholarly conceit in the postsocialist milieu that entire works are organized around it.<sup>45</sup> While the esoteric prose of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* study may account for some of the obfuscation surrounding his early writings on allegory, the same cannot be said of the *Arcades*, where the arbitrary nature of allegorical relationship<sup>46</sup> is explicitly and repeatedly linked to the exchange principle.<sup>47</sup> This alone should be enough of a hint that we may not be able to grasp the status and the stakes involved in Benjamin's discussion of the allegorical without first abandoning the usual explanation that "allegory signifies the necessary fragmentary nature of [man's relation to the absolute] in a world that has itself been reduced to fragments or ruins."<sup>48</sup> If this were the case, if allegory merely reflected an object (even if that object was one of disintegration), the concept of allegory would not fundamentally differ from that of a more familiar metaphysical symbol. The difference between allegory and symbol is not in the object of signification ("convention of expression"); it is, instead, in the manner of representation ("expression of convention"), wherein the allegorical comes to signify

1998], p. 28). "Its method is essentially representation [*Darstellung*]," Benjamin famously writes. "Method is a digression [*Umweg*]. Representation as digression – such is a methodological nature of the treatise. The absence of the uninterrupted purposeful structure is its primary characteristic" (*ibid.*). This is carried over into the *Arcades* and, in particular, into "Konvolut N," where Benjamin comments most explicitly on the method of his project, namely, "the art of quoting without quotation marks" that enables the author who "has nothing to say and everything to show" to "write history" by "ripping historical objects out of their context" (N1.10, N1a.8, N11.3, N10a.3; trans. modified in N1a.8; all in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, p. 574.). Benjamin's name for this evidently anti-subjectivist method is, of course, "literary montage." My contention here is that only once we fully account for the role of Benjamin's subject will we be able to understand that his "literary montage" bears little resemblance to some avant-gardist aesthetic sensibility.

<sup>45</sup> For example, the ontologizing of separation in Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), or the rupturing of history in Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, sections J59a.4, J65.1, J67.4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, sections J80.2, J80a.1, J59.10; J60.5; see also sections J24.2, J79a.4, J83a.4, J66.2.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 69.

the disruption in the instantaneous temporality and the pre-given unity within the symbolic order.<sup>49</sup> This means that allegory admits only one object, the allegorical itself (the convention or history), as it seeks to destroy all that remains of the immediacy of the symbolic mode.<sup>50</sup> It is with and through the deployment of allegory that Nature becomes history, that the world is disenchanted, and that transcendence is supplanted by immanence. In Benjamin's words from the *Arcades*, "allegory has to do, precisely in its destructive furor, with dispelling the illusion that proceeds from all 'given order,' whether of art or life: the illusion of totality or of organic wholeness which transfigures that order and makes it seem endurable."<sup>51</sup> Benjamin refers to this as the "progressive tendency of allegory." It produces certain philosophical, historical and semantic discontinuities that we can avow only if we keep in mind that – within the same fragment – Benjamin also refers to allegory's "regressive tendency" to "hold fast to the ruins," to ontologize separation, transience, and the hollowness of subjective experience, and thus to return history to nature.<sup>52</sup> Accounting for both of these tendencies or moments within the allegorical – Nature becoming history and history reverting to Nature – is key to understanding Benjamin's critique. In Benjamin's own words, the allegorical mode of expression emerges "by virtue of a strange combination [*sonderbaren Verschränkung*] of nature and history."<sup>53</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor explains this in the following way:

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin*, pp. 165–166.

<sup>50</sup> Benjamin explains that allegories could not be symbols because "the thought symbolized was nowhere expressed" (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, sections J90.1; he is quoting from Proust). This does not mean, however, that allegories express nothing. What Benjamin calls the "triumph of allegory" (*ibid.*, J60.5) is the "triumph of subjectivity and the onset of an arbitrary rule over things" (Benjamin, *The Origin*, p. 233) and, as such, it expresses a historical truth by way of nonexpression (cf., Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Critique of the Organic: Kierkegaard and the Construction of the Aesthetic," in Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2006], pp. 77–93, here 89; and Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Title Essay: Baroque Allegory and The Essay as Form," in Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, pp. 125–135, here 128). In Adorno's words, "Benjamin shows that [...] the allegorical is not an accidental sign for an underlying content. [...] The relationship of allegory to its meaning is not accidental signification, but the playing out of a particularity; it is expression. What is expressed in the allegorical sphere is nothing but historical relationship. The theme of the allegorical is, simply, history" (Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," in Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, pp. 252–269, here 262–263).

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, section J57.3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, section J56.1.

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin*, p. 167; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 344. I am not sure if the word "combination" contains the sense of "entanglement" or "intertwining" evident in the original. Under the "*sonderbaren Verschränkung*" Benjamin has in mind, the two "combined" elements maintain the tension existing between and within each of them – each term has within itself both

What Benjamin discerns in allegory is its double aspect. On one hand he finds in it the essential mechanism by which history regresses to a mythical state of nature: allegory dominates nature; it represents “the triumph of subjectivity and the onset of an arbitrary rule over things.” Yet allegory is also the critique of domination. In it *thésis* (positing, convention) becomes the expression of *physis*: “It may not accord with the authority of nature; but the voluptuousness with which signification rules, like a stern sultan in the harem of objects, is without equal in giving expression to nature.”<sup>54</sup>

There is another reason to heed Benjamin’s warning about the “regressive tendency” of allegory. It has become easy to see that allegory can itself “see *through* the mysterious ‘natural’ appearance of objects in their ‘given’ form *to* the historical dimension of their production.”<sup>55</sup> Allegory certainly can and, in fact, it already has rendered nature transitory, but once it did so, it also had to withstand the enchantment of history. It serves no purpose to replace the semblance of objective truth with the illusion of subjective autonomy, one type of eternal recurrence with another. I think the following passage from Benjamin confirms as much:

[A] critical understanding of the *Trauerspiel*, in its extreme, allegorical form, is possible only from the higher domain of theology; so long as the approach is an aesthetic one, paradox must have the last word. Such a resolution, like the resolution of anything profane into the sacred, can only be accomplished historically, in terms of a theology of history, and only dynamically, not statically in the sense of a guaranteed economics of salvation.<sup>56</sup>

At stake here, in other words, is the possibility of redemption through the recuperation of objective truth and the restoration of expressive content to language while continuing, nonetheless, to use allegory against myth.<sup>57</sup> Benjamin was acutely aware of this, and to

a historical/transitory and natural/mythical pole (see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* [New York: The Free Press, 1977], p. 54). Furthermore, this “combination” ought not to be taken for a false synthesis or provide an implicit justification of any given reality. The dialectical *Verschränkung* of nature and history, or as Adorno would later polemically call it “*die Idee der Naturgeschichte*,” allows the allegorical mode to comprehend historical being as natural where it appears most historical and as historical where it appears most deeply natural (cf., Adorno, “The Idea of Natural-History,” p. 260; see also p. 264). In both Benjamin’s and Adorno’s work, these types of formulations are primarily directed against Heidegger’s historicity.

<sup>54</sup> Hullot-Kentor, “Title Essay,” p. 128.

<sup>55</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Origins*, p. 55.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin*, p. 216.

<sup>57</sup> I owe this point to Hullot-Kentor. See, in particular, Hullot-Kentor, “Title Essay,” pp. 126–127.

mistake his position for an endorsement of indeterminacy means to learn only one half of the critical import of his theory of allegory. Perhaps we can even say that the most salient question he struggled with his whole life was the following: given the necessary transience of the world free of the semblance of myth, how can one still represent a transcendent, messianic truth within the realm of immanent historical experience? The style of literary montage – whose fragmentary nature Benjamin incidentally shared with most of his left-Hegelian contemporaries from Adorno and Bloch, to Brecht and Gramsci – is used here in the name of totality contained within each fragment. To confuse aesthetic necessity for the work of “theology of history” would mean, in our context, to give up on the possibility of historical transformation, to confirm that the world, “this life here and now,” has not only become Hell, but that the Hell on earth will remain for eternity. I think Adorno saw the stakes of this most clearly when he remarked that the fragmentary nature of Benjamin’s work cannot be “ascribed solely to a hostile fate” – note that “hostile fate” here refers as much to the fate Benjamin suffered as it does to the “hostile fate” of the world of immanence he rejected. “Built into the structure of his thought [...] from the start,” Adorno continues, “this literary principle claims nothing else than to express Benjamin’s conception of truth. No more than for Hegel is this for him the mere adequacy of thought to its object – no part of Benjamin ever obeys this principle – rather it is constellation of ideas that [...] together form the divine Name, and in each case these ideas crystallize in details, which are their force field.”<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Adorno’s quote is from his “Introduction to Benjamin’s *Schriften*,” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 220–232, here 223. Adorno could have said as much about his own writing since it, too, is often mistaken for some polysemic textual strategy meant to disrupt Hegelian dialectic (“Dialectic theory, abhorring anything isolated, cannot admit aphorisms” – is the oft-quoted verdict from Adorno’s “Dedication” in *Minima Moralia*). This of course misses the obvious: Adorno’s “reflections from a damaged life” are written “from the standpoint of subjective experience,” which is to say, from the impossible and “false” perspective of the “vanishing” subject reflecting on life that “does not live,” or on the object of which it is deprived (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, pp. 18, 15, 19). How and why can Adorno then insist on the subjective experience when from the outset of *Minima Moralia* he claims this experience is “false to the same extent that life has become appearance” (*ibid.*, p. 15)? He does so because truth – a category he very much retains – can only be gained subjectively. In *Minima Moralia*, it is the fragment or, as Adorno calls it, the aphorism, that carries out this procedure by wresting truth from what is so obviously false. It does so by negating any claim to immediacy whether it is made on behalf of the subject or the object. The fragment, in other words, insists on negativity and this is precisely what Adorno says in the only place in *Minima Moralia* where he directly speaks about its fragmentary character, just four sentences after the anti-Hegelian “verdict” I mentioned above: “If today the subject is vanishing, aphorisms take upon themselves the duty ‘to consider the evanescent itself as essential.’ They insist, in opposition to Hegel’s practice and yet in accordance with his thought, on negativity” (*ibid.*, p. 16).

### Tending to Gardens

We are now ready for the subject who was going “to give materialist investigations a truncated [*abgestumpft*] ending” to emerge from “epistemological asceticism and anti-subjectivism.” I would like to suggest that we think of this subject as a “gardener” wielding a blunt [*abgestumpft*] instrument with enough force to nonetheless truncate all that mistakes itself for an organic matter.<sup>59</sup> In Benjamin this variously refers to a fetishized commodity, progressive history, a certain type of materialism and, of course, to the subject itself (in this last sense, Benjamin’s gardener is not unlike Adorno’s *Münchhausen*, “pulling himself out of the bog by his pig-tail”<sup>60</sup>). But, as we saw above, it also refers to the “regressive tendency” of the allegorical mode that has returned history to nature. This truncating is thus an act of a “damaged” subject who takes a dull axe to all ontologizing of separation. Simply put, Benjamin calls for stunning or – in a word that shares the “root” of the German *abstumpfen* – for stumping the organic growth of second nature. What is this crude object that Benjamin thinks can cut through the thicket of the new organic matter overtaking our gardens? What can keep materialism from regressing into the “thinging of a thing” – Heidegger’s term for an object escaping subject’s domination of nature so that it can remain in the process of becoming, an object of pure potentiality? The three materialist tests I began with and the tenor of my polemic already hint at the answer. For the sake of materialism one has to turn back to or, as it were, “return” to idealism and in particular to its speculative and binding thought. This cannot be a matter of a philosophical parlor game. At stake today is our ability to even perceive contradictions, let alone resolve them.<sup>61</sup> We are not even sure if we can tell which concepts are in motion and which are static, to say nothing of routinely mistaking the sound emanating from hollow words for the thing itself. I do not mean to suggest that dialectical thought is any less important than the speculative, but it may just not be “blunt” enough considering the truncating task ahead of us. Also, because our moment is marked by ontology’s semblance of negation, dialectics – its negative force notwithstanding – may not even be the appropriate measure to take on its own.

<sup>59</sup> *Abgestumpft* is an adjective (derived from the verb *abstumpfen*) that, in addition to a “truncated” limb, can also refer to a “blunt” or “dull” edge of an instrument; senses that are “deadened” or deprived of vitality; and a person “stultified” by some routine. The cutting that Benjamin has in mind will have to be carried out by a measure that is pretty blunt or “crude,” as Brecht would say. Of course, the cruder the object, the more force will have to be applied.

<sup>60</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 74.

<sup>61</sup> Another way to say this is that contradictions are once again cast as antinomies of thought. Hegelian contradictions [*widersprüche*], which are both subjective and objective, and which finite thoughts and things alike are immanently disposed to reveal and overcome, are today dismissed in favor of equally ineluctable Kantian *antinomien* that are either kept insoluble as aporias or whose resolution is predicated on the complete separation of the phenomenal from the noumenal order. Thereby the process of overcoming becomes a proliferation of differences, determinate negation is turned into ironical detachment, struggle is reconfigured as play. Implicit in this philosophical realignment is a cowardly obscurantism that sees time as treacherous and humanity as fallen.

Hegel's distinction between dialectical and speculative reason is famously controversial.<sup>62</sup> At first sight it appears to be a part of yet another triadic form in his system and is ultimately what allows him to attain the perspective necessary to write his *Phenomenology*. I do not think I am saying anything that is not, at least formally, obvious and necessary: if *Vernunft* was only capable of its dialectic or negative phase, that is, if there is no account of speculative reason, the infamous "we/for us" of the *Phenomenology* – the fact that consciousness is never aware of the transformation it goes through but that it can nonetheless record it – would not have the absolute knowledge it takes to see dialectics through (a less generous interpretation of Hegel would either simply dismiss the man who claims to stand at the end of history or mistake the situation consciousness finds itself in for a case of dramatic irony). To complicate this further, the much-pilloried moment of subjective synthesis that is said to complete the triad is inextricably tied to speculative reason and to German Idealism in general. This accusation can be made against Fichte since the terms "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis" originated with him, but is patently false in reference to Hegel, who quite explicitly rejected the triadic form as "lifeless" and as an "instrument of monotonous formalism."<sup>63</sup> Adorno, who apparently felt an "instinctual" and "violent antipathy to the concept of synthesis" and whose tone in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* is hardly favorable to Hegel, had to admit as much to his students: "the status of synthesis in Hegel [...] is actually somewhat anomalous."<sup>64</sup> Dispelling the myth of synthesis does not, however, put the question of speculation to bed since Hegel does indeed talk about the overcoming of oppositions by dialectical *and* speculative reason. In other words, Hegel's problem with synthesis was its formulaic nature, not its supposedly naïve intention to unite the irreconcilable. It is precisely what synthesis failed to accomplish in Kant and Fichte – in the former because he ruled it out categorically and in the latter because he achieved it subjectively – that Hegel's speculative reason

<sup>62</sup> "Speculative" and "dialectical" reason [*Vernunft*] are two different phases of the same faculty of reason that is itself different from and, in contrast to Kant, superior to the faculty of understanding [*Verstand*]. This is perhaps the most important in a series of reversals and challenges Hegel presented to the Kantian architectonic. If Kant's first *Critique* is concerned with establishing limits of experience, *Vernunft* is precisely the faculty that he feared would "seduce" [*ausschweifen*] us beyond permissible limits and into "intelligible worlds" (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], p. 381 [A289]). Adorno noticed that the overtly sexual language of Kant's prohibition here bears some resemblance to the wrath of Luther's sermons directed against *Vernunft*: "And what I say of passion [...] must also be understood of reason, for the latter violates and insults God [...] and has far more horrible whorish evil than a whore" (quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason: Lecture 1959* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001], pp. 249–250). Although Hegel was Lutheran, his views on *Vernunft* and *Spekulation* are far closer to the scholastic view, the target of Luther's ire, according to which one could catch a glimpse of God in speculative thought as in a mirror (*speculum*).

<sup>63</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §50, 51.

<sup>64</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 29.



will attempt to do through the means less synthetic and *not* at all subjective. This is an important point to bear in mind: the final conceptual reconciliation in Hegel's idealism is not subjective because the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity has itself been sublated (subjective certainty is reconciled with objective truth in religion, while objective truth is reconciled with subjective certainty in the ethical substance).

Often and at times through perfidious means we are told that the above two objections (synthesis and subjectivism) are leveled against Hegel even by those inclined to agree with him. This is supposed to put one on notice that it is futile to defend speculative thought. Even Adorno had supposedly positioned his own thought precisely between or in opposition to both Kantian *Verstand* and Hegel's speculative *Vernunft*. In fact, the same *Münchhausen* passage from which I quoted above is meant to confirm Adorno's distaste for the speculative: "Nothing less is asked of the thinker today," Adorno writes, "than that he should be at every moment both within things and outside them – Münchhausen pulling himself out of the bog by his pig tails becomes the pattern of knowledge which wishes to be more than either *verification* or *speculation*."<sup>65</sup> The champion of negative dialectics, in one of the most programmatic aphorisms of his fragmented *Minima Moralia*, confirms beyond doubt that "the morality of thought" (the title of the aphorism) best resist affirmation on both sides of the triad. It appears irrefutable that Adorno comes out against both *Verstand*'s "verification" and *Vernunft*'s "speculation" until we realize that the key word in this sentence is rather curiously translated. The German word that Adorno uses and that in a possible reference to Hegel is translated as "speculation" is actually "*Entwurf*," or a "state of projection," the single most important and recognizable concept in Heidegger's ontology that refers not simply to Dasein's alienated essence but rather to alienation as the essence of Dasein.

Before I turned to Adorno's original I did not know that I would find the worst of Heidegger hiding behind the liberties the translator took with the text. I did, however, have a pretty good sense of where to dig, for the simple reason that something quite important did not add up about this particular aphorism (the same goes for Benjamin's "truncated endings").<sup>66</sup> This is after all the same aphorism where Adorno speaks of Hegel's "double edge method which has earned Hegel's *Phenomenology* the reputation among reasonable people of unfathomable difficulty, that is, its simultaneous demands that phenomena be allowed to speak as such – in a 'pure looking-on' – and yet that their re-

<sup>65</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 74, emphasis added.

<sup>66</sup> In addition to Jephcott's translation in *Minima Moralia*, I have thus far listed four other instances of direct intervention in the left-Hegelian tradition: an example of Petrović's lexical discretion; a common case of a lazy, formalist interpretation of Benjamin; Heidegger's own appropriation of Hegel; and, in passing, an emergence of a "new" philosophy of history in the wake of socialism's collapse in Eastern Europe (this article fn. 45). While these five cases are different in scope, offense, and motivation, they do have one thing in common: in each of these cases we see a categorical preference given to separation and fragmentation.



lation to consciousness as the subject, reflection, be at every moment maintained.”<sup>67</sup> The “double edge method” Adorno describes here, and whose subjective formulation I have touched on above in terms of the status of the *Phenomenology*’s “we/for us,” can only be an outcome of speculative reason. Furthermore, it does not hurt to recall one of the most basic and yet far-reaching pieces of advice from Alex Thomson’s “guide” to Adorno: “Bear in mind that Adorno rarely thinks in sentences, but only in paragraphs.”<sup>68</sup> Finally and most importantly, regardless of a handful of endlessly rehearsed anti-Hegelian maxims (bombers, the whole, Auschwitz, etc.) and the tone of the *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* I mentioned above, Adorno was actually quite consistent not only in his regard for Hegel, but also about the dangers of the dialectic mistaken for a simple method without the speculative prop.<sup>69</sup> This is precisely what makes me think that Adorno, too, would insist that we return materialism to Hegel and to his “idealism” in particular.

### Return to Idealism

I will express my point in even more extravagant terms so that our task is clear. I am *not only* calling for an all-important return *to* materialism in Hegel, *to* the material, social, and historical “kernel” that is already present in the “mystifying shell” of Hegel’s philosophy and of which we have become largely oblivious because we read Hegel through Marx if we read him at all.<sup>70</sup> It is indeed important to establish that much of what we recognize as a distinctly materialist imagery in Marx’s argument against Hegel actually comes from Hegel himself. But establishing this is only a preliminary, if necessary, step

<sup>67</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 74.

<sup>68</sup> Alex Thomson, *Adorno: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 153; also see Adorno’s “Skoteinos” essay for the identical advice on how to read Hegel: “Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel,” in Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, pp. 89–148, in particular pp. 122–123.

<sup>69</sup> The key passage about the performative bias in the “use of the dialectic” and “the threatening relapse of reflection into unreflectedness” is the penultimate aphorism in *Minima Moralia*, “Warning: not to be misused” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, pp. 244–247). Regardless of the use it is put to, dialectics remains for Adorno “the ontology of the false condition” (Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 11; trans. modified). He was famously reluctant to say what the “right state of things” would look like, and while he was mercilessly criticized for it towards the end of his life, the *Bilderverbot* was precisely the meaning of utopia for him. This is best expressed in his 1964 radio conversation with Bloch, published as “Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing,” in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), pp. 1–17. Towards the end of this brief but powerful exchange, Adorno offers a speculative instantiation of Anselm’s ontological proof: “you used the phrase from Brecht – ‘something’s missing’ – a phrase that we actually cannot have if seeds or ferment of what this phrase denotes were not possible. Actually, I would think that unless there is no kind of trace of truth in the ontological proof of God, that is, unless the element of its reality is also already conveyed in the power of the concept itself, there could not only be no utopia but there could also not be any thinking” (*ibid.*, p. 16).

<sup>70</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 103.

for establishing a truth even more relevant today: Not only is Marx's materialism already present in Hegel, but Hegel's idealism remains in Marx. So, what are some of these preliminary steps we need to take, and how do we get from them to Hegel's idealism? I think the first procedure entails yet another close exegesis of some key passages in Marx and in particular his "Postface to the Second Edition" of *Capital*, Vol. 1, where most of the best-known caricatures of Hegel originate. I will spare you the details other than to point out that it is not "Hegel" who Marx stands on his feet as it is often misinterpreted, but "*it*" – viz. "the dialectic" which "suffered mystification in Hegel's hands" and which "by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner."<sup>71</sup> So, the dialectic "is standing on *its* head" and it "must be inverted."<sup>72</sup> This is more than a matter of literary pedantry, for it shows that Marx – in agreement with Hegel and for the sake of the dialectic – strategically inverts the dialectic from the "mystified" into "its rational form." If we now recall that in the very next paragraph Marx explains its mystified form in terms of glorification/transfiguration of what exists and in terms of fashion, we will see that the demystification Marx calls for is effectively the same demystification Hegel carried out against Kant and Fichte (the bad infinity of Fichte's theory of reflection has the same temporality as fashion). Of course, one does not need to be too fancy here and can instead just read on through the rest of the next paragraph in the "Postface" to realize that the passage reads as a summary of Hegel's own position.<sup>73</sup>

The second procedure follows from the first in the sense that it focuses on what I have described above as a "strategic" deployment of Hegel's own argument against Hegel. It is, again, of the utmost importance to our understanding of Hegel (and Marx) that we do not lose sight of the polemic context of the second "Postface," in which Marx is responding to the specific accusation of "Hegelian sophistry" leveled against his work: "Marx is the most idealist of philosophers," the accuser charged, "and indeed in the German, i.e., the bad sense of the word."<sup>74</sup> In his initial response, Marx uses the critic's own words against the accusation, making it thus clear that Marx believed his accuser was simply mixing up his categories. Marx was not only in the business (pardon the expression) of ridiculing his many critics, which he of course did keenly and with wit. He was also a political organizer who, precisely because he made no specific predictions about revolution in his theoretical writings, acted to make revolution directly imminent. Thus, while the accusation made absolutely no sense philosophically and was not worth Marx wasting any of his own words on it, it was politically fatal and I think Marx understood the danger of being accused of the exact political tendencies he was trying to suppress, from his

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103, emphasis added.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

critique of utopianism in *German Ideology* to the expulsion of the anarchists from the First International. Adorno comments on this indirectly in *Negative Dialectics*: “They [Marx and Engels] wanted the revolution to come next day; hence their acute interest in breaking up trends that would, they had to fear, be crushed like Spartacus once upon a time, or like the peasant uprisings. Marx and Engels were enemies of Utopia for the sake of its actualization [*Verwirklichung*].”<sup>75</sup>

The third and final procedure in rescuing Hegel from “Marx” involves forgetting Marx and the exigencies of his time, and returning to Hegel’s own philosophy to carefully outline its critical and revolutionary import to our own moment. This is in effect what Marx did, but if we are to “repeat” Marx’s procedure, we will arrive at what I think are different conclusions, more appropriate to our own moment. To be clear, I do not think that we have experienced an epochal break or some historical rupture and that we are facing fundamentally different social and material circumstances. On the contrary, I have argued above against the type of thinking that privileges radical separation that now cuts to the “soul” of every human being and to her every relation, so that one can no longer even speak of the social, political, historical or even of the human without negative inflection. In the words of Benjamin, “the enemy” has remained the same and as “victorious” as ever; what has changed, however, are the “tools” at his disposal, and it is these that we have to account for.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 322, trans. modified (p. 313 in the 1966 Suhrkamp Verlag edition of *Negative Dialektik*). E. B. Ashton had the unfortunate honor of having to be the first translator to attempt to render Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* into English some fifty years ago. As Hullot-Kentor once observed, Ashton “dragged the book into English,” and in the process became the most hated translator in all of critical theory (Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, p. 299). The charge is not altogether justified considering that the German text is itself written “at the limits of German syntax” with, e.g., omitted articles, ambiguous pronouns, missing objects, etc. (*ibid.*, p. 235). The effect of this Beckett-like exercise on the reader – in any language – is clear: the text “demands persistently reconstructive labor on the reader’s part” (*ibid.*). Before we dismiss this as a needless modernist exercise, we should recall the effort Adorno goes thorough in “Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel” to convince his readers of the appropriate way to approach the style so severe that it yields nothing to the passive spectator: “One must read Hegel by describing along with him the curves of his intellectual movement, by playing his ideas with the speculative ear as though they were musical notes” (Adorno, “Skoteinos,” p. 123).

<sup>76</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 253–264, here 255. Along similar lines, if we were to “repeat” Benjamin today, if we were to heed his command that “in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition [of the oppressed] from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (*ibid.*), we would need to mount a critique not against historicism of the Weimar SPD and its Neo-Kantian philosophers, but against the notions of historical discontinuity, disruption, and permanent crises. One can get there from Benjamin by realizing that the argument that appears to be about continuity and discontinuity is in fact his attempt to break with what he elsewhere called “vulgar historical naturalism” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, section N2.6). Vulgar historical naturalism is hardly the sole domain of historical continuity. Both continuity

With respect to the work of returning to Hegel's materialism, a lot has already been accomplished even if only in the margins of radical theory. It is thus possible today to clearly see that, for example, "Marx's statement [from *The German Ideology*] that philosophy passes over into history already characterizes Hegel;"<sup>77</sup> that it was already Hegel who historicized the solipsistic *Verstand* of the Kantian analytic; already Hegel who provided a materialist critique of the bourgeois state's abdication of its sovereignty to market economy; already Hegel who showed that the contradictions of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution cannot be reconciled strictly conceptually through a Robinsonade fantasy, but must be fought over on the island of Hispaniola; already Hegel who understood the international dimension of history and politics; already Hegel who taught us to recognize the failed state by the "ethical turn" (*Moralität*) of its denizens. That all stands but we may need to take an additional step of recognizing in each of Hegel's materialist feats the role of the *Idee*. This is what I meant earlier by *not simply* returning to materialism, but rather returning materialism – our materialism – to Hegel's idealism. To fully grasp this, we need to relearn what Hegel means by a whole range of technical terms in his philosophical system and we cannot do this without first wresting the same from their tendentious reinscription in hands of friends and foes alike. I have made a modest pass at this here and will now finish with an account of the *Idee*, the thorniest but most relevant term for my advocacy of idealism. In simplest terms, *Idee* is a union between the concept and its actualization, or the full realization of the concept *in* the object. From this statement alone it should be clear that *Idee* is not a concept (*Begriff*), and that it is neither entirely subjective nor objective. In his preface to *The Philosophy of Right* (which is supposed to be another famous source of Hegel's scandalous statements and which I, following Brennan's thesis in *Borrowed Light*,<sup>78</sup> take to be as radical a text as the *Phenomenology*), Hegel describes the philosophical *Idee* as the conscious unity of Form and Content, where Form is "reason as conceptual cognition" or intellectual apprehension that conceives its object; and Content is reason as substantive essence of social order and nature, or in his words, "substantial essence of both ethical and natural actuality."<sup>79</sup> A few pages later, he offers an even more useful

and discontinuity can equally succumb to it as long they are governed by the logic of inevitability and not by the concept of "actualization." When continuity succumbs to historical naturalism, it is called "progress," and it is this "idea of progress" that infected the Left of Benjamin's time. When discontinuity succumbs to historical naturalism, it is called "rupture," and it is this idea of rupture that infects the theory of our times.

<sup>77</sup> Adorno, "Skoteinos," p. 123.

<sup>78</sup> See Brennan, *Borrowed Light*, pp. 84–85.

<sup>79</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 22. I have switched from the *Phenomenology* to *The Philosophy of Right*, which is to say from an exposition of "*speculative Philosophie*" to that of the "*Idee*," because Hegel's discussion of the *Idee* in the latter work (an actual textbook he used in his classes) was easier to understand in translation than was his treatment of "speculative philosophy" in the "Preface"

configuration of what it means to think speculatively: “The science of right is a part of philosophy. It has therefore to develop the *Idee* – which is the reason within an object [*Gegenstand*] – out of the concept; or what comes to the same thing, it must observe the proper immanent development of the thing [*Sache*] itself.”<sup>80</sup> In language that is perhaps less abstract and that recalls Horkheimer’s question from the beginning of the essay, the *Idee* is an intercourse of the subject-object and the object-subject in the world to which they do not just belong in some pure immediacy, but which they actively transform. The final observation to make about Hegelian *Idee* is that in as much as it is dependent on the concept’s realization in the particular, the *Idee* is not an abstract “ideal” that the subject ought to achieve. Not an infinite task nor some fundamental, ecstatic capacity that reveals itself intermittently and only to those who pursue it resolutely. That reality lags behind its possibility, that it must be brought to reason to become actual, is itself only a knowledge made real through the transformation of reality.<sup>81</sup> It is from experience of its own work or “in work,” as Hegel says, that the subject both learns of the “disparity between concept and reality” and “becomes what it is in truth” – a subject free from the empty concepts it had of itself.<sup>82</sup> A world awoken from the dream it had of itself. In the end, it is still idealism that stands firm against the new materialist cult of potentiality and its empty promise of deliverance.

to the *Phenomenology* (Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §56–71). It may be due to Miller’s decision to use “speculative” for two different German words, the actual “*spekulative*” and for “*begreifende*.” Speculative philosophy is the knowledge of the *Idee*, not concepts as it implies in *begreifende*. Either Miller is not correct in his translation or Hegel indeed meant *spekulative* when he wrote *begreifende*, which I am not in a position to evaluate. My basic contention remains unchanged. Speculative thought can expose the empty transcendence of the Heideggerian proposition inasmuch as it can discern the unity (not identity) of things in their opposition.

<sup>80</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy*, p. 26.

<sup>81</sup> I am indebted to Keya Ganguly and Timothy Brennan for a particularly clear articulation of this point in “Materialist Conservation,” a précis for a guest-seminar they taught at the Franklin Humanities Institute, Duke University, Apr. 14–16 2015 (online at <http://www.fhi.duke.edu/sites/default/files/FHI%20Brennan%20Ganguly%20Seminar%20Description.pdf> [accessed May 5, 2017]).

<sup>82</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §406.



# LIVING DISTINCTIONS OVER ATROPHIED OPPOSITIONS

## Hegel as Critic of Reification

*Eric-John Russell*

*Abstract: Georg Lukács, writing in History and Class Consciousness, describes modern philosophy, culminating in the work of Hegel, as providing “a complete intellectual copy and the a priori deduction of bourgeois society.” By closely considering this remark, the following essay will explore the manner in which Hegel’s philosophy stands as a register for the reification constitutive of the capitalist mode of production. After first outlining the fundamental characteristics of Lukács’s theory of reified consciousness, an investigation into culled sections of the Phenomenology of Spirit will demonstrate the conceptual affinity between reified consciousness and the consciousness of Hegel’s own protagonist. The Phenomenology follows the path of a consciousness successively failing to give an adequate account of both itself and the world. Here, the immediate and sequestered otherness of its object obscures the truth that consciousness is the substance of its own process. By analyzing the sections “Sense-Certainty” and “The Spiritual Realm of Animals and Deception,” I aim to demonstrate the extent to which Hegel’s Phenomenology can be grasped as a critique of reified consciousness grounded in both an immediacy prohibited from comprehending its own mediated composition of itself and its object, and in the reduction of social activ-*

*ity to an aggregate of competitive self-interests. As a result, Hegelian philosophy stands as a prescient and indispensable critical resource for grasping the requisite intellectual dispositions of the capitalist mode of production.*

*Keywords: Marxism, Hegel, Lukács*

## Introduction

A mere glance at daily economic commentaries will evince the contemporary importance of the critique of the fetish-character of economic forces. Most narratives in circulation on either end of the neoclassical spectrum, whether *laissez-faire* or Keynesian, confer upon the economy and its calamities an almost omnipotent status, one in which financial capital and currency markets are afforded spectral reverence and trepidation. The fetish-character of the economy herein entails its elevation above and against the social relations and processes that are constitutive of its dynamics. This fetish character becomes apparent in light of Marx's critical analysis of the historically specific social relations mediated by commodity exchange within the capitalist mode of production. Within the opening pages of *Capital*, Volume 1, the category of the commodity unfolds and reveals its social function as a mediator of production relations – that is, through the production and exchange of commodities, relations between people are inverted into relations between things while, inversely, relations between commodities are animated by their creators and yet come to operate autonomously. This central theme within the work of Marx was subsequently theorized through the concept of reification [*Verdinglichung*], or “thingification,” most notably with the work of Georg Lukács in his book *History and Class Consciousness* (1919-1923). In his analysis of the fetish form, Lukács attempts to historicize the phenomenon of reification by following specific changes in the modes of production of commodity society. Lukács elaborates the commodity form as a *universal* mode of social mediation which subsists outside the direct exchange relation, and through an increasingly rationalized, specialized, and fragmented world, comes to nevertheless reflect the structural principles of the commodity form.

The work of Lukács in extending the theory of reification proceeds by grounding Marx within the German philosophical tradition of G.W.F. Hegel, and as such, takes seriously Marx's warning in the afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*, Volume 1 not to treat Hegel as a “dead dog.” It is particularly in accordance with Marx's method for dialectically unfolding the categories of the critique of political economy that the importance of Hegel becomes clear. This methodological inheritance consists in the movement from the simplest and most abstract appearances proceeding through their own immanent wealth of determinations to disclose a complex and concrete totality. This logic advances from the most immediate categories, which in their own internal determinations conflict with their appearance and necessitate a sublation [*Aufhebung*] of their initial configuration. As such, the intrinsic determination of a single category, sublated through its own non-identity, or negated through its own internal contradictions,



will, for Marx, systematically yield a dynamic totality of social relations constitutive of a society dominated by the capitalist mode of production. For Marx, the categories of the critique of political economy are thereby the expressions of the concrete social relations of capitalist society, and beginning with how things *appear* to be allows for penetration into a more developed whole. Here, the *thought* of bourgeois society comes to reveal the *being* of bourgeois society. It is this aspect of the dialectic that Marx inherits from Hegel: the interrelatedness of thought and being, whereby epistemological modes are themselves constitutive of their own object – *how* one knows is not independent from *what* one knows.

Of course, despite the alleged pan-logicism said by Marx to characterize Hegel's philosophy, it is no secret that Marx lauded Hegel on a number of occasions. As Marx states in the *1844 Manuscripts*, the Hegelian dialectic, as laid out in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), illustrates a process by which reality comes to know itself and call into question all extrinsic otherness through its own internally contradictory modes of existent knowing, thereby revealing all acquired knowledge of the world to be a knowledge of oneself. Marx recognizes that it is through Hegel's dialectic that the content of even the most abstract categories of the *Phenomenology* yield a dynamism wherein the subjectivity of man unfolds in a manner constitutive of the objective world.

Hegel's *Phenomenology* traces the experiential journey of consciousness through phenomenal knowledge towards true knowledge, or science [*Wissenschaft*], along the way assuming various shapes and stages [*Gestalten*], each unraveled through their own intrinsically contradictory determinations. Through this "path of despair," consciousness experiences a loss of itself as it expands its truth through a knowledge of itself. All of its untruths contain a truth to the extent that each new result is apprehended as the result of consciousness' own activity. It is through this progressive insight into the untruth of its phenomenal knowledge and immediate appearances [*Erscheinungen*] that consciousness comes to be revealed as its own standard, wherein the truth of the object *in-itself* is compared with the truth of the object *for consciousness*. This dialectical process reveals the activity of consciousness to be a comparison of consciousness with itself, one whose movement proceeds by way of an examination into whether its concept corresponds to the object and whether the object corresponds to its concept. What for consciousness may appear, for example, as a distant objectivity of the world is in fact constitutive of its own mode of knowing and being. It is through this general framework that Hegel collapses any rigid separation between epistemology and ontology. "[E]verything hangs on apprehending and expressing the truth not merely as *substance* but also equally as *subject*."<sup>1</sup>

This process by which a subject proceeds to supersede its own immediacies and re-

<sup>1</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), §17. Within the following work, all selections from the *Phenomenology* will be taken from Pinkard's translation, as yet to be published and available here: <http://terrypinkard.weebly.com/phenomenology-of-spirit-page.html>.

veals itself to be intrinsically related to its own object, rather than simply taking refuge within the appearance of an object's otherness and thereby reifying it, pervades the work of both Hegel and Marx.<sup>2</sup> It will be this theme that the following work will explore, particularly that of grasping the dynamics of Hegel's *Phenomenology* as a critique of reification. It is undoubtedly the case that the narrative of reification and its supersession pervades the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in its entirety, a narrative in which an individual recognizes him- or herself as both the subject and object of social praxis, that is, as the dialectical sublation of immediacy and of sequestered otherness into a process whereby the objective world becomes integrated by the subject of experience. As Lukács states, "Hegel's logic shows on the one hand that the objects which seem to be so fixed and rigid are in reality processes, and, on the other hand, it regards the objective nature of the objects as products of 'externalization' on the part of the subject."<sup>3</sup> It will be the aim of the following work, however, to demonstrate and make explicit the structure of reification within Hegel's *Phenomenology* in its most perspicuous moments.

To accomplish such a task, it will be first necessary to outline a particular understanding of the phenomenon of reification, specifically as theorized by Lukács, thereby establishing a framework for investigating choice sections of the *Phenomenology*. This framework will consist in an objective and subjective schematic for grasping the condition of reification constitutive of commodity society – that is, the extent to which capitalism, through its fetish forms, structures both the objective conditions of subjective experience and the subjective conditions of objective experience. Such an analytic distinction will enable one to select two sections of the *Phenomenology* as exemplary of the reified social life constitutive of commodity production and its contradiction. These sections will consist in Hegel's opening chapter entitled "Sense-Certainty" as well as a later chapter entitled "The Spiritual Realm of Animals and Deception." While at first these sections may appear relatively insignificant for a Marxist approach to the *Phenomenology*, most notably since Alexandre Kojève's elevation of the "Lordship and Bondage" section as pivotal for grasping capitalist alienation,<sup>4</sup> my interpretation aims at suggesting that the *Phenom-*

<sup>2</sup> While of course a Marxian understanding of the concept of reification is not reducible to this methodological insight but rather should be grounded within the historical conditions of social alienation, the aim of the present work, as will become clear, is to demonstrate that these conditions nonetheless express themselves within particular forms of consciousness found in Hegel's philosophy. It should therefore be explicitly stated that the present work makes no claim that Hegel possessed insight into the *concrete* aspects of the phenomenon of reification. Rather, it can be argued that Hegel implicitly addressed reification's *philosophic* expressions, insofar as reification develops not solely within the social relations of value, but also within the metaphysical accomplishments of modern Western philosophy, ranging from Cartesian dualism to a subjectivity to which is bequeathed the omnipotent capacity of constituting its own object, exemplified in the work of Fichte and, to a certain extent, barring the problems of the 'thing-in-itself,' in the work of Kant.

<sup>3</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel* (London: The Merlin Press, 1975), p. 532.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher J. Arthur's *Dialectics of Labour* convincingly concludes that, despite popular opinion,

*enology* is an inventory of deception, one in which all sections exemplify conditions of reified thought. Further, the *Phenomenology* wields the distinctive perspective that deficient modes of *thinking* are constitutive of deficient modes of *being* in the world. It thus becomes the case that any theory of reification extracted from the book cannot be reduced to an epistemological error of misrecognition,<sup>5</sup> but should rather be understood as part of a social reality developing in actuality.

The return to a reading of Hegel through Lukács holds additional significance in light of what has been referred to as the rise of a “non-metaphysical Hegel” since the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the poststructuralist and analytic philosophical traditions of interpreting Hegel’s thought as subordinating the world’s concreteness and heterogeneity to an expression of a quasi-divine spiritual substance operating from on high and taking possession of the finite, non-metaphysical readings (best exemplified by the work of Terry Pinkard and Robert Pippin) elucidate Hegel’s philosophy as a critical examination into the presuppositions of a given fixed reality. Such a reading takes the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a process in which the intelligibility of both the world and ourselves unfolds through our own self-determinations and is therefore subject to transformation. Here, the self-determining character of how human beings come to regard their world as meaningful proceeds through a set of socially and historically mediated conditions of which they are the authors. However, if one were to grasp any singular moment of the *Phenomenology* in its isolation, and unrelentingly adhere to any claim of certainty towards a fixed reality expressed in that moment, such a calcified orientation to the world amounts to an exemplary instance of reification as understood by Lukács. My approach thereby allows for a nuanced Marxian approach to Hegelian philosophy that both accepts Hegel’s system as the social and historical development and instantiation of human freedom, while at the same time posing the question of what it might mean for the negative movement of this system to be stunted and how it is that this languor corresponds – in actuality – to the sociality of the capitalist mode of production.

Marx did *not* draw on Hegel’s analysis of the labor of servitude in his theory of alienation. As Arthur succinctly states: “When Marx says Hegel grasps labour as the essence he is talking not about what Hegel actually says about material labour (hence the lack of reference to ‘Lordship and Bondage’) but about the esoteric significance of the dialectic of negativity in spirit’s entire self-positing movement (hence Marx’s claim that the only labour Hegel knows is spiritual labour).” (Christopher J. Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour: Marx and his Relation to Hegel* [New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986], p. 80.)

<sup>5</sup> Such a perspective, wherein reification is taken in purely epistemological terms rather than understood as a historical ontology of social labor constitutive of commodity production and exchange, is grounded most notably within the work of Axel Honneth. Here, reification is adapted to a theory of normative inter-subjective recognition, in which the concept of totality and the determinations of the capitalist mode of production are effectively abandoned. See Axel Honneth, *Reification: A Recognition-Theoretical View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> For a brief account of this change in contemporary Hegelian scholarship, see Simon Lumsden, “The Rise of the Non-Metaphysical Hegel,” *Philosophical Compass* 3 (2008), no. 1, pp. 51–65.

### The Objective-Subjective Structure of Reification

Within Marx's immanently critical analysis, capitalist society unfolds as a totality of social relations which are mediated by objective forms that, while constitutive of social practice, attain an existence autonomous from those practices and, in turn, instantiate them. It is through this interpretation that capitalism comes to be understood as a form of domination by *real* abstractions – as a form of objective domination [*sachliche Herrschaft*], as Marx refers to it – that is, human activity becomes structured by objective forms of social mediation, specifically that of abstract labor, which is constituted by determinate modes of real, concrete practices and which are objectified through the categories of commodity, money, and capital.

Taking the fetish character of the commodity social form to be the pivotal and most essential component of the sociality constitutive of capitalism, Georg Lukács seeks to expand the structural implications of the fetish – character of commodities over time, specifically through the category of reification. Most extensively in the essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” Lukács, under the influence of Georg Simmel and Max Weber, argues that the increasingly fragmented, rationalized, and specialized system mediated by the commodity form has extended its qualities and attributes throughout other facets of social life. The examples offered by Lukács consist of the form of the state and jurisprudence with its increasingly calculative administration of justice and the subordinating dominance of bureaucracy with its formal standardization. Even examples such as the division of cognitive faculties, journalism, and marriage are all scrutinized for their development under the universality of the commodity form.<sup>7</sup> Lukács thereby identifies the core of reification as follows:

Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a “phantom objectivity,” an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Despite the dramatically different historical configuration of capitalism that exists at present, Lukács's theory of reification, grounded in the elemental form of the commodity and its fetish character, carries with it a historical prescience similar to that of Marx's critique of political economy, a prescience that remains unyieldingly valid for as long as capitalism remains in place. Said another way, insofar as the abstractions of commodity exchange remain the predominant modes of social mediation, any internal changes in the development of capitalism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, through for example Keynesian state intervention or transformations in production processes, have yet to call into question the reality that “[t]he wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities.’” (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I [London: Penguin Classics, 1990], p. 125.)

<sup>8</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: The Merlin Press, 1971), p. 83.

Characteristic of reified consciousness is a series of pathological modes by which the self, the world, and their interrelation are constituted, most notably through an extrinsic separation of subject and object; a static and ossified dualism which obscures the nature of social reality and abandons living and interrelated distinctions within a concrete totality for atrophied and petrified oppositions under a reign of immediacies. As a result, the relation between individuals and the result of their own activity expresses itself as a one-way causal sequence of two otherwise unchangeable objects upon one another and dominated by a principle of commensurability, in which isolated entities are uninterruptedly reconciled.

The phenomenon of reification is grounded in the suspension of human activity within the realm of appearances and immediacy, and is practically structured within commodity society by 1) a personification of things; and 2) a thingification of persons. Such a schematic refers to both the *objective* and *subjective* aspects of reification. The objective component concerns a world of objects whose laws, generating their own autonomous power, confront man in his activity as an alien force. At the same time, as the “fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails the fragmentation of its subject,”<sup>9</sup> the subjective feature of reification has it that an individual enters into social relations with others in his isolation, at the mercy of private intention and self-interest, and bearing only the property of their labor-power. It is the truth of reification, as a social form, to oscillate between these two poles of what I refer to as the “objectivist” and “subjectivist” components of reified social life. Trapped between these two extremes, consciousness becomes both a passive observer moving in obedience to laws which it can never control, as well as a consciousness that regards itself as a fortified individual, at odds with the rest of the world and expressing its freedom only through the exchange of its property. It will be this schematic of a reified mode of experience that will be utilized in grasping the movement of consciousness within the *Phenomenology*.

### The Authority of Appearances and the Untruth of Apparent Knowing

When the phenomenon of reification is grasped as both the personification of things and the thingification of persons, a relation between appearances and reality is asserted whereby an authoritative claim is made strictly at the level of appearances. The phenomenon of reification is grounded in the suspension of human activity within this realm of appearances and immediacy. It does not however indicate a mere epistemological illusion,<sup>10</sup> but rather the domination of appearances constitutive of the practical activity of commodity

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> Reification cannot be merely an epistemological problem, an erroneous “false consciousness” or cognitive blunder, but is rather expressive of a historically specific mode of being. Lukács emphasizes this fundamental concrete component of reification when he writes that “these manifestations are by no means merely modes of thought, they are the forms in which contemporary

production and exchange. It will therefore be the general relation of appearance and reality that will be integral to grasping Hegel's *Phenomenology* as a critique of reification.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* imparts the journey of natural consciousness as it proceeds towards true knowledge charting the ways in which it takes different shapes, developing through its own nature. It is with this experience of itself – an acquaintance of what consciousness is in-itself – that Hegel offers a vicious critique of immediacy, one which an examination into the mediated determinations of appearance is unfolded. This authoritative claim of immediacy will, for consciousness, through its voyage in the *Phenomenology*, lose its justification and disclose an abundance of determinations of which no immediacy is itself unmediated.

It is, however, crucial to recognize that the untruth of immediacy is constitutive of the experience of consciousness. While immediate knowledge entails disclosed mediated conceptualizations, new immediacies arise with every new stage of consciousness, only to thereby further deepen both the subject's consciousness of the world and of itself. For Hegel, philosophical truth as such contains both the true and the untrue at the same time, a process by which the true is brought to light by the deficiencies of the untrue, not through an abstract negation or a simple rejection of the false, but rather through a determinate negation, through which the implicit truth contained within the untrue is made explicit. As such, Hegel does not make any effort to venerate any "true reality" hidden underneath appearances, nor will he deny the deceptive significance of appearances themselves. Rather, Hegel seeks to repudiate the authority of respective appearances

bourgeois society is objectified. Their abolition, if it is to be a true abolition, cannot simply be the result of thought alone, it must also amount to their *practical* abolition as the *actual forms of social life*. Every kind of knowledge that aspires to remain pure knowledge is doomed to end up granting recognition to these forms once again." (*Ibid.*, p. 177.) The problem of understanding reification as merely an epistemological error remains key for illuminating the manner in which Hegel's *Phenomenology* can be grasped as a critique of reification. If the epistemological error is not merely contained within a deficient mode of *thought*, but is itself an untruth constitutive of a mode of *being*, and thereby a moment within the contradictory process of truth, i.e. of experience [*Erfahrung*], then the critique of reification must reside in the refusal of consciousness to remain in its discord between truth and certainty, which is itself a refusal grounded in its own internal and essential movement. A renunciation of appearances [*Erscheinungen*] therefore cannot by itself amount to a critique of reification, nor would a simple overcoming of the immediacies of semblance within the realm of thought. Since the appearance itself is constitutive of the essence, the movement against appearances must also be a movement against a particular mode of being. As such, the manner in which appearances are criticized in the *Phenomenology* corresponds to a critique of reification to the extent that reification is not merely a process of "veiling" or "mystifying" a true reality hidden underneath appearances, but rather phenomena which are constitutive of a social form and mode of production. Hegel's definition of knowledge itself implies a truth of actualization. This understanding of Hegel enables one to witness Lukács echoing the movement of consciousness within the *Phenomenology* when he writes: "since consciousness here is not the knowledge of an opposed object but is the self-consciousness of the object the act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of its object." (*Ibid.*, p. 178.)

in their claims to offer legitimate and robust explications of subjective consciousness and its relation to the world. Through this process, the reality of appearances is in fact affirmed. However, it is through the activity of consciousness that this reality reveals certain deficiencies that negatively prompt consciousness – and this disruption emerges at every moment in the *Phenomenology* – into calling into question the mode by which the appearance of reality is apprehended.

The dialectical process by which this revelation takes place consists in natural consciousness demonstrating that it does not possess true knowledge, but only the certainty of apprehending the object in its immediacy. This distinction reveals to consciousness the inadequacy of its own concept [*Begriff*]. However, this disparity between certainty [*Gewissheit*] and truth [*Wahrheit*] is only revealed retrospectively. In its varying moments, consciousness apprehends its immediate object *as* true knowledge, a certainty which, pummeled against the realization of its own concept, propels consciousness into a loss of itself; a loss of its truth, and as such a “path of despair” against its own apprehended naturalisms. It is therefore through conscious insight into the untruth of phenomenal knowledge that consciousness experiences a progressive maturation, retrospectively attained from the standpoint of true knowledge. As Hegel writes in his introduction, “[t]he goal lies at that point where knowledge no longer has the need to go beyond itself, that is, where knowledge comes around to itself, and where the concept corresponds to the object and the object to the concept.”<sup>11</sup> The object of knowledge gained by consciousness will therefore not be something that externally acts upon consciousness, but instead will be eventually disclosed as something structured by an *acting* self-consciousness.

### “Sense-Certainty or the ‘This’ and Meaning Something”

The importance of the section “Sense-Certainty” [*sinnliche Gewissheit*] for distilling a critique of reification from the *Phenomenology* derives from the relation of consciousness to its object, a relation that nowhere else in the *Phenomenology* is dominated by immediacy in its most elemental form; an absolutely minimal form of knowledge in which the object [*Gegenstand*] apprehended stands over and against the knowing subject. By beginning here, Hegel allows for the relation of immediacy to the grasped in its most simplified and direct form: as a subject accosted by the appearance of a thoroughly foreign and imposing object. Hegel’s point of departure from the perspective of consciousness relinquishes presuppositions of any logical deduction and instead begins from the immediacies of phenomena whose content will eventually emerge through the interrogation of the immediacies themselves. Additionally, because the negation of immediacy takes place at every subsequent *Gestalt* of the *Phenomenology*, outlining this process in its most rudimentary form enables one to grasp the reified core of all stages of the *Phenomenology* in which the immediacy of appearances declares universal authority.

<sup>11</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §80.



Sense-certainty begins only with a knowledge of that which is immediate, that is, of what merely *is*, a natural or naïve [*natürliches*] awareness of oneself and objects within a non-inferential and pre-reflective mode of knowledge. The immediacy of such a direct acquaintance evokes an absence of any active endeavor on the part of consciousness to achieve conceptual abstraction or reflection, and instead pushes consciousness to passively adhere to a truth of the mere *existence* of an external object, apprehended in its mere appearance. As Hegel begins the section, “Knowledge which is our object at the outset, that is, immediately, can be nothing but immediate knowledge, *knowledge* of the *immediate*, that is, of *what is*. Likewise we ourselves have to conduct ourselves *immediately*, that is, *receptively*.”<sup>12</sup> In this immediate existence, the object is devoid of any ascribed predicates, and its truth is to be located only within its bare singularity. As such, the content of immediate knowledge appears as an infinite wealth, whose proximity to truth is expressed by the immediate object in all its concrete fullness, unspoiled by the exclusions of conceptual comprehension.

The articulation of sense-certainty through the indexical demonstrative “this” locates truth in the authoritative being of the object, the *this*. However, once sense-certainty attempts to articulate this truth, it inadvertently evokes a claim to *plurality*, rather than to *singularity*, or as Hegel describes it, the object is an example among many. This revelation first emerges when Hegel situates the *this* of the object’s being within the twofold indexical demonstratives of the “here” and “now.” Beginning with the *now*, Hegel offers an answer to the question of “What is the now?”: “The now is the night.” But in the effort to preserve the truth of what the *now* is, the *now* becomes stale as soon as it is no longer night. “To be sure, the now itself maintains itself but as the kind of thing which is not the night.”<sup>13</sup> The *now* thus maintains itself but only in a negative fashion, always altering by virtue of an other, a mediated *now* never static, but rather always in flux. The *now* exists through its negation, the non-identical *not-this* indifferent to any particular being, refusing to be restrained under one particular or singular state.

It is through the ineffability of linguistically referring to particularities that the truth of sense-certainty reveals itself to be a universality, one in which even the sensuous is expressed as universal: being *as such*, or one among many. It is in language, Hegel explains, that although one may *mean* [*meint*] to articulate solely the singularity of the object, what is instead *spoken* [*gesagt*] is its universal character. Sense-certainty consistently says the contrary of what it means: *a linguistic revelation of universality within a meaning grounded in bare singularity*.

While the truth of sense-certainty was initially located within the immediate awareness of the object, it turns out that the content of this experience cannot be held firm in

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, §90.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, §96.



a singular definite moment. In attempting to find refuge in the pure immediate intuiting activity of the articulated “Now is daytime,” this certainty remains ignorant of the transformation from day into night, wherein its truth resides in its immediate relation to a self-limited non-temporal *now* or non-spatial *here*. However, if this truth were taken up, its meaning would be lost and, in the case of *now*, it would emerge as *what has been*. Any *now* therefore turns out to be *an overturning sequence of nows*. The *now* itself is thereby elusive and possesses no truth *of being*; its fleeting propensity instead leaving a trail of sublated moments. The universality disclosed by the activity of sense-certainty therefore reveals a union of an interrelated multiplicity of instances in both space and time, a universal dynamically *in process*, whereby the pure being of sense-certainty loses its immediacy through negation. Hegel has begun to demonstrate the necessity of *mediated* knowledge.

### The Reified Structure of Sense-Certainty

In order to grasp the reified structure of “sense-certainty,” it is first necessary to recall that the chapter resides among the first three sections of the *Phenomenology* constituting a unit aptly described by Quentin Lauer as “Objective Consciousness.”<sup>14</sup> In the particular case of sense-certainty, the authority of truth for consciousness resides in a mode of awareness entirely dependent on the object in its petrified and undifferentiated singularity. It is therefore important to recognize that Hegel utilizes the German word *Gegenstand* rather than simply *Objekt*.<sup>15</sup> Here, the immediacy of this mode of knowledge prides itself

<sup>14</sup> It is the approach of consciousness to at first always distinguish something from itself and relate itself to that object. At the outset, the object for consciousness is therefore posited as existing externally, and it is as such that the fundamental structure of consciousness operates by way of a distinct subject/object framework. The first sections of the *Phenomenology* indeed proceed with consciousness gravitating in a predominantly object-oriented manner. These sections, under the title of “Consciousness,” include “Sense-certainty,” “Perception,” and “Force and the Understanding.” Within these sections, consciousness locates truth within the object of apprehension, a knowledge that is to be attained “out there” and which has yet to reflect upon its own practical modes of knowing. As Terry Pinkard writes in his commentary on the *Phenomenology*, “Hegel wishes to show [within the first three sections of the *Phenomenology*] that the basic candidates for such knowledge logically lead to and culminate in what we can call the subject/object model of knowledge and practice: a picture of our epistemic practices and our various practical endeavors that interprets them in terms of a subject, an independent object, and a representation [*Vorstellung*] that supposedly serves as a metaphysical intermediary between the subject and the object.” (Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994], p. 21.)

<sup>15</sup> In his seminal reading of the *Phenomenology*, Quentin Lauer reminds us that the imposing character of the object is indeed disclosed in the very opening words of the section: “Das Wissen, welches zuerst oder unmittelbar unser Gegenstand ist...[The knowledge which is at the start or is immediately our object...]” (Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §90). Cf. Quentin Lauer, S.J., *A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), p. 43.

on adding nothing to the passive reception of the object whereby it “appears as the *most true*; for it has not omitted anything from its object.”<sup>16</sup> Throughout this section, Hegel employs an archetype of the pure or vulgar empiricist, one which attempts to preserve the truth of an immediate singularity and, more importantly, undermines itself on its own terms through its own claim to truth, which ends up shattering both the extrinsic separation between thought and the world posited by sense-certainty, as well as the essentially atemporal and ossified character of its initial efforts at locating the truth of the object. The fundamental dynamism of this first section offers a critique of reification as it shatters the essentially ahistorical and ossified character of consciousness’s initial efforts to locate the truth of the object. As such, sense-certainty can be grasped as an archetypal form of reified consciousness, specifically in its limited capacity in apprehending the intrinsically relational and mediated aspects of modes of knowing.

The immediacy of sense-certainty demands that both consciousness and its object must be apprehended in their isolation, an isolation in which “Consciousness is I, nothing further, a pure *this*, and the *individual* knows a pure this, that is, he knows *the individual*.”<sup>17</sup> As such, the certainty of immediacy possesses no movement, and therefore is incapable of recognizing itself as *undergoing* experience. Instead, it is under the illusion that it needs nothing beyond the immediate singularity of itself and its object in order to be complete, thereby destined to engage in a tragic conflict with an *externalized* reality. This reality for consciousness is abstract and incoherent, one in which the external structure of the world ordains its singularity upon an equally singular and abstract consciousness. It is for this ordinary and naïve *individual* consciousness that the world appears as an already established and undifferentiated datum, merely *existing* independently of consciousness as an objective reality. Here the “objectivist” component of reification emerges through the narrative of sense-certainty, particularly through the external and indifferent relation of consciousness and world.

Sense-certainty offers an instance by which a rigid formalism, characterized by an immediate apprehension of an alien world externally imposed upon a thinking subject, is rendered thoroughly untenable. The reified structure of sense-certainty – grounded not in the constitution of the object of consciousness, but rather in the latter’s own *existent mode of awareness* – collapses within its own claim to totality.

For Lukács, the social existence of the proletariat is placed *wholly* on the side of the object, as the proletariat’s own objective appearance confronts it *immediately* as a commodity, not as an active part of the social process of labor. While the social-historical element is not explicitly problematic for sense-certainty at this stage in the *Phenomenology*, socially constitutive modes of historical knowing and being are here nevertheless structurally prohibited from being reflected on by consciousness. This is due to the

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §91.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

impossibility of accounting for particulars within a framework of bare immediacy that does not turn attention to universals; this reveals the immediacy of sense-certainty as structurally contained within a reified social existence. The reified forms of objectivity occasion unmediated modes of knowledge in order to make the phenomena of capitalist society appear ahistorical and eternal. Grounded within a falsity of extreme nominalism, the immediacy of sense-certainty mirrors the reified mode of consciousness. The untruth of the reified structure of sense-certainty reveals itself precisely through its own articulated indexical demonstratives of the *here* and *now*, expressions which cannot help but point beyond themselves. Lukács therefore aptly notes the structural similarities between faulty certitude and the consciousness of the proletariat when he writes the following: “the habits of thought and feeling of mere immediacy where the immediately given form of the objects, the fact of their existing *here* and *now* and in this particular way appears to be primary, real and objective, whereas their ‘relations’ seem to be secondary and subjective. For anyone who sees things in such immediacy every true change must seem incomprehensible.”<sup>18</sup>

Ensnared within the elemental untruths characterized by the immediacies within sense-certainty, the reified social life of commodity society is “[u]nable to discover further mediations, unable to comprehend the reality and the origin of bourgeois society as the product of the same subject that has ‘created’ the comprehended totality of knowledge,” and “its ultimate point of view, decisive for the whole of its thought, will be that of immediacy.”<sup>19</sup>

### “Individuality, Which in Its Own Eyes Is Real in and for Itself”

Turning now towards what has been described above as the “subjectivist” component of reification, one is reminded that its fundamental features arise from the individualism cultivated by bourgeois social relations. It is the self-reliant and solitary individual, at odds with the social world and the collective demands that world might impose upon private activity. Indeed, a society dominated by commodity production wields as both its result and presupposition an aggregation of isolated individuals, all bearing the capacity to sell their labor power within a division of labor. Within such an environment, the primacy of subjectivity eclipses the objective and social character of all individual activities, and as such, the immediacy of an individual’s activity appears to be solely the result of private intention and self-interest, rather than the expression of a socially-integrated whole by which individual subjective activity self-consciously articulates an objective truth.

Guided by this theme of the vanity of the individual – a subjectivist prejudice by which the social world is grasped as estranged – one can now approach a different section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, which exhibits a further aspect of reification. The subjectivist

<sup>18</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 154 (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

aspect of reification concerns an individuality ignorant of its own social presuppositions. The analysis of reification extracted from the *Phenomenology* thereby highlights a form of bourgeois individuality – that is, a purely introspective and egoistic individual grounded within an extrinsic and absolute separation between itself and the social world. Therefore, by turning to the later section entitled “Individuality, which in its own eyes is real in and for itself,” with a particular focus on the subsection “The Spiritual Realm of Animals and Deception; or the Thing that Matters,” the dynamics of what was described above as the “subjectivist” component of reification within Hegel’s *Phenomenology* will now become lucid.

Once consciousness proceeds from its object-oriented efforts at grasping truth, it is propelled to engage with itself, as Hegel describes within the sections under the title “Self-Consciousness,” where authority for consciousness becomes *self*-authority. *Self*-consciousness, having comprehended that its modes of knowing the world warrant knowledge of itself, returns to the world in the section entitled “Reason” [*Vernunft*], specifically with the intention of imposing its standard of rationality upon the world, manifested as the individual rational activity of consciousness. Within “Reason,” various expressions of subjectivity are positioned within an opposition between the self and the prevailing social world, an individual consciousness in an arduous, and often harrowing, pursuit for its own identity. Within the final subsection of “Reason,” however, the world has become a mirror of the individual consciousness, one that reflects the latter’s own rational activity; the reality of this new world consists only in the *I* of consciousness. Here, self-consciousness becomes subjectively certain of itself through its own individual activities and thereby attains its own objective truth, while conversely the individual activities of self-consciousness seek their own subjective certainty. The impotence of this pure subjectivity is expressed by the emergence of a world in which the truth of all reality is the self, or more specifically, the immanent rational activity of the individual consciousness, is its own authority, not dependent on any objective world. Within such a certainty, the individual consciousness and its activity are regarded as self-sufficient and complete.

#### “The Spiritual Realm of Animals and Deception; or the Thing That Matters [*die Sache selbst*]”

As rational activity itself emerges as the truth of reason, individual consciousness begins to wield a vague awareness of its own universality, one which, as it actually expresses itself in the world, does not yet possess any specific content which might assist in differentiating its universality. Instead, the purity of its thought presides over any actual employment in the world. At its foundation, individual consciousness places itself within a “spiritual animal kingdom” in which all activity derives from an originary natural existence [*ursprüngliche Natur*] according to which the self-preserving individual treats its surroundings only as a means for survival. The determinate limitations of this natural existence cannot confine the free activity of individual consciousness, and so while all of individual consciousness’s activity may derive from this originary nature, it actively imposes itself

upon the world around it. This originary natural existence is merely a moment in which the individuality of consciousness unfolds; it is not what constitutes individuality itself. The activity of individual consciousness consists first in a subjective purpose *opposed to* the given reality, second in a process by which this aim is achieved in actuality, and finally in a realized end which stands independent of the acting subject. Each of these individual moments becomes, for individual consciousness, moments within its own identity. It is thereby only within activity itself that individual consciousness becomes aware of its own aims and, as such, is actualized.

Hegel refers to the wholly subjective experience of being “interested” as the individual’s experience of producing something through its activity. The *interested* activity of the individual consciousness is productive both of an actualization and of an activity of immanence that procures the individual itself – that is, the individual in the process of coming-to-be, whose “*doing is his being*.”<sup>20</sup> Hegel’s distinction between *being*, as the framework of natural processes, and *doing*, as the framework of individual or *spiritual* processes, constitutes a movement by which the individual consciousness negates its merely natural existence, asserting itself above its originary and wholly determinate nature and, through its activity, affirms the individual as standing above the limits of nature. This negativity is self-reflective rational activity – that is, natural existence developing into free existence. The rational activity of the individual consciousness is at once individual and universal, and it is the relation of the result produced to the activity producing it that is immanently related to the developing consciousness of the individual.

The universal character of an individual’s activity, however, can be distinguished from any of its singular expressions, and it is the product or work [*das Werk*] of an individual’s activity that renders explicit the universality of its consciousness. As such, it is “the essence of the work, which is to be a self-expression of an individuality,”<sup>21</sup> and:

The work is the reality which consciousness gives itself; it is that in which the individual is for himself what he is *in itself*, and in such a way that the consciousness *for which* the individual comes to be in the work is not a particular consciousness but rather *universal* consciousness.<sup>22</sup>

Within the work, all of the circumstances of its production, whether the intention, means or process of its procurement, are each extinguished and become, within actuality, an alien object to the subject. Within the work, the individual places himself outside himself and within a universality, in a “space of being which is utterly devoid of determinateness.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Lauer, *Reading*, p. 190.

<sup>21</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §402

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, §404.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

The individual consciousness has produced a work that has a life of its own. It is not merely the expression of the individual consciousness's own individuality but must, in its objectivity, escape its individual grasp. It thereby becomes accessible to all other individuals. As a result, the work now appears as transitory and not strictly his own, a deprivation settling upon the individual consciousness as it now experiences a separation between *doing* and *being* in which its activity risks failure.

The various elements of individual consciousness are now inclined to emerge in discordance. The essential unity of an individual's activity may contradict itself, and so the possibility of a contingent failure within actuality lurks around every corner within these distinct moments of activity. The work takes on a life of its own; it is simply "out there" in the world for others to judge and does not strictly characterize the individual.

What persists however is the awareness that the individual consciousness at least made an attempt to give its own individuality actuality in the world. It therefore becomes irrelevant whether or not the realization of a work's intention is successfully accomplished. The work itself emerges as indifferent to its own failure, and what becomes crucial instead is the task as such, or the "thing that matters" [*die Sache selbst*]; activity seen "precisely as activity which produces no *result* other than itself."<sup>24</sup> The individual's recourse is to affirm the "thing that matters" not in the work produced, but in the activity through which the individual develops. The work of the individual is therefore only a moment of its essential reality, wherein a distinction is made "between the mere 'actuality' characteristic of a 'thing' [*Ding*] and the 'reality' which characterizes 'what matters' [*die Sache*]."<sup>25</sup>

The "thing that matters" is the thing of practical life, combining intention with execution, as well as circumstances and medium with the product itself. It is the achievement of the "thing that matters" to unite subjective individuality with a universal objective reality, possessing goal, method, process, and product, each as differentiated moments within a unity of individual activity. As Hegel writes,

The thing that matters thereby expresses the spiritual essentiality in which all these moments are sublated as valid on their own, and therefore valid merely as universal moments, and in which the certainty that consciousness has of itself is, to consciousness, an objective essence, *a thing that matters*.<sup>26</sup>

Here the individual objectively grasps its own individuality, not however yet as a subject in the *full sense*, that is, as a universal subjectivity, but only as the universality of its substance, or as a predicate of itself. The universality of this individual consciousness thus remains abstract, without injecting any subjective prejudice into its objectivity.

<sup>24</sup> Lauer, *Reading*, p. 191.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>26</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §409.

Hegel here introduces the honest consciousness in order to demand that the “thing that matters” articulate the individual subject’s efforts, regardless of success. Even if the subject ineffectively achieved its intended goal and even if the external world nullified its work, it would nonetheless have effectively confronted the “thing that matters” by demonstrating an interest in it. The honest consciousness is completely subordinated to its activity; its work is venerated as an end in itself, an aim divorced from any individual, specific work, elevated above the producer as the predicate of activity. In venerating its work, individual consciousness purports to give up its egoism and ascribes a public aim to its activity, investing it with validity beyond the mere self-expression of individuality, validity that becomes objective.

However, the honest consciousness is not as forthright as it first appears. The enthusiasm of the honest consciousness for objectivity is revealed to be more subjective than objective; it has *an interest in being disinterested*. Its concern with the “thing that matters” is revealed to be in fact a strict preference for its *own* performance, for *some* “thing that matters,” for reality rather than *the* “thing that matters.” As such, it has little concern for the activities of others. Hegel describes the honest consciousness’s lack of commitment to objectivity in the following manner:

The *pure* activity is essentially *this* individual’s activity, and this activity is likewise essentially an *actuality*, that is, something that matters. [...] Since in his eyes, what seems to be his concern is only the *thing that matters* as *abstract actuality*, it [is] also the case that he is concerned with it as *his* activity. However, as in his eyes it has just as much to do with what *engages* and *absorbs him*, he is likewise not really serious about the whole affair.<sup>27</sup>

Deceptively ardent in its venture for accomplishment, the honest consciousness deceives other individuals by its egoistic intentions. This individual frustrates others around it in demonstrating that its activity is only advantageous and worthwhile if conducted by itself and in isolation.

Here there remains no interrelation between self and the world. Since the individual consciousness refuses to be judged by standards outside itself, and therefore only wields an interest in the self-expression of its own individuality, the attempt by the individual to give universal significance to the immanent activity of its own consciousness amounts to a deception. The fraudulence of the honest consciousness arises from its ignorance of the real, social significance of acting. In spite of its objectivist posturing, the honest consciousness “in his eyes [...] is concerned with *a thing that matters* and that thing mattering as *his own*.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, §414.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*



This egoistic consciousness is preserved under the treacherous umbrella of a pseudo-submission to the “thing that matters,” a maneuvering which enables one to remain alone in one’s work so long as the work is regarded as an end in itself. The blindness of the honest consciousness is expressed in the disinterested way it participates in the validation of its work, a perspective from which it is only *this consciousness’s* attitude to *its* cause that matters to it, an activity reflective of its self-absorption; “the self playing with itself”<sup>29</sup> has not yet risen above its own egoism.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, the dismay of others in witnessing the self-centeredness of this egoistic consciousness reflects their *own* egoistic and private concern with their respective activities, and so they share a similar disregard for the objective “thing that matters.” Hegel describes the sociality of dishonest consciousness as such:

[...] what thus comes on the scene is a game individualities play with each other. In this game, each is deceiving himself as much he is finding all to be mutually deceiving each other.<sup>31</sup>

Each individual is convinced they are acting disinterestedly with respect to others. Yet because the “thing that matters” emerges regardless of which individual acts, and because individuals must nonetheless submit the work of their activities to the daylight of the socially objective world, they must also contradict themselves in their supposed denial of the “thing that matters.” It is true that all individuals in their self-authority desire to constitute their activity and the objects produced by it as strictly their own. However, the “thing that matters” does not mean individual self-interest. Instead, the “thing that matters” is sought precisely because it is of interest to *everyone*. In the unmasking of the honest consciousness, the falsity of its perspective is revealed. It “is only as a member of society, as a man among others that his actions, works, facts and causes have any real significance.”<sup>32</sup> The illusion of the self-legislating ego is that while the individual acts in what appears to it as its own self-interest, it inadvertently acts for a common interest. The truth of the deceptive consciousness emerges therefore with all individual action amounting to social action, collectively instituted forms of mutual recognition. Both objectivity posited as separate from the subjective activity of an individual, as well as subjectivity which presumes that its actions are not constitutive of an objectively consti-

<sup>29</sup> Judith N. Shklar, *Freedom and Independence: A Study of the Political Ideas of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 128.

<sup>30</sup> As Hegel clarifies: “A consciousness that opens up such matters learns from experience that others come hurrying over like flies to freshly poured milk, and they too want to busy themselves over the matter. Likewise, those others then likewise learn from experience that he is not concerned with such a matter as an object but only with it insofar as it is *his concern*.” (Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §417)

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, §415.

<sup>32</sup> Shklar, *Freedom and Independence*, p. 129.



tuted reality, are themselves illusory and fallacious scenarios. As Hegel writes, “Rather it is an essence whose *being* is the *activity* of *singular* individuals and of all individuals, and whose activity exists immediately *for others*, that is, it is a *thing that matters*. It is only that kind of thing insofar as it is the *activity of each and all*, the essence that is the essence of all essence, that is *spiritual essence*.”<sup>33</sup>

### Reified Structure of the Individuality Which Takes Itself to be Real in and for Itself

In “The Spiritual Realm of Animals and Deception; or the Thing that Matters,” Hegel describes the attempt by the individual consciousness to give universal significance to the immanent activity of its own consciousness, attempting to achieve an identity between itself and the world through its own rational activity. Beginning with the sections under “Self-Consciousness,” consciousness, as a necessary condition of its own *self*-consciousness, has had to tangle with the objectivity of the world now under the authority of itself. However, no longer suffering from the anxious compulsion to compare itself with others, the individual consciousness remains momentarily content with the universality of its abstract activity for its self-realization. However, because this individual consciousness produces both itself *and objects* in the world, its ego faces the problem that the result of its activity risks standing in discordance with itself. In order to act, the individual consciousness must conceive of some end or purpose that may or may not correspond to the circumstances of the world, which calls into question this supposedly strictly subjective experience of being *interested*.

Hegel here recognizes that activity is necessary for the self-realization of self-consciousness. Because the self of the individual consciousness is in conflict with its own externality in the world concretized in particular works, it is plunged deeper into its own abstract and universal egoism, an egoism in which gratuitous and insincere gestures are made in accordance with consciousness’s own omnipotent principle of self-interest. This deceptive concurrence between subjective interest and objective reality, however, stands on precarious ground, specifically because it comes to reveal the necessarily social character of individual activity. With the unfolding of the honest consciousness, the reification portrayed in this section of the *Phenomenology* begins to emerge. As the subjectivist component of reification reflects a mode of individuality hostile to its own social character, by which an extrinsic and absolute separation between itself and the social world is torn asunder, “what the acquisition of rationality means to the individual consciousness is that he gradually comes to perceive that the real character of society and history is something created by men together.”<sup>34</sup>

Hegel begins the section with a phenomenological figure at the center of the world, one whose activity remains resolutely solitary and private. Such an individual springing

<sup>33</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §417.

<sup>34</sup> Lukács, *Young Hegel*, p. 470.

from his originary natural existence resembles an isolated and self-sufficient Robinson Crusoe, content to remain alone and moved only by self-gratification, refusing to be judged by standards outside itself. Such a detached and empty individuality stands in opposition to the world, grasping itself as an abstract universal that takes itself to be all of reality. Oriented toward its own immanent rational activity, the activity of consciousness becomes identical with consciousness itself, and it is this reflection that accompanies the reified subjectivist prejudice by which the social world is grasped as estranged.

This estranged quality at first derives from the objectivity involved in producing a work. No matter how conceited it may be, the individual consciousness has produced an object which has a life of its own, with other individuals possibly appropriating it for their own self-expression. Here the reified structure of the individual consciousness emerges most distinctly in the objectifying process of the work itself, in which external forces call into question the freedom of consciousness's own individuality. If the subjectivist component of reification concerns the extent to which abstract labor renders one's own individuality as an opposing force, an individuality concretized in its thinghood in the case of commodity society, the very concrete existence of the work heralds a denial of bourgeois subjectivity. The work, or the commodity, exists in actuality, that is, within a social domain constituted by other individuals, and, in the case of the historical specificities of commodity production, within the domain of exchange relations. The individual consciousness, however, still refuses to regard its own activity as of a social process, and so the honest consciousness arrives in an effort to reclaim the universality of its individuality.

The honest consciousness seeks satisfaction in work for its own sake, not necessarily in any *particular* work produced. This form of self-consciousness remains severed from its sociality, taking itself to be, in and of its own *abstract* activity, complete. By denying the concrete specificity of the work, the honest consciousness seeks self-realization in the abstract universality of its own activity, independently of its work as real and actual, and withdrawn from its *determinate* quality. When the work does take on a concrete reality, it becomes an objective alien work, at odds with the intention of the individual producer. Put simply, it becomes an object which stands *over and against* the producer, no longer expressing the producer's individuality but governed by an abstract objectivity; *a separation of doing and being*. The particular work constitutes an alien reality for the individual consciousness, which propels individual consciousness inward, into a deeper refuge of the egoistic consciousness.

As its first attempt to see itself in its work endangered a fortified individuality, the honest consciousness is precisely that effort at reconciling itself, for a second time, with objective reality. With the turn to the "thing that matters," all of the distinct moments of activity, including activity's aims, means, or objects, are dissolved into the predicate of an abstract universality. This turn is therefore an attempt by consciousness to concede its stubborn egoism so that the world itself isn't simply eradicated. This recourse taken by the individual consciousness reveals the difficulty of constituting a universal that is

not wholly abstract and empty of determinacy. If the individual consciousness is to wield a universality with its own determinate content without abandoning the realization of its individuality, its attempted egoism discloses socially objective conditions through which all individual activity expresses itself in the dishonesty of the honest consciousness. The fallacy of self-interest emerges as the dishonest consciousness consists in its disregard for the “thing that matters” beyond its *own* self-interest. It is in the interest of each that the “thing that matters” be *their own* doing, and as such, “there is deception all around, because pure objectivity is not really the motive on any side, and yet something has been brought forth for all.”<sup>35</sup>

The realization of an individual’s activity must take place within an objective world, never solely within the fortified bourgeois ego. Hegel “explains the dialectics of self-interest and in particular [of] that false consciousness which persuades the individual to live in accordance with the principles of self-interest while in reality his selfish actions are necessarily connected with the labours of others and so flow into the stream of social, socially useful species-activity of mankind.”<sup>36</sup> In the *Phenomenology*, the sociality of all individual activity occurs in its explicit form through the contradictions of the individual positing an abstract universality that cannot sustain the truth of its claim. The reified structure of its claim is revealed in the disparity between the individual and society, a chasm that remains even as the two collapse into one another. In this process, the rigidity of the individual and the universality of its assertion are transcended as false conceptions of self-expression. The goal of ethical life becomes the transcendence of the self-sufficiency of the individual, the attainment of a justified sociality in which the freedom of others becomes *admittedly* necessary for the freedom of the individual, as a freedom of a reciprocal recognition. While such a development does not occur explicitly at the conclusion of this section in the *Phenomenology*, the advancement can be heralded as a substantial move in this direction. “It is the universal, which is a *being* only as this activity which is the activity of each and all.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, when rationality is no longer conceived of as an impersonal and individual activity, but rather as an actual mode of institutionalized reflective social practice, Hegel’s *Phenomenology* has entered the realm of Spirit.

## Conclusion

Since Alexandre Kojève’s lectures on Hegel in the 1930s, followed by the work of Jean Hyppolite and Jean-Paul Sartre, it has been common for Marxists, seeking to solve the riddle of the dialectic under Hegel’s “mystified shell,” to focus attention almost irresistibly on the “Lordship and Bondage” section of the *Phenomenology*. Any Hegelian clues for

<sup>35</sup> Lauer, *Reading*, p. 196.

<sup>36</sup> Lukács, *Young Hegel*, p. 481.

<sup>37</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §417.

grasping the forms of domination within the capitalist mode of production, specifically that form of domination embodied in estranged labor, were thought to be found within the master-servant relation and the variant of alienation contained therein. However, if the Marxian turn towards Hegel is less concerned with extracting sociological archetypes of conflicting class interests than it is with unearthing the historically specific ontology of social being constitutive of the production and exchange relationships of capitalism, as well as the necessary forms of reified consciousness associated with this ontology, then less tattered sections of the *Phenomenology* offer hitherto neglected conceptual resources and insight that have not received the attention they deserve. It has been the aim of the present work to approach such sections, specifically “Sense-Certainty” and “The Spiritual Realm of Animals and Deception,” with the intention of demonstrating that the structures laid out in the *Phenomenology* offer conceptual groundwork for the critique of reified consciousness. This was accomplished by first explicating the phenomenon of reification from both an objectivist and subjectivist perspective. It was shown that the truth of reified social existence consists in the oscillation between the two perspectives, the former as a “personification of things” wherein an ahistorical objective and alien world imposes its structures upon the latter’s alternatively subjectivist individual, riddled with anxiety over the world’s intrusion into its own egoism. Such pathological modes of existence become expressive of reified consciousness grounded in an immediacy that is structurally prohibited from grasping its own mediated composition of itself and its object, and in the diminution of social activity into an aggregate of competitive self-interests.

To interpret the *Phenomenology* as a critique of reification admittedly poses numerous problems. Most glaring is the suggestion that the conditions of reification themselves are capable of being extracted out of logical dynamics independent from the historical specificities of a society dominated by commodity production. The practical overcoming of reification cannot take place within the abstract categories of its theoretical apprehension, but within the concrete movement of class struggle and in the self-abolition of the proletariat as the class of capital.<sup>38</sup> Reification is not merely a mistaken choice of philosophic commitment. Merely coming to comprehend any calcified epistemological

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps here it should be noted that it would be highly questionable to rely too heavily on the *path* of consciousness through the *Phenomenology* as an instructive model that points beyond capitalism. Of course, the general Hegelian lessons of determinate negation and the immanence of the dialectical method are decisive insofar as they methodologically illustrate the fact that it is only the contradictory conditions of the capital-labor relation itself are addressed by taking this path, while the relation’s abolition is not guaranteed in the production of communism. Nevertheless, the present thesis holds that the different *moments* of the *Phenomenology* instantiate historically specific conditions of reified social life. This, by itself, does not necessitate that the *transitions* between those moments of the *Phenomenology* in similar fashion offer exemplary elucidation of how to overcome reification. The latter line of thought would admittedly require a substantial amount of political economy that is largely absent from both the present paper and, in a sense, from Hegel’s philosophy. This does not however prevent us from grasping Hegel’s thought as giving apt philosophical expression to real historical problems.

standpoint as erroneous does not mean the practical dissolution of reification, but consists at best only in a speculative formulation of the extent to which reified consciousness has its origins not just in the concrete developments of the commodity social form, but also in the foundations of modern philosophical thought, which have enabled bourgeois thought to gain abstract universal ascendancy.<sup>39</sup> The experience traversed within the *Phenomenology* offers philosophical representation of the reification constitutive of the capitalist mode of production. Hegelian philosophy thus stands as a prescient critique of the reified consciousness necessary to the capitalist mode of production, a form of consciousness structurally seized and repetitively compelled to remain within the categories of immediate experience, apprehending only the most abstract forms of objective and subjective being. Hegel philosophically reconciles thought to its own present while simultaneously, through an immanently critical methodology, pointing beyond that present.<sup>40</sup> It is in this manner that Hegel considered philosophy's systematic character to be emblematic of its own historical moment, while at the same time cultivating the germ of its own overcoming.

It can be argued that each moment of the *Phenomenology* demonstrates a methodological homology to the pathologies of reification. Within the successive failures of consciousness one finds the different aspects of reified consciousness, which appear as a chronic disorder of experience. In this way, the book can be seen as a catalogue of deception.<sup>41</sup> Lukács will go so far as to state that "if we look a little deeper, we see that [Hegel's] true subject is the phenomenological dialectic of the commodity-relation, and that he is investigating both its objective nature and its subjective implications in its relation to the consciousness of man in capitalist society."<sup>42</sup> Insofar as capitalism formalizes empty abstractions and fossilizes analytic oppositions as a *modus operandi* of consciousness, Hegel's philosophy continues to anticipate the critique of political economy. In the words of Terry Pinkard, "the questions those 'German' philosophers asked themselves during this period remain our own questions."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Is it for this reason that Lukács has been most apt in illustrating the extent to which Hegel can be grasped as a critic of reification, and that "it becomes plain, in short, how Hegelian dialectics were able to serve as the immediate prototype of materialist dialectics." (Lukács, *Young Hegel*, p. 553)

<sup>40</sup> Lukács describes modern philosophy, culminating in the work of Hegel, as unable "to do more than provide a complete intellectual copy and the *a priori* deduction of bourgeois society. It is only the *manner* of this deduction, namely the dialectical method that points beyond bourgeois society." (Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 148)

<sup>41</sup> "In reviewing these failures, we notice the reoccurring dualisms that block experience by separating the subjects from their objectives. At each level, mind reaches a state where it cannot know its objects or interact with others." (Jeanne Schuler, *Logics of Theoretical and Practical Reason in G. W. F. Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* [Doctoral dissertation, Washington University, 1983], p. 5)

<sup>42</sup> Lukács, *Young Hegel*, p. 500.

<sup>43</sup> Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 2.



# ESSAY





# POETIC JUSTICE: VIKTOR SHKLOVSKY AND CARL SCHMITT\*

*Peter Steiner*

*Abstract: The paper explores a shared epistemological bias of Shklovsky's poetics and Schmitt's legal Dezisionismus: their privileging the singular over the ordinary. "The exception is more interesting than the rule," Schmitt stated about the law in 1922. For, every legal judgment, he insisted, involves the indispensable moment of contingency insofar as it extends the same statute to different and irreducibly unique situations. Shklovsky, quite similarly, endowed art with the capacity to defamiliarize our perception of reality made torpid by repetition: turning the usual into the unexpected.*

*Both theoreticians rebelled against the Positivistic tradition in their respective fields. Schmitt against Kelsen's "pure theory of law"—an autonomous science of deductively arranged norms, each deriving its validity from appropriate higher norms, down to the ultimate Grundgesetz underlying and sustaining them. "The basic law," argued Schmitt pace Kelsen, is always already something supra-legal that becomes incorporated into jurisprudence only retroactively. For initially it is but the expression of an unpredictable will of a particular "sovereign" who decides to suspend an existing legal system and establishes a different one. Such a coup d'état is not an act of legal nihilism but, on the contrary, a self-protecting measure intended to save the state from liquidation by its enemies.*

\* The original version of this paper was delivered on August 25, 2013 at the Moscow conference celebrating the centenary of Russian Formalism. For its Russian translation see *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 139 (2016), no. 3, pp. 16–30. In revising it, the author drew on valuable advice from Joe Grim Feinberg and Ilya Kliger.

Shklovsky critiqued the validity of Spencer's postulate, popularized in Russia by Veselevskii, that art strives to economize our mental energy. Defamiliarization, he insisted, is wasteful, but for a vital reason: to resuscitate our relationship with the surrounding world that, without this intervention, would succumb to a deadening entropy. "Only the creation of new artistic forms," wrote Shklovsky in "The Resurrection of the Word," "can return to humankind the experience of the world, resurrect things, and kill pessimism." Like the Schmittian sovereign, then, poets destroy literature in order to preserve it. They arbitrarily suspend worn-out artistic norms to inaugurate new ones capable of defamiliarizing reality afresh.

Keywords: Vitkor Shklovsky, Carl Schmitt, György Lukács

*Resemblances are the shadows of differences.  
Different people see different similarities and  
similar differences.*

Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*.

Shklovsky and Schmitt... ???, my former colleagues usually intone incredulously with a glint of glee in their eyes when discretely prying whether – even after “perishing” no longer rhymes for me with “publishing” – I still continue playing academic games. The source of their perplexity is hidden in plain view. What could a scandal-mongering Futurist, my young interlocutors imply, a sworn proponent of the *l'art pour l'artism*, as the deeply ingrained lore has it, share with a conservative Catholic appreciating literature only as political allegory? I could offer a possible disquisition about Shklovsky, an anti-Bolshevik conspirator and a political émigré as well as a theoretician crediting art with a significant social role, or about the curiously modernist spin of Schmittian conservatism and his closeness to the writers with impeccable avant-garde credentials, like a Dadaist, Hugo Baal,<sup>1</sup> and an Expressionist, Theodor Däubler,<sup>2</sup> but this would be, most likely, excruciatingly long-winded for the busy people hurrying from their classroom to the next faculty meeting (or *vice versa*). Moreover, the elective affinities of Shklovsky and Schmitt, the way I see it, is neither the function of piecemeal biographical details nor of their idiosyncratic artistic sensibilities but of something more essential. In what will follow, I intend to demonstrate that in carving up the subject-matter of their respective inquiries, the aesthetician and the jurist, despite all the ideological and/or cultural disparity, reacted to the spirit of their times which both of them regarded, for strikingly similar reasons, as intolerable, and that the heuristic stratagems they advanced in their own disciplines to remedy this perceived calamity seem in many respects equally analogous.

<sup>1</sup> Trevor Stark, “*Complexio Oppositorum*: Hugo Ball and Carl Schmitt,” *October* 146 (2013), pp. 31–64.

<sup>2</sup> John P. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 45–47.

But how useful for such a comparison, an inquisitive reader might ask, can be a category as nebulous and vapid as “the spirit of the times?” To deflect this vexing question let me involve in my exposition, however sketchily, yet a third famous thinker, Georg Lukács. I have in mind, in particular, his sweeping critique of an inauthentic state of consciousness deforming in a specific way all human endeavors, which he observed in the early 1920s.<sup>3</sup> For it is this peculiar mental set, the Marxist philosopher opined, that constitutes the most salient feature of the modern historical epoch. Against this intellectual backdrop, the correspondences between Shklovsky’s and Schmitt’s theorizing will, I believe, loom quite prominently.<sup>4</sup>

The root of all misery that modern humankind faces, Lukács insisted, rests with one word: “reification” (*Verdinglichung*). If you find this lexical item somewhat opaque, welcome to the club. Even that German philosopher whose utter disregard for the common reader was second to none felt compelled to ask: “*Allein was bedeutet Verdinglichung?*”<sup>5</sup> Alas, chasing after this elusive meaning, I learned fast, is a tall order. Lukács’s influential category, first of all, did not come out of nowhere. As a synthetic substitution for three kindred notions employed by earlier social critics, it oozes with connotations. By “reification” the Hungarian philosopher “generalized Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, and fused it with Max Weber’s concept of formal rationalization and Simmel’s concept of the tragedy of culture.”<sup>6</sup> And even if we bracket off this historical ballast, taking “reification” as a simple rhetorical trope (the opposite of, say, personification) through which phenomena that, by their very nature, are not objects, become mentally transformed into them, we would still be at a loss as to what constitutes the middle ground linking the tenor of this figure with its vehicle. For, as Hanna Pitkin’s in-depth analyses convincingly

<sup>3</sup> Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Let me point out that the relationship of the two thinkers with Lukács was rather asymmetrical. Shklovsky apparently encountered the Hungarian Marxist only in the 1930s, during Lukács’s prolonged exile in the USSR, and their interaction was quite minimal (Galin Tihanov, “Viktor Shklovskii and Georg Lukács in the 1930s,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 78 [2000], no. 1, pp. 44–65). Schmitt, on the other hand, like Lukács, not only studied with Max Weber, whose influence on both can hardly be overstated, but the two also engaged intellectually. “Schmitt was an admirer of Lukács’ essay, ‘Legality and Illegality,’ [...] and Lukács eventually wrote a serious review of Schmitt’s *Political Romanticism*. Moreover, in the first edition of *The Concept of Political*, Schmitt devoted “the longest and most substantive footnote [...] to Hegel and to Lukács as the one who has kept the ‘actuality’ of Hegel ‘most vitally alive’” (which he promptly removed from the subsequent editions after the Nazi takeover rendered the Hungarian philosopher’s race a political liability) (McCormick, *Carl Schmitt’s Critique*, pp. 36–37). Thus, it is not surprising that some of Schmitt’s opinions about jurisprudence coincide, to a significant degree, with Lukács’ views on the subject.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1953), p. 437.

<sup>6</sup> Frédéric Vandenberghe, “Reification: History of the Concept,” *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society & Culture* 12 (2013), no. 3, pp. 427–436, here 427.

illustrates, “there are [...] at least five aspects of Lukács’s concept of reification” and it “seems to mean something different in each of” them.<sup>7</sup> For these and a welter of other reasons, “reification” has gradually lost most of its venerable luster and was relegated by analytically astute researchers who deemed it as “a pseudo-scientific abstraction” into the proverbial dustbin of history.<sup>8</sup>

All the criticism notwithstanding, I still find Lukács’s jaundiced report about the sore state of the modern world eminently useful, at least for the purpose of my essay. “Reification” might well be a tool too blunt to dissect with any precision intricate social structures. Yet, in its descriptive capacity it captured remarkably well the main symptoms of the existential angst common to many of his cohorts – Shklovsky and Schmitt among them – and of the radical remedies proposed to overcome it. For them, the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s the most cherished values and ideals – whether the power of reason, the benefit of science or the continuity of progress – were but the dead hand of the past that, to recycle Marx’s famous image, weighed like a nightmare on their brains, forcing them to interact with the surrounding world through grossly simplified stereotypes, in an alienating and profoundly inadequate manner. This confining mental predisposition and its causes, they felt strongly, cannot be let go or negotiated away but must be shattered through decisive, climactic, violent action legitimized by faith. But now, back to the hero of this overture.

Since there are many exhaustive analyses of Lukács’s “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” I can afford to be both concise and selective. “*Verdinglichung*,” in Lukácsian understanding, is ineluctably but not exclusively linked to the capitalist mode of production, especially to its most advanced phase, where the division and the mechanization of labor fragments the organic bond between workers and their output. But the ultimate impetus for the reification of consciousness comes from the market, which transforms the unique and multifaceted products of human labor, capable of satisfying a variety of personal needs, into abstract commodities appreciated solely on the basis of their price. In this way, the subjects embroiled in mercantile exchange irretrievably lose the natural attitude toward the world around them because they cannot but begin: “(a) to perceive given objects solely as ‘things’ that one can make potentially a profit on, (b) regard each other solely as ‘objects’ of profitable transactions, and finally (c) to regard their own abilities as nothing but supplemental ‘resources’ in the calculation of profit opportunities.”<sup>9</sup>

Such a dehumanized and dehumanizing view of reality, Lukács stresses, is not just a passing mental aberration but an entrenched set of assumptions that its involuntary captives spontaneously regard as natural. “The reified world appears henceforth quite

<sup>7</sup> Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, “Rethinking Reification,” *Theory and Society* 16 (1987), no. 2, pp. 263–293, here 267.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Bewes, *Reification or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 22.

definitively [...] as the only possible world, the only conceptually accessible, comprehensible world vouchsafed to us humans. Whether this gives rise to ecstasy, resignation or despair, whether we search for a path to 'life' via irrational mystical experience, this will do absolutely nothing to modify the situation as it is in fact."<sup>10</sup>

It is not just the self-perpetuating immutability of reified consciousness that bothers the Marxist social critic. Equally pernicious is its spillover effect, the power to impose the arid logic of calculative rationalism across the entire spectrum of cultural praxis. He finds particularly abhorrent, in this respect, the extreme formalization of modern jurisprudence. To make legal adjudication predictable and computable to the utmost, the system deliberately insulates the law from all disruptive contingencies with which the chaotic social reality challenges it, subordinating the law's living spirit to the dead letter. Reiterating Max Weber's mechanical metaphor, Lukács humorously equates a contemporary judge with "an automatic statute-dispensing machine in which you insert the files together with the necessary costs and dues at the top, whereupon he will eject the judgment together with the more or less cogent reasons for it at the bottom."<sup>11</sup> Like the law, philosophy and, together with it, all manifestations of the modern intellect – Lukács deals his highest card – spring from the reified structure of consciousness. For, "the salient characteristic of the whole epoch is the equation [...] of formal, mathematical, rational knowledge both with knowledge in general and also with 'our' knowledge."<sup>12</sup>

Important for my argument, though, is not just what Lukács says but also how he says it. The discursive mode of "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" is not dianoetic but deontic. This is not just a detached critique of an injurious mental set but, above all, an authoritative call for a total cognitive switch, a voluntaristic leap into a higher form of consciousness commensurate with human dignity: "the true beginning of *human* history."<sup>13</sup> And, unsurprisingly, given Lukács's Marxist *Weltanschauung*, such a change can be triggered only by a violent proletarian revolution that will abolish the private ownership of productive assets – the poisonous root of all reification. Yet, the working class – "the barbarians [...] with callous hands" – seemed woefully unaware of its historical *devoir*. It lacked, Lukács lamented, at least in 1910 (when he did not yet consider himself a Marxist), one quality, *sine qua non* of any signal social change: "the soul-expanding religious strength of early primitive Christianity [...] the absolute mastery of man's soul [...] the power to reign supreme."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness," p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96; Max Weber, *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik, III Abteilung: Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1947), p. 507.

<sup>12</sup> Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness," p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> Georg Lukács, "Tactics and Ethics," in Georg Lukács, *Political Writings: 1919–1929*, ed. Rodney Livingston, trans. Michael McColgan (London: NLB, 1972), pp. 3–11, here 6.

<sup>14</sup> Georg Lukács, "Aesthetic Culture," in Arpad Kadarkay (ed.), *The Lukács Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 146–159, here 151.

This early essay of his furnishes the clue as to the projected purpose of Lukács's "Reification" study. It is a recipe for inculcating the "callous-handed barbarians" with Christian-like "soul-expanding strength" and "the power to reign supreme" so they could enact Marx's chiliastic *kerygma* of the proletarian revolution, delivering humankind back to the prelapsarian idyll: the universe of freedom without necessity. True, the capitalist class is doomed, Lukács argues, pace the reformist Social Democrats, because the economic system sustaining it is riddled with irreconcilable antinomies. But it will vanish only insofar as a new class is ready to deal it the decisive *coup de grâce* and take the world's affairs into its hands. To make the workers ready for such a game-changing mission, and this is the gist of Lukács's essay, they must acquire the proper class-consciousness, the awareness of their sacrosanct social role not as history's passive objects but as its active makers. It is this "will to new order," Lukács declares authoritatively, that "designates the proletariat as the socialist redeemers of humanity, the messianic class of world history."<sup>15</sup>

The quasi-religious terminology in which Lukács casts his desire for a better new world is not, I believe, just a matter of rhetorical embellishment. It betrays, I would argue, a fideistic spin on Lukács's version of historical materialism, the fact that his plan for transcending reified consciousness is, when push comes to shove, a leap of faith. This probably should not come as a total surprise, given his intellectual trajectory. Did not he, after all, as Lukács's biographer tells us, "come to Marx over the charred ruins of his youth's single-minded pursuit of salvation?"<sup>16</sup> But given the breath of the topic, I will limit my discussion to just one concept, that of "imputed class consciousness" (*zugerechnetes Klassenbewusstsein*), "a term," according to Michael Löwy,<sup>17</sup> "Lukács developed from Marx's famous passage in *The Holy Family*, where Marx discusses the historical destiny of the proletariat."<sup>18</sup> For despite the variety of contradictory interpretations it elicited,<sup>19</sup> its centrality for Lukács' philosophy of history is undeniable.

To simplify the matter slightly, it might be said that Lukács differentiates between two types of class consciousness: the actual and the potential. The proletarians, the

<sup>15</sup> Georg Lukács, "Bolshevism as an Ethical Problem," in Kadarkay (ed.), *The Lukács Reader*, pp. 216–221, here 217–218.

<sup>16</sup> Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 193.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Löwy, "Interview with Michael Löwy: 20 May 1991, Paris," in Eva L. Corredor, *Lukács after Communism: Interviews with Contemporary Intellectuals* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 17–28, here 27.

<sup>18</sup> Other scholars traced its origin to Max Weber's methodology (see, for example, David Frisby, *The Alienated Mind: The Sociology of Knowledge in Germany 1918–33* [London: Heineman Educational Books, 1983], pp. 91–93). In this context let me note that while in Marxist discourse "imputation" refers to the destiny of a class, in Lutheran theology "*imputatio*" concerns the predestination of an individual: God's imputation of Christ's righteousness to the chosen ones, and their adoption of this righteousness as their own (*Zurechnung der Gerechtigkeit*).

<sup>19</sup> See Michael Löwy, *George Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: NLB, 1979), pp. 175–182.

Marxist thinker argued, are sentient of their disadvantageous social situation and often challenge it. Yet in doing so they remain the captives of a reified consciousness. They are class-conscious merely at the level of their direct existence remaining oblivious to the totality of historical process beyond the empirical *hic et nunc*. Yes, through the spontaneous class struggle they are able to extract some quantifiable benefits from the exploiters (higher salary, shorter work hours) but not to strike at the ultimate cause of their misery, the capitalist mode of production. For this reason, Lukács postulates another type of class consciousness – the potential one – that would go beyond the ephemeral now and project the perceived economic injustices against the background of the whole society in its developmental dynamics. Lukács imputes such a transcendent consciousness to the proletariat on the basis of “the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were *able* to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society.” At the moment, though, such a totalizing vantage point exists merely as an objective possibility, concedes Lukács,<sup>20</sup> “and yet the historically significant actions of the class as a whole are determined in the last resort by this consciousness.”

For the Hungarian philosopher, it is easy to see, the true proletarian revolution can take place only if the imputed class consciousness becomes actualized: with the workers foregoing the incremental doles and enacting instead Marx’s grand historical narrative. How this broadening of the mental horizons might actually take place is not, however, altogether clear. Will the avant-garde Communist party induce the workers to follow its lead, will the intensified class struggle become the catalyst that revolutionizes their minds, or will their ideological maturation pave the way to such a conversion? These are just the most popular scenarios. But even a more apropos question! Must this conversion happen at all? Let me flesh out two situations, mentioned by Lukács himself, where his project of informing a revolutionary subject might flounder. This, I believe, should help us to assess to what extent the consciousness Lukács imputed to the proletariat might be a real force for fashioning futurity and to what extent it is just an article of faith.

The proletariat’s consciousness could, first of all, fail “to be awakened to a consciousness of the [historical] process,” thus ruling out the possibility of the proletariat becoming “the identical subject-object of history whose praxis will change reality.”<sup>21</sup> But even if this doesn’t come to pass, Lukács assures us, history will eventually save the day. The can of unsettled social contradictions would simply be kicked down the alley, their resolution deferred but not cancelled. Should we take this guarantee *prima facie*? Yes, maybe, perhaps. It is the second glitch Lukács envisions that seems even stickier. What if “a class thinks the thoughts imputable to it and which bear upon its interests right to their logical conclusions and yet fails to strike at the heart of totality?” This is a serious

<sup>20</sup> Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness,” p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.



problem, indeed, for “such a class [...] can never influence the course of history.”<sup>22</sup> Were such an infelicity to afflict the proletariat, permit me to ask, would not its historical mission be but wishful thinking?

Before addressing this issue let me recall that the ultimate objective of Lukács’s quest was not the revolution *an sich* but revolution as an instrument for restoring an authentic, unreified consciousness. And the proletariat, because of its unique capacity for synchronizing its direct economic interests with the general drift of human history, was in his opinion the only conceivable agent of this cataclysmic change. But can we rule out the dreaded eventuality mentioned above of the workers failing to attain the level of consciousness imputed to them, that is, the alacrity to view the radical social transformation from the perspective of the entire historical process rather than of a shortsighted power grab. For if the latter happened, the revolution, as opposed to leading to universal freedom, would backslide to a self-perpetuating dictatorship of the proletariat – a mere mirror image of the previous oppressive sociopolitical formations – only now with the oppressed in charge and Marxism just another mind-bending ideology. Such an upshot, needless to say, would fail “to strike at the heart of totality,” thus not influencing “the course of history.” To fulfill their “historical destiny,” the workers must take an altogether more reflective path, Lukács insists. “In order for society to *become truly self-conscious*,” he italicizes his thought, “*the class-consciousness of the proletariat must itself become conscious*. This means understanding above and beyond direct class-consciousness, above and beyond the immediate conflict of class interests – that world-historical process which leads through the class interests and class struggles to the final goal: *the classless society and the liberation from every form of economic dependence*.”<sup>23</sup>

Lukácsian historical sublation, let me note in passing, has a distinct ironic twist to it. Like the trope of irony that vanishes when understood, the conquering proletariat, relishing, at the pinnacle of its triumph, the very moment of glory, is supposed to sacrifice itself on the altar of humanity and, together with the vanquished bourgeoisie, exit, as a class, from the world stage. But is it reasonable to expect the victorious workers to carry out the historical role imputed to them, trading, so to speak, their just-acquired economic and political power for a possible world cleansed of all reification. Hardly so, and Lukács is not unaware of this.<sup>24</sup> His optimism, though, that enlightened self-sacrifice will prevail over self-serving reason comes from Jerusalem, not Athens. Alluding, as in the 1910 essay, “to the soul-expanding religious strength of early Christianity,” he

<sup>22</sup> Georg Lukács, “Class Consciousness,” in Kadarkay (ed.), *The Lukács Reader*, pp. 222–245, here 228.

<sup>23</sup> Georg Lukács, “‘Intellectual Workers’ and the Problem of Intellectual Leadership,” in Lukács, *Political Writings*, pp. 12–18, here 17.

<sup>24</sup> According to Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács*, p. 203, in 1918, Lukács rationalized his joining the Communist Party, “by quoting Kierkegaard’s saying that sacrificing one’s life for a cause is always an irrational act. ‘To believe,’ said Lukács, ‘means that man consciously assumes an irrational attitude toward his own self.’”



exhorts his comrades: "And we must possess faith – the true *credo quia absurdum est* – that oppression will not precipitate as always the oppressed's struggle for power (an opportunity for new tyranny) – and so on, in an endless, senseless chain of struggle – but rather lead to the self-negation of oppression."<sup>25</sup> O Lord hear the sound of his call!

But enough of this warm-up act! Let me finally get to the two featured stars of my show! In Shklovsky's terminology the concept "*ostranenie*" – known in English either in its nominal form of "defamiliarization" or as a verbal construction "to make strange" – plays just as an indispensable role as "reification" in Lukács's. And semantically it is definitely no less fuzzy. The author himself likens his neologism, because of its defective morphology (a correct spelling would be "*ostrannenie*"), to "a dog with a cut-off ear."<sup>26</sup> As for defamiliarization's intellectual affinities, it has been compared to Socratic irony,<sup>27</sup> the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius,<sup>28</sup> Nietzschean "critical history,"<sup>29</sup> and Derridian *différance*.<sup>30</sup> Its genealogy has been traced back to Hegel,<sup>31</sup> Henri Bergson,<sup>32</sup> and William James,<sup>33</sup> to mention just the most obvious inspirational sources. Meanwhile, it penetrated into the discourse of many disciplines,<sup>34</sup> some of which at the time of its coinage did not exist, such as cinematology,<sup>35</sup> translation theory,<sup>36</sup> and gender studies.<sup>37</sup> And this it did

<sup>25</sup> Lukács, "Bolshevism as an Ethical Problem," p. 220.

<sup>26</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, *O teorii prozy* (Moscow: Krug, 1983), p. 73.

<sup>27</sup> Aage A. Hansen-Löve, *Der russischer Formalismus: Methodologische Rekonstruktion seiner Entwicklung aus dem Prinzip der Verfremdung* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1978), p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> Carlo Ginsburg, "Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device," *Representations* 56, 1996, pp. 8–28.

<sup>29</sup> Dragan Kujundžić, *The Returns of History: Russian Nietzscheans After Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 18–19.

<sup>30</sup> Lawrence Crawford, "Viktor Shklovskij: *Différance* in Defamiliarization," *Comparative Literature* 36 (1984), no. 3, pp. 209–219.

<sup>31</sup> Boris Paramonov, "Formalizm: Metod ili mirovozzrenie?," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 14 (1996), pp. 35–52.

<sup>32</sup> James M. Curtis, "Bergson and Russian Formalism," *Comparative Literature* 28 (1976), no. 2, pp. 109–121.

<sup>33</sup> Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History – Doctrine* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1955), p. 155.

<sup>34</sup> Grigorii Tulchinskii, "K uporiadocheniu mezhdistsiplinarnoi terminologii," in Boris Meilakh, et al. (eds.), *Psikhologia processov khudozhestvennogo tvorchestva* (Leningrad: Nauka 1980), pp. 241–245.

<sup>35</sup> Annie van den Oever (ed.), *Ostrannenie: On "Strangeness" and the Moving Image. The History, Reception, and Relevance of a Concept* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Dimitrii Mikhailovich Buzadzhii, "*Ostranenie*" v aspekte sopostavitel'noi stilistiki i ego peredacha v perevode (na materiale angliiskogo i russkogo iazykov): *Dissertatsia na soiskanie uchennoi stepeni kandidata filologicheskikh nauk* (Moscow: MGLU, 2007) (online at: <http://www.thinkaloud.ru/science/buz-disser.pdf> [accessed May 18, 2017]).

<sup>37</sup> Veronica Hollinger, "(Re)reading Queerly: Science Fiction, Feminism, and the Defamiliarization of Gender," *Science Fiction Studies* 26 (1999), no. 1, pp. 23–40.

despite (or, perhaps, just because of) its pronounced conceptual vagueness, also well illustrated.<sup>38</sup>

Like Lukács, Shklovsky sharply distanced himself from the practices prevailing in his own discipline of literary studies, which he considered superannuated, out of touch with reality. His earliest publications (with which I will be primarily concerned) railed against the contemporary definitions of art fashioned, in the spirit of positivism, after mathematics or physics. Like Potebnia's famous "general formula of poetry (or art): 'A (image) < X (meaning),' " according to which the aesthetic effect comes from an uneven ratio of images to meanings (the former must always be smaller than the latter).<sup>39</sup> Or Veselovskii's differentiation of poetic and prosaic style in terms of their respective mental energy efficiency.<sup>40</sup> Art, he argued vis-à-vis Potebnia, is not always "thinking in images,"<sup>41</sup> and poetic style is not a device for saving mental energy, as Veselovskii would have it.<sup>42</sup> With equal vigor, he decried the *laissez faire* liberalism of the Symbolists' taste, which was oblivious to the fact that "the arts of different epochs contradict and negate each other [...] The rapprochement and the simultaneous coexistence of all artistic epochs in the passéist's soul," intoned the young Futurist, "fully resembles a cemetery where the dead no longer feud."<sup>43</sup>

To set things right, Shklovsky resorted to disjunctive logic. Art was strictly separated from non-art – *tertium non datur*. But the young Formalist never clearly disconnected artistic theory from practice, and so strict systemization was never his forte. Even a cursory look at his pre-Revolution writings reveals a number of binary oppositions he advanced, each grasping this antinomy from a different perspective: "poetry vs. prose,"<sup>44</sup> "seeing vs. recognizing,"<sup>45</sup> "trans-rational vs. common languages,"<sup>46</sup> "metaphor vs. metonymy,"<sup>47</sup> "perception vs. automatization"<sup>48</sup> – the list could go on. What unites all the latter mem-

<sup>38</sup> Meir Sternberg, "Telling in Time (III): Chronology, Estrangement and Stories of Literary History," *Poetics Today* 27 (2006), no. 1, pp. 125–235.

<sup>39</sup> Aleksandr Potebnia, *Iz zapisok po teorii slovesnosti* (Kharkiv: M. Ziľberberg, 1905), p. 100.

<sup>40</sup> Aleksandr Veselovskii, "Tri glavy iz istoricheskoi poëtiki," in Viktor M. Zhirmunskii (ed.) *Istoricheskaja poëtika* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1940), p. 356.

<sup>41</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, "Iskusstvo kak priëm," in Viktor Shklovsky, *Gamburgskii schët: Stat'i – vospominaniia – èsse (1914–1933)* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), pp. 58–77, here 60.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, "Vyshla kniga Maiakovskogo *Oblachko v shtanakh*," in Shklovsky, *Gamburgskii schët*, pp. 42–45, here 42.

<sup>44</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, "Voskreshenie slova," in Shklovsky, *Gamburgskii schët*, pp. 36–42, here 37.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>46</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, "O poëzii i zaumnom iazyke," in Shklovsky, *Gamburgskii schët*, pp. 45–58, here 45.

<sup>47</sup> Shklovsky, "Iskusstvo kak priëm," p. 61.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

bers of these pairs is the specific mode in which we perceive phenomena around us. And on this point he sounds very much like Lukács on reification. Numbed by mechanical repetition, we attend to them habitually in a superficial manner as abstract algebraic figures, doomed forever to remain self-same. But instead of the proletarian revolution, it is artistic defamiliarization, common to the first members of the above antinomies, that radically changes our awareness of reality: the expected turns exceptional. Suddenly we see objects as if for the first time – severed from the usual associations – the same as different. And to be truly effective, as Shklovsky demonstrates through the example of poetic rhythm, the defamiliarization must be surprising, “unpredictable” and as such it cannot be “systematized.”<sup>49</sup> But what fuels the drive for this peculiar perceptual switch? Before answering this question let me turn to the second protagonist of my story.

To summarize succinctly Carl Schmitt’s legal theories is a daunting task, not least due to the style of his prose. As one commentator has characterized it, Schmitt’s prose “is an unrelenting oscillation between the cold and feverish, the academic and the prophetic, the analytical and the mythical.”<sup>50</sup> Schmitt’s keen interest in the political dimension of law, most observers agree, was stimulated by Weberian sociology,<sup>51</sup> and the chief object of his critique (shared, by the way, with Lukács<sup>52</sup>) was the liberal positivism espoused by an Austrian jurist, Hans Kelsen, the most famous proponent of the non-political and scientific approach to legal analyses.<sup>53</sup> Risking oversimplification, it might be said that Kelsen’s *Pure Theory of Law* (the title of his *magnum opus*) is a science of deductively arranged norms. Legal order is a hierarchy of systematically organized “ought” statements, each deriving its validity from more fundamental norms, down to the ultimate *Grundnorm* that underlies and sustains it. In this way jurisprudence is purged of all exogenous considerations – be it ethics, ideology, or economy – and is made into a logical, self-regulating system.

Schmitt objected to Kelsen for a number of reasons, and my short account can hardly provide a full rendition of his critique.<sup>54</sup> Let me focus on just one point that is important for my argument. The foible of Kelsen’s argument, Schmitt noticed shrewdly, is the *Grundnorm*, the legislative underpinning of the entire body of laws which Kelsen presupposed, but which, for the sake of his theory’s scientific purity, he left un-

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 39.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, McCormick, *Carl Schmitt’s Critique*, pp. 31–82.

<sup>52</sup> Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness,” pp. 108–109.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Michael G. Salter, *Carl Schmitt: Law as Politics, Ideology and Strategic Myth* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 98–118.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Peter C. Caldwell, *Popular Sovereignty and the Crisis of German Constitutional Law: The Theory and Practice of Weimar Constitutionalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 85–119.

examined.<sup>55</sup> The concept of “basic norm” contains in itself an obvious paradox. As the legal system’s foundation, it is an intrinsic part of it. Yet, it acquires this status only retroactively, after the system is recognized as legitimate. Like “the signature,” to recycle Derrida’s dictum, “invent[ing] the signer.”<sup>56</sup> For initially it is something supra-legal: the expression of an arbitrary will of a particular subject/group (“sovereign” in Schmitt’s parlance) who at a certain moment decided to suspend an existing order and establish a new one. This is, in Schmitt’s eyes, the law’s decisive moment, the moment of exception brought about by an emergency – foreign or domestic – that successfully tests the limits of normalcy. In an uncanny parallel with Shklovskian aesthetics, he wrote about the law: “The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.”<sup>57</sup>

Where does the decision to replace one legal system by another come from? To a large degree, it is a function of concrete historical contingency; and, as such, it is completely fortuitous, uncodifiable by law. Yet there is a categorial unity to all these heteronymous supra-legal acts generating each and every legislative project, Schmitt believed, because they are in their very nature political. For my discussion, it is important to notice that in defining this concept Schmitt employed binary logic. “Let us assume,” he wrote in 1927, “that in the realm of morality the final distinctions are between good and evil, in aesthetics beautiful and ugly, in economics profitable and unprofitable. The question is,” he continued, “whether there is also a special distinction which can serve as a simple criterion of the political and of what it consists.”<sup>58</sup> And, as expected, Schmitt had an answer up his sleeve: “The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.”<sup>59</sup>

Though formally analogous in its antinomic structure to other domains of life, the political pair “friend and enemy” differs from all similar polar oppositions in one important respect: in the intensity of the relationship between the two terms – its existential purport. “For to the enemy concept,” Schmitt asserted, “belongs the ever present possibility of combat.”<sup>60</sup> Or, put more pregnantly, “the friend, enemy, and combat concepts

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 20; Hans Kelsen, *Hauptprobleme der Staatsrechtslehre entwickelt aus der Lehre vom Rechtssatz* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1911), p. 411.

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” trans. Thomas A. Pepper and Tom Keenan, *New Political Science* 15 (1986), pp. 7–15, here 10.

<sup>57</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 26.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of Political*, p. 32.

receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing. War follows from enmity. War is the existential negation of the enemy.”<sup>61</sup> True, and Schmitt concedes as much, the boundary between politics and, say, ethics or economics is not absolute. All human values can become the *causa belli* of a lethal struggle, of which a seemingly innocuous sociological notion of class, as Lukács illustrated quite convincingly, is a telling example. But only if they are politicized, if they “transcend the value spheres from which they emerge and now concern, in Schmitt’s view, the eminently political question of ‘existence.’”<sup>62</sup>

By now, the purpose of suspending the existing legal system is clear. It is not an invitation to anarchy but a self-preservation measure aimed to tackle the perceived threat posed by an internal or external enemy. This act serves either to maintain the *status quo*, when a dictatorship is declared as a stopgap measure to deal with a specific calamity after which the original order is to be restored (what Schmitt terms the “commissarial dictatorship”); or, to replace the *status quo* with another regime, when the “sovereign dictatorship” is the prelude to a new legislative project.<sup>63</sup> The declaration of a state of emergency (*Ausnahmezustand*) is the most palpable example of how the law is used to legitimize a desired political outcome. But this bias, according to Schmitt, is true of the entire judicial praxis. “All law,” Schmitt declared, “is ‘situational law,’”<sup>64</sup> that is, an *ad hoc* appropriation of the general rule. This is so because matching an abstract norm with a particular situation is not a mechanical process with a logically predetermined outcome but always an interpretative decision, a choice among the myriad of possibilities determined by a specific social context. “The judge,” according to one of Schmitt’s commentators, “by acting the way a judge should act, does not apply law according to norms, but rather produces the norm in the very act of applying the law. The law, like the work of art, reveals the rules that guide its application only after it has been laid down.”<sup>65</sup> From this vantage point, then, every legal judgment involves the moment of exceptionality insofar as it extends the same statute to different and irreducibly unique situations. But it is precisely this flexibility that endows the law with its vitality, the applicability to infinitely changeable human affairs. For it is only “in the exception,” to reiterate Schmitt’s words, that “the power of real life breaks through the crust of mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.”

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>62</sup> William E. Scheurman, *Between the Norm and the Exception: The Frankfurt School and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), p. 18.

<sup>63</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Die Diktatur: von den Anfängen des modernen Souveränitätsgedankens bis zum proletarischen Klassenkampf* (München: Duncker & Humboldt 1921).

<sup>64</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 13.

<sup>65</sup> William Rasch, “The Judgment: The Emergence of Legal Norms,” *Cultural Critique* 57 (2004), pp. 93–103, here 102.

Which brings me back to the question I raised above concerning the utility of the particular perceptual switch that Shklovsky eventually termed “defamiliarization.” Let me stress that for the young Formalist, contrary to the prevailing *doxa* about him, art was much more than the mere free play of the imagination, a source of aesthetic hedonism. If Schmitt conceived of law as a political weapon in the struggle for self-preservation, for Shklovsky the life-saving mission of art was primarily cognitive. Its creative potential served to revitalize our relationship with the surrounding world that – without this intervention – would succumb to deadening entropy. “Now the old art has already died,” he mourned the current situation in 1913, “and the new one has not yet been born: and things have died – we have lost awareness of the world [...] we have ceased to be artists in quotidian life, we do not like our houses and clothing and easily part with life that we do not feel.” But this moribund paralysis can be remedied, Shklovsky proclaimed. “Only the creation of new artistic forms can return to humankind the experience of the world, resurrect things, and kill pessimism.”<sup>66</sup>

The parallel between Schmitt’s and Shklovsky’s thought can be extended even further. Though the fields of their respective endeavors were quite different, they managed, curiously enough, to cross-pollinate them, to aestheticize the political and to politicize the aesthetic. Let me explain. The implicit target of the German jurist’s decisionism, as Richard Wolin has argued persuasively, was the “bureaucratic class,” whose “mode of functioning [...] is based on rules and procedures that are fixed, preestablished, and calculable [...] the very embodiment of *bourgeois normalcy*.”<sup>67</sup> Yet in order to subvert the rational predictability underpinning the bureaucratic *modus operandi*, some commentators concur, Schmitt cast the decision-making process in artistic terms. According to Peter Bürger’s assessment, which Wolin invokes, Schmitt rooted politics in aesthetics. “The aesthetic desire for the exception going beyond the orderly categories of understanding, serves as the ground for the theory whose aim is to impact reality. In light of this transference it only follows that Schmitt can identify the aesthetic categories of the ‘new and strange’ with the decision that he conceived, following the model of the artistic genius’ deed, as an absolute act.”<sup>68</sup>

For Shklovsky, “the embodiment of bourgeois normalcy” was “*byt*.” This locution has two intriguing features. Not only does it defy any direct translation (it is usually

<sup>66</sup> Shklovsky, “Voskreshenie slova,” p. 40.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Wolin, “Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror,” *Political Theory* 20 (1992), no. 3, pp. 424–447, here 425.

<sup>68</sup> Peter Bürger, “Carl Schmitt oder die Fundierung der Politik auf Ästhetik,” in Christa Bürger (ed.), *Zerstörung, Rettung des Mythos durch Licht* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 170–175, here 174. In this context I should probably mention that one of Schmitt’s earliest publications was a lengthy analysis of Däubler’s Expressionist poem “Nordlicht” (Carl Schmitt, *Theodor Däublers “Nordlicht”: Drei Studien über die Elemente, den Geist und die Aktualität des Werkes* [München: Georg Müller, 1916]).

lame paraphrased as “the quotidian,” or “everyday life”) but, furthermore, it lacks any precise definition, and the Formalists themselves diverged on its use.<sup>69</sup> For my purpose, its metaphorical circumscription suggested by Roman Jakobson in his 1931 eulogy to Mayakovsky should suffice. According to Jakobson, *byt* “is the tendency, contrary to the creative impulse toward the transformed future, to stabilize an immutable present, covering it over by a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its dense, hardened mold.”<sup>70</sup> It is precisely through artistic “defamiliarization” that “the power of real life,” to recycle for the last time Schmitt’s catchy locution, “breaks through the crust of mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.”

But how did Shklovsky politicize aesthetics, as I claimed above? Where did he draw the line between friends and enemies, the *sine qua non* of the political according to Schmitt? *Byt*, for Shklovsky, it is necessary to point out, did not include just physical reality which we take for granted and no longer pay any attention to, but also older artistic forms automatized due to their overuse and audiences’ overexposure to them. This is true, in particular, of the classics “covered by the glassy armor of familiarity” which “we remember [...] only too well [...] and no longer perceive.”<sup>71</sup> Yet, if the artistic output of the grandfathers made the grandchildren yawn, the works of their fathers drove them to rebellion. Russian letters can be revived, Shklovsky and his cohorts declared, if and only if Futurist poetics replaces the obsolete Symbolist canon. A review of Mayakovsky’s 1915 book *A Cloud in Trousers* provided Shklovsky with a convenient platform for settling the score. “The previous Russian literature” – he did not mince his words – was “the literature of impotent people” who “did not reject anything, did not dare to destroy anything because they did not realize that the arts of different epochs contradict and negate each other.” The advent of Futurism, he asserted, has brought an end to the aesthetic liberalism of the Symbolist generation: “A great era, it seems, is arriving. A new beauty is being born [...] We are standing at your gate,” he avowed, poking his fingers into the elders’ eyes, “and yell, ‘we’ll destroy, we’ll destroy.’”<sup>72</sup>

The Futurist poet is similar to the Schmittian sovereign, to push my analogy yet a notch up, insofar as it “is he who decides on the exception.”<sup>73</sup> Concerned about his nation’s cognitive competency,<sup>74</sup> which he considers acutely impaired by the mechanical rep-

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Sergei Zenkin, “Otkrytie ‘byta’ russkimi formalistami,” in Liubov N. Kiseleva, et al. (eds.), *Lotmanovskii sbornik*, vol. 3 (Moscow: OGI, 2004), pp. 806–821.

<sup>70</sup> Roman Jakobson, “O pokolenii rastrativshem svoikh poëtov,” in Roman Jakobson and D. S. Mirsky (eds.), *Smert’ Vladimira Maiakovskogo* (Berlin: Petropolis, 1931), pp. 7–45, here 13.

<sup>71</sup> Shklovsky, “Voskreshenie slova,” p. 38.

<sup>72</sup> Shklovsky, “Vyshla kniga Maiakovskogo,” pp. 41–42, 45.

<sup>73</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> In his Mayakovsky review, Shklovsky suggests that the difference between the countries engaged in World War I is the function of their respective poetic sensibilities: “The War in our time of dead art bypasses consciousness, which explains its cruelty, greater than the cruelty of the religious



etition of artistic forms, he arbitrarily suspends the rules of the game and establishes a new set of poetic norms capable of defamiliarizing *byt* again. And these are affirmed, at least by Shklovsky, as more legitimate than the Symbolist rules because their authority is supposedly supra-aesthetic: it lies in universal linguistic and psychological laws.<sup>75</sup> All considered, the Futurist revolution is not unlike the political *coup d'état*. It destroys art in order to save it.

But it is not just the transition from Symbolism to Futurism that can be characterized this way. According to Shklovsky, all of literary history is a series of *coups d'état*. As he succinctly put it in his oft-quoted definition of artistic genealogy: "According to the law that was first established, as far as I know, by me, legacy is transmitted in the history of art not from father to son but from uncle to nephew."<sup>76</sup> Though his statement does not mention the political coup, it hints at it via the subtext which cannot be easily overlooked. Let me attend this point in some detail.

Shklovsky might be correct in staking out his nomothetic primacy insofar as the history of art is concerned. But he, and if not him some of his readers for sure, must have recognized that the same "law" was already advanced for general history by Karl Marx in the well-known first paragraph of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. History repeats itself, he reiterated with Hegel, but in a strange, roundabout manner, substituting a historical figure with its parody, or, more apropos, "the Nephew for the Uncle."<sup>77</sup> The said uncle was no one less than Napoléon Bonaparte, and the nephew, Louis-Napoléon, who on December 10, 1848 was elected President of France by popular vote in a landslide victory. The effect of this event, however, as Karl Marx predicted in *The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850*, flouted what it initially promised. Instead of the rise of republicanism, it marked the beginning of the restoration of the monarchy. "The first day of the realization of the constitution was the last day of the rule of the Constituent Assembly.

wars. Germany did not have Futurism, but Russia, Italy, France, and England did." (Shklovsky, "Vyshla kniga Maiakovskogo," p. 43.)

<sup>75</sup> Commenting on the trans-rational language of the Russian Futurists (*zaum'*), Shklovsky asks a leading question: "Is this method of expressing one's emotions particular only to this bunch of people, or is this a general linguistic phenomenon that has not yet been recognized." (Shklovsky, "O poëzii," p. 46.) And in his polemic with Spencer, he writes: "The law of economizing the creative forces belongs to the group of laws accepted by all." This idea, Shklovsky continues, "might be correct if applied to a particular case of language [...] practical language." But it would be wrong to extend it to poetic language as well. In this functional dialect, "we should speak about the laws of expenditure and economy not on the basis of analogy with the prosaic [language] but on the basis of its own laws." (Shklovsky, "Iskusstvo kak priëm," p. 61–62.)

<sup>76</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, *Literatura i kinematograf* (Berlin: Russkoe univerzālnoe izdatel'stvo, 1923), p. 27.

<sup>77</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), p. 15.



In the abyss of the ballot box lay its sentence of death. It sought the ‘son of his mother’ and found the ‘nephew of his uncle.’”<sup>78</sup>

But why does Marx, somewhat incongruently, speak of Louis-Napoléon’s mother rather than of his male progenitor? His cryptic remark, as sly references to someone’s mother often are, is a double entendre whose indelicate meaning is quite patent. It harkens back to a popular innuendo of the time insinuating that “Napoléon le Petit” (Victor Hugo’s moniker for Louis) was not sired by his eponymous father – brother of Napoleon I – but by a Dutch admiral VerHuell and, therefore, not kin to the House of Bonaparte at all. Marx makes this clear toward the end of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* when he jokes that “a man named Napoléon [...] bears the name of Napoleon [only] in consequence of the *Code Napoléon* which lays down that *la recherché de la paternité est interdite*.”<sup>79</sup> Whether true or not, the imperial mantle of his putative uncle proved more attractive than the “matrilineal” presidency.<sup>80</sup> On the 47<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Napoleon I’s coronation – December 2, 1851 – Louis-Napoléon staged a coup to eventually become Napoléon III.

Let me now return in passing to the teaser of my paper, George Lukács. I invested some energy into illustrating that his revolutionary project of a radical reconstruction of human consciousness fully depended on a Tertullian-like faith that the proletariat, after eliminating the bourgeoisie, would willingly cancel itself out of existence to make possible a society without rulers and ruled. Lukács himself calls this a “utopian postulate of the Marxist philosophy of history: the ethical prescription for the coming world order.”<sup>81</sup> He avoids calling such a transformative self-sacrifice a miracle. But this concept is a key term in the vocabulary of Schmitt. Schmitt’s actual religious denomination seems a matter of dispute.<sup>82</sup> Regardless, the metaphysical underpinnings of his theorizing are hard to

<sup>78</sup> Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), pp. 70–71.

<sup>79</sup> Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 124.

<sup>80</sup> Marx, it should be observed, employed the maternal lineage only metaphorically in the sense that “the Constitutive Assembly was the mother of the constitution and the constitution was the mother of the President.” This was the link tying Louis-Napoléon to “his republican legal title” (Marx, *The Class Struggles*, p. 81).

<sup>81</sup> Lukács, “Bolshevism as an Ethical Problem,” p. 217.

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, Robert Howse, “From Legitimacy to Dictatorship – and Back Again: Leo Strauss’s Critique of the Anti-Liberalism of Carl Schmitt,” in David Dyzenhaus (ed.), *Law as Politics: Carl Schmitt’s Critique of Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 56–91, here 63–65. Though usually considered a Catholic, in making his personal choices, Heinrich Meier informs us, such as his faithful decision “to serve the ‘total Führer-State’ [...] in the spring of 1933,” Schmitt “behaved more ‘like a Protestant’ [...] referring solely to his own faith or the sovereign authority” rather “than satisfying the traditional rules of the Institution of Rome with which he identified himself.” (Heinrich Meier, *The Lessons of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy*, trans. Marcus Brainard [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011], p. 146.)

overlook.<sup>83</sup> The opening of the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of his *Political Theology* makes this obvious: "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development [...] but also because of their systematic structure." And, explaining the book's title, he continues: "The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology."<sup>84</sup> For precisely like God through the miracle – as something totally defying our worldly expectations – reveals to us his/her being, an "omnipotent lawgiver" deciding on the exception confirms the existence of the rule.

But how does Shklovsky, an author who in his writings evinces virtually no interest in matters of faith, fit in the picture? Without subscribing to the view that his "conception of literature [...] borders on the mystical,"<sup>85</sup> one can clearly see that as a theoretician and as a writer he was "very fond of religious allusions"<sup>86</sup> in general and of Biblical miracles in particular.<sup>87</sup> Let me illustrate Shklovsky's creative appropriation of the latter topos in his early writings. The Mayakovsky review contains an altogether inconspicuous reference to the "Siloam pool" – the place where Jesus restored sight to a blind man: "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam," Christ bade the invalid. "He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing."<sup>88</sup> At first glance one might be inclined to read this allusion in terms of the polar opposition between "recognizing" and "seeing" mentioned above, in which Shklovsky couched the difference between non-art and art.

The wrong pool and the wrong miracle – as is revealed by a closer look at the actual wording and at the context in which the Biblical allusion is employed. In fact, Shklovsky was referring to Christ's curing of a lame man at the pool of Bethesda. Deriding the warmed-over flavor of Symbolist poetic imagery, Shklovsky quotes the New Testament to drive the point home. "The images were reestablished for the hundredth, the thousandth time, but only the first one entering the troubled water of Siloam [sic!] pool was healed."<sup>89</sup>

<sup>83</sup> This, it must be emphasized, Schmitt considered a common denominator of all human endeavors. "The thought and feeling of every person always retain a certain metaphysical character," he argued. "Metaphysics is something that is unavoidable [...] we cannot escape it by relinquishing our awareness of it." (Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986], p. 17.)

<sup>84</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 36.

<sup>85</sup> Douglas Robinson, *Estrangement and Somatics in Literature: Tolstoy, Shklovsky, Brecht* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2008), p. 112.

<sup>86</sup> Alexei Bogdanov, "Ostranenie, Kenosis, and Dialogue: The Metaphysics of Formalism according to Shklovsky," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 49 (2005), no. 1, pp. 48–62, here 50.

<sup>87</sup> If we take seriously Shklovsky's reference to the Bible as that "fat book that my father read from right to left, my mother from left to right, and I don't read whatsoever" (Viktor Shklovsky, "Pis'mo k Romanu Iakobsonu," *Veshch': Mezhdunarodnoe obozrenie sovremennogo iskusstva* 1-2 (1922), p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> John 9:2–7.

<sup>89</sup> Shklovsky, "Vyshla kniga Maiakovskogo," p. 42.

The described event concerns a cripple who wished to exploit the salubrious power of the Bethesda pool after an angel “troubled [its] water” for “whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.” Alas, due to his handicap he was always too slow and others beat him to it. But “Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk,”<sup>90</sup> which, needless to say, fixed the disability. One could speculate whether Shklovsky’s Biblical misprision was intended to defamiliarize the venerable text or whether it was simply a lapse in memory. In any case, it illustrates how well he was acquainted with Christ’s glorious deeds regardless of the haphazard way he might have acquired this knowledge.

This brings me to the foremost Biblical miracle to which alludes the very heading of Shklovsky’s programmatic presentation – *The Resurrection of the Word*.<sup>91</sup> “The analogy with the resurrection of Christ,” it has already been noted, “(the Word that became flesh and died) is quite clear.”<sup>92</sup> But this is not the only possible scriptural reading of a highly evocative manifesto. Jesus’s command to the lame man at the Bethesda pool, mentioned above, brings to mind another of the imperatives with a similarly supernatural perlocutionary effect, “Maid, arise,”<sup>93</sup> addressed to a deceased daughter of Rabbi Jairus. In other words, Jesus was not the only one resuscitated in the Holy Writ. There are a few others whom he himself brought back to life. From this angle, Shklovsky’s passionate account of the dead and resurrected word adapts the story about Lazarus of Bethany featuring the Futurist poet *in figura Christi* with the violation of customary linguistic norms as the source of his “divine” power.<sup>94</sup> “I do not believe in miracles,” demurred Shklovsky

<sup>90</sup> John 5: 4–8.

<sup>91</sup> This was originally a speech, “The Place of Futurism in the History of Language,” that Shklovsky delivered in 1913 at the bohemian cabaret “Stray Dog.” When subsequently published as a small booklet under the said title, he recollected some fifteen years later, the journal notices were posted in the section on religion. With a nod and a wink, he attributed this confusion to the fact “that the printer set the title in a antiquated font” (Viktor Shklovsky, *Gamburgskii schët* [Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo pisatelei, 1928], p. 107).

<sup>92</sup> Bogdanov, “Ostranenie, Kenosis, and Dialogue,” p. 50.

<sup>93</sup> Luke 8:54.

<sup>94</sup> It might be added that, for the young Shklovsky, the affinity between literature and religion had also its linguistic aspect. “The ‘capricious’ and ‘derivative’ words of the Futurists,” he explained in his 1913 speech, are not unlike “the religious poetry of almost all ages written in such a semi-comprehensive language. The Church Slavonic, Latin, Sumerian.” (Shklovsky, “Voskreshenie slova,” pp. 40–41.) Something similar can also be noted about the Futurist trans-rational language [*zaum'*] “that only rarely manifests itself in its pure form. But there are some exceptions” Shklovsky hastened to add. One of them “is the trans-rational language of mystical sectarians. What facilitated this was the fact that the sectarians identified [it] with glossolalia – the gift to speak in tongues – that they received, according to the *Acts of Apostles*, on the Pentecost. Thanks to this they were not ashamed of the trans-rational language but took a pride in it and even recorded its samples.” (Shklovsky, “O poëzii,” pp. 54–55.)

(donning for the occasion the hat of a critic) with regard to Tatlin's counter-reliefs, which were supposed to create a new palpable world, "that is why I am not an artist."<sup>95</sup> But if he were, and Shklovsky's belletristic output might suggest as much, would he have a choice?

Why, then, was Shklovsky's attitude toward miracles so ambiguous? For which reason did he, on the one hand, seem ready to invoke them when convenient while, on the other hand, he refused to believe in them? A closer look at this category is a must. So, what is a miracle? For the sake of efficacy, I will defer to David Hume's well-known definition from his diatribe refuting the very possibility of miracles.<sup>96</sup> "A miracle," the Scottish skeptic railed against this idea, "is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."<sup>97</sup>

Whence, the first caveat: both Shklovsky's Futurist poet forging *zaum'* and, by extension, Schmitt's sovereign declaring a state of emergency, violate not natural laws but only much softer social norms – artistic or legal – and, therefore, they do not perform miracles in the Humean sense of this word. Secondly, to cast "defamiliarization" in terms of a miraculous resurrection seems on Shklovsky's part more a figure of speech than a factual statement. And even the religiously minded Schmitt calls the exception in jurisprudence not a theological miracle *per se* but only its analogy. Finally, as a speech genre, *The Resurrection of the Word* hardly qualifies as an empirical hypothesis about the nature of art. Unabashedly, it is a partisan statement, an eristic manifesto of a new poetics striving to sway the audience to radically shift its aesthetic preferences. Likewise, Schmitt's style, as already noted, is "an unremitting oscillation between [...] the academic and the prophetic, the analytical and the mythical."<sup>98</sup> In heated polemics with the positivistic-inclined adversaries, the otherworldly connotations of the word miracle, one should recognize, serve to add insult to injury.

Still, despite all of this, the significance of miracle for Shklovsky's and Schmitt's theorizing can be dismissed all too easily. For the target of their passionate assault was precisely what, for Hume, disproved the existence of miracles – "a firm and unalterable experience."<sup>99</sup> It was not the entrenched feeling of self-perpetuating regularity that, in their respective opinions, made art artistic, and law legal, but its exact opposite: not the substantiation of the expected but the subversion of all usual expectations. So, even if one agrees with Hume that in a world governed by the laws of nature miracles cannot occur, this need not be necessarily true in the domains predicated on the unpredicta-

<sup>95</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, *Khod konia: Sbornik statei* (Moscow: Gelikon, 1923), p. 107.

<sup>96</sup> For a thoroughgoing critique of Hume's argument against miracles, see, for example, John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>97</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing, 1900), p. 120.

<sup>98</sup> Holmes, *The Anatomy*, p. 39.

<sup>99</sup> Hume, *An Enquiry*, p. 120.

ble. But are natural laws, permit me to ask, as incompatible with the miracle as Hume would like us to believe? To unpack this question, let me add the fourth ingredient to my comparative enchilada – an Austrian philosopher of science, Karl Popper.

At first glance, I must admit, my involving Popper in an essay dealing with Shklovsky and Schmitt does look rather offbeat. Was not the Viennese critical rationalist, in contrast to the firebrands like the aforesaid duo, a vociferous proponent of liberalism? And did he not believe in the incremental growth of human knowledge, eschewing the catastrophic vision of history (embraced by Shklovsky and Schmitt) that conceived of change in terms of rupture and of diachrony as discontinuity? Last but not least, was Popper not concerned primarily with the empirical sciences whose results are subjected to rigorous testing? Yet all these disparities notwithstanding, Popper's thought did converge with Shklovsky's and Schmitt's on one important point. Similar to them, the Austrian philosopher was a contrarian in his own discipline who, against the headwind of positivism, considered the repetition of experience not the engine of but a hindrance to knowledge gathering. And even though his explanation of how scientific discovery comes about does not directly involve the notion of miracle, by appointing exception as the defining moment in this process he willy-nilly acceded to the miracle as the *sine qua non* of science. Let me elaborate.

The epistemologist Popper, in Shklovsky- and Schmitt-like fashion, was preoccupied with clearly delimiting his field of inquiry. He saw this task in the early thirties as follows: "The theory of knowledge must establish a strict and universally applicable criterion that allows us to distinguish between the statements of the empirical sciences and metaphysical assertions ('criterion of demarcation')." And, he continued, "the *problem of demarcation* [...] can rightly be called [one] of the *two fundamental problems of the theory of knowledge*."<sup>100</sup> I'll return to the other fundamental problem soon; but, before that, let me point out first that Popper's logic is disjunctive. A statement cannot be a bit scientific, like a woman cannot be a bit pregnant. What is the strict and absolute criterion that separates pseudo-science from genuine science? To explain it, I must say a few words about the intellectual context that served as the backdrop for the development of Popper's ideas.

In his autobiographical recollection, Popper characterized his early philosophical quest as a critical discussion with "the Machian positivists and the Wittgensteinians of the Vienna Circle."<sup>101</sup> He applauded their radical empiricism but considered the epistemological perspective of positivism in general to be distorted by a specific bias. This bias constituted the second fundamental problem of the theory of knowledge mentioned above: that of induction. In my cameo presentation, I cannot do full justice to Popper's multifaceted critique of this method that proceeds from the particular to the universal.

<sup>100</sup> Karl Popper, *The Two Fundamental Problems of the Theory of Knowledge*, trans. Andreas Pickel (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 4.

<sup>101</sup> Karl Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 80.

For my comparison, it is important to point out that Popper saw “all theories of induction” based on one peculiar doctrine which he calls, “*the doctrine of the primacy of repetitions*.”<sup>102</sup> Unlike Shklovsky or Schmitt, Popper differentiated between the “logical” and “psychological” variants of this doctrine: the first furnishing “a kind of *justification* for the acceptance of a universal law” and the second “inducing and arousing [...] expectations and beliefs in us.”<sup>103</sup> But like them, he regarded repetition as unproductive and impoverishing. It cannot, Popper stipulated in the late 1920s, “produce something new; on the contrary, repetition can only make something *disappear* (speeding up the process); habit and practice only *eliminate* the detours of the reaction process by streamlining it. Thus, nothing comes into being through repetition. The increasing rapidity of a reaction should not be mistaken for its gradual re-creation (*natura facit saltus*).”<sup>104</sup>

Some of Popper’s objections to repetition-based induction might sound familiar. His observation that scientists are not just passive recorders of some pre-existent recurrences unfolding in front of them but active participants imposing – from a singular point of view – patterns upon the heterogeneous phenomena under investigation<sup>105</sup> brings to mind the Weberian critique of Kelsen’s “pure theory of law” that equates the judge to “an automatic statute-dispensing machine.”<sup>106</sup> Others continue venerable philosophical arguments, like Hume’s logical analyses of induction which demonstrates that inductive proof is either no proof at all or that it leads to infinite regress.<sup>107</sup>

Popper’s objective, though, is not merely to discredit the view, dating back to Bacon and Newton, that induction is the only logic proper to scientific discovery. He strives to provide an alternative theory of knowledge that would avoid the pitfalls of bottom-up generalization by proceeding from strictly deductivist premises. Viewed this way, scientific praxis is a top-down process that does not begin with factual observations but with advancing more or less conjectural hypotheses. How can general statements about reality, an inductivist might wonder, generated in such a contingent manner, ever be veridical? And herein lies the crux of Popper’s argument. It cannot; and, moreover, this does not matter much. What separates science from metaphysics, he opines, is not that the former, in contrast to the latter, establishes eternal certitudes but that, instead, aware of its own fallibility, science capitalizes on mistakes which it ineluctably makes. The contribution of the trial-and-error method to the growth of our knowledge cannot, in Popper’s view, be overstated. For if no repetition of an experiment – its frequency notwithstanding – can verify the universal law, because there is no logical necessity that the next time

<sup>102</sup> Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005), p. 440.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Popper, *The Two Fundamental Problems*, p. 30.

<sup>105</sup> Popper, *The Logic*, pp. 440–442.

<sup>106</sup> Weber, *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik*, p. 507.

<sup>107</sup> Popper, *The Two Fundamental Problems*, p. 35–44.

the results will be the same, a single negative upshot, the actual counter-instance, will invalidate it for good. Thus, the distinctive feature of “empirical scientific statements or systems of statements” according to Popper, is the “principle of falsifiability,”<sup>108</sup> the fact that such hypotheses can be empirically refuted.

My shorthand rendition of Popper’s philosophy of science distilled from his earliest writings dating back to the 1920s and 30s, however, was not intended just to demonstrate the curious similarity between his way of thinking and those of Shklovsky and Schmitt. I initiated it to illustrate that the notion of miracle they both employed need not to be deemed as metaphysical as it might have initially seemed. For once “a firm and unalterable experience” is rendered incapable of establishing the laws of nature, the miracle gets involved, if only implicitly, to make such laws possible. To wit: from the beginning of his career Popper steadfastly maintained the difference between “singular empirical statements,” on the one hand, and “natural laws, theories and universal empirical statements,” on the other hand. The latter “constitute the basis of deduction of predictions, that is, for deduction of singular empirical statements, the truth or falsity of which can be decided by experience.”<sup>109</sup>

Let me exemplify: there is a law of gravity formulated theoretically by Newton on the basis of which I can advance a singular empirical statement foretelling that if I let go of the glasses I hold in front of me, they will fall. And I can easily verify this mundane hypothesis. In contrast to this, natural laws and theories “possess those logical properties [...] that ‘deductive bases’ must have if they cannot be tested directly, but only indirectly through their consequences. They are empirically falsifiable, but not verifiable. While they cannot be justified [...] they can always [...] be conclusively refuted by experience.”<sup>110</sup> Thus, given the “principle of falsifiability” as the criterion of all empirical scientific statements, for Newton’s theory to attain this status there must be a chance, if ever so slight, that when I open my hand the glasses might hover in front of me or even fly upward. But if I ever encounter such a counterfactual event, my surprise would be unbearable because, hallelujah, I would be witnessing a wonder. Does this not imply, allow me to conclude with a query, that science’s zetetic quest for knowledge, according to Popper, is founded on the possibility of miracles?

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*





# INTERVIEW



# POST-FASCISM IS NO LONGER A DANGER. IT IS A REALITY

Interview with G. M. Tamás,  
by Lukáš Matoška\*

*G. M. Tamás, once known as a left-libertarian dissident and later as a liberal member of the Hungarian parliament, has become one of post-Communist Europe's most important Marxist intellectuals. In his writing on the history of the socialist movement, the character of Communist-led states, and the nature of the "transition" from state capitalism to free-market capitalism, he highlights the deep historical and structural roots of the current morass in which Central Europe, and much of the rest of the world, finds itself. In this interview he explains and further develops his diagnosis of the present, setting out from his well-known notion of "post-fascism."*

\* This interview took place in Budapest in May 2015. It was transcribed, edited, and completed in autumn 2015; final minor edits have been made before publication.

Some questions in this interview emerged from endless debates with my friend Ondřej Lánský. I would like to thank him for that. (Note L.M.)

Fifteen years ago you published the essay, “On Post-Fascism,” in which you described “a cluster of policies, practices, routines, and ideologies” that reverses “the Enlightenment tendency to assimilate citizenship to the human condition.”<sup>1</sup> How do you judge your hypotheses today? Were you right or far too pessimistic?

Every attempt at social theory always needs corrections and expansions. But on the whole it has been proved more or less correct. Elements of post-fascism were apparent even then. Now you can see how elements of civic discrimination have become a part of politics everywhere. In that essay, I wrote mainly about ethnic groups; “the migrant problem” was not so serious at that time, but look at what we have today. I described how citizenship, from being the universal condition of humankind – which the French revolution was aiming at in some respects – is becoming a privilege of the citizens of rich, stable, and peaceful states. Now, the civic condition is becoming a privilege in general.

Firstly, there are non-citizens who have no rights. Hundreds of millions of people are not citizens of a proper state; they have no rights, no obligations, no law, no culture, no school, no power. Secondly, and not completely independent of the first, there is a further deterioration of citizenship as such. The proportion in which people participate in the handling of public affairs, even in so-called democratic countries, is ever smaller. Political passivity is on the increase, and this passivity is imposed by the manner of governance which is dominant in most polities: civic participation is on the wane. It is not only an economic crisis that we are facing, but also a crisis of politics. Versions of inequality – economic, social, cultural, and educational – are now synthesized by political inequality, by ever smaller elites steering public affairs, by the low quality of public debate, and by the demise of public media (compare the British Tories’ attack on the BBC and the occupation of Hungarian media by the right-wing régime).

The deterioration of citizenship offers a gateway to the phenomenon of post-fascism as civic and political inequality is being taken more and more for granted by public opinion. This is both a tragedy and a challenge because I am convinced that the re-creation of democratic citizenship is not possible on the basis on which it has rested in the West since 1945 and in Eastern Europe since 1989. This cycle is about to end. The old democratic, liberal, constitutional solutions are not sufficient since they weren’t able to prevent this deterioration. Therefore, there will probably be a new cycle of struggles that will aim at the reconstruction of political participation and at a new understanding of democracy. How long this will last and how strong the democratic side in this struggle will be, I don’t know.

You have mentioned the crisis of politics. But is it really a crisis of politics that we are facing today? Of course, it depends on your notion of politics. But it seems to me that at

<sup>1</sup> G. M. Tamás, “On Post-Fascism,” *Boston Review* 25 (Summer 2000) (online at <http://new.bostonreview.net/BR25.3/tamas.html> [accessed May 20, 2017]).

the least global capitalist governance is quite strong, or probably even stronger, than it was before the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008...

I think there is a difference between politics and governance. Of course, economic and social affairs are run pretty smoothly, especially in the wealthy states. However, in the poor states this is not the case. Look at the Balkans, look at Hungary: a great deal of dissatisfaction is simmering under the surface. But I don't think even bourgeois democracy can survive with this abysmal level of participation and identification. Yes, indeed, we do have some sort of elitist and oligarchic rule in most of these places. There are local differences, but we don't need to go into that – the essence is the same. As long as unemployment is not too high and wages are not dropping very sharply, people might tolerate this decline.

The old ideological forms that have fueled the resistance movements of one kind or another seem to be dead. There is no great threat to the rulers. But this kind of oligarchic system, in which only a very small and distant group of administrators, professional politicians, and lawyers (and transnational companies, local oligarchs, and business managers and international bureaucrats) are governing, cannot be stable. That means that societies as societies are not operating properly. There is no real support for the régime – people merely tolerate it. This bond – even according to traditional, bourgeois democratic standards – is extremely superficial, very unpopular, and very distant. And every time that the problem surfaces you can see that people's actions are non-political. Look at how “the immigrant problem” is dealt with, this is not something that a democratic politics that is barely present can resolve: politicians are pursuing their exclusionary politics, while the democratic majority is largely silent. There is no debate, there is no resistance, there is no moral outrage, and people just hope that our governments and the European Union will solve it somehow. Such a feeling that our own affairs are not our affairs is what I call a political crisis.

This means that the ruling capitalist cliques and the political elites can drive these countries anywhere. For example, think of the two danger spots for war in our neighbourhood – one in the Ukraine, another in the Middle East. For the first time in modern history there are no peace movements during such conflicts, nobody is really saying “stop it,” “stop killing people for no reason whatsoever.” But there is no enthusiasm for the war either. There is nothing, only a truly serious alienation of the public from public affairs. Since these bourgeois régimes that we live under are still supposed to have some degree of public participation – but in reality they don't have any – I wouldn't consider them extremely stable in spite of appearances to the contrary.

I think there is a tendency among contemporary intellectuals to redeem the idea of politics. For example, Jacques Rancière argues in favour of distinguishing “politics” from “the police.” Isn't he doing so in order to support a thesis – to put it very simply – that politics is actually much more than what we are living in? But is such a differentiation –

or a similar one – plausible? I mean, is or was there any such thing as politics in a sense that is radically different from what we are used to calling politics?

What I said was quite similar to Rancière's ideas. What I was saying was kept intentionally within the framework of bourgeois democracy that, alas, I do not support. Of course, these states had faced the same problem before the First World War. At that time there were even more oligarchic systems. Think of Austria-Hungary – a very narrow layer of administrators, priests, military officers, grand financiers, and the court dominated a huge country in which people didn't even know what the hell was happening in Vienna, in Prague, in Budapest, or in Zagreb. Our age is increasingly similar to those times, and what followed those times back then was the First World War. Unlike before the Second World War, when people knew that it was coming, the First World War came after a long period of peace, everybody was pretty much surprised that it had happened. It could have been avoided, but there was nobody to control or stop those totally irresponsible, myopic élites. Now we are in a similar position. Stability is but a dream.

But even if this world would be more stable, if there would be more popular participation, it still wouldn't save us from what I have called post-fascism, and for a very simple reason. And this is what I might add to the old essay. Back then, I didn't stress that historical fascism came into being not so much in order to fight liberal democracy, as it is – in a completely baseless, mythical manner – described nowadays, but in order to fight communism. In 1929–1933 the Soviet Union was seen as the only country unaffected by the crisis, so the challenge of communism seemed extraordinary. The very dubious German historian Ernst Nolte had a point when he said that National Socialism was a preventive counter-revolution of sorts. He was inspired by ultra-left groups of the twenties and thirties. There were a number of people who saw it that way, and I think they were right. All this anti-capitalist dynamic was embraced by Nazism to a certain extent – it had to mobilize and then demobilize the society in order to save capitalism from the challenge of communism. We forget that a similar phenomenon – saving the bourgeois society by autocratic measures of the bourgeois state – took place in all Western countries, although it didn't always succeed. I don't like it when people compare Roosevelt's New Deal to, say, the policies of Salazar, but there are similarities.

In the present time we don't have an organized international workers' movement. Capitalist society before 1989 always lived in a tension between the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and the challenge of the counter-power, counter-culture, adversary ideology, which were Marxism and other radical left ideologies, on the other. That was a valid adversary or challenger which influenced hundreds of millions of people, tens of millions of whom were organized in very militant and well-organized, often armed (think of the *Schutzbund* or of the *Rotfront*) groups. Now, whatever we might think of the Soviet Union and of real socialism – I very much loathe it – it kept the continuity of the socialist challenge alive, and it represented the authority of a great military and political force. Something like that is totally lacking, we live in a world unified in most

respects, and there is no organized challenger, no real adversary culture. There are leftist intellectuals, for the first time without a movement and a committed, *engagé* audience. Adversary cultures of the past had a background of huge unions, parties, states, armies. It wasn't just a matter of theory or a matter of who is funnier or cleverer.

There is no need for the blundering and floundering bourgeois states to invoke extreme measures, they can domesticate the far-right challenge because – to call it by its proper name – there is no real class enemy, in the political sense, although the proletariat, of course, exists as the main structural element of capitalism, now as ever. This explains why we are talking about *post-fascism* – *the communist element* is missing. This is one of the reasons why people put up with the impoverishment of the political participation, why there isn't even any kind of reformism to speak of. In the Western countries there was some kind of social democratic reformism until Tony Blair – until that time people at least knew that if they want a little more equality, if they want free health care, and higher unemployment benefits, they have to vote for social democratic parties. Even in such a narrow and poor sense of political intervention as that was, there is nothing of the kind nowadays.

Rancière is quite right that social struggles and aspirations are politics and can be atomized and still remain politics. But we should not forget one thing – politics isn't a zero-sum game, but a battle in which people without capital or without a state are losing. That is the rule and there are no exceptions. The existence of historical socialism in whichever form – be it anarchist or social democrat or Bolshevik or Left Communist (say, situationist), including to a certain extent even dictatorial developments – at least presented a different model and simply kept alive a certain idea of an alternative. The ruling class is exploiting this situation – they would be fools if they didn't.

We should not forget that even bourgeois society has some objectives that aren't completely identical to the anonymous workings of a market that focuses on accumulation. The market doesn't have any substantive aim to achieve, but the bourgeois state does. For example, what is it exactly that the liberals call the "rule of law?" It means that uniform regulation is extended to virtually everybody, and people's relationship to the state is thoroughly legalised, "juridified," thoroughly transformed into legal frameworks. When dealing with a state whose laws you have to obey – or challenging it, actually – your option was to go to court. This is very conspicuous in English-speaking countries, where courts are the only places to challenge the decisions of the state, of the *élites*, or of the corporations. That's why earlier social movements were led towards couching everything in legal terms. It had created a great deal of political uniformity – you change laws, you pass laws, you challenge laws, you go to court, you resist within legal frameworks, influence legislation, and so on. So the gradual process of the legalisation of politics was turning everybody into a lawyer of sorts – that's a part of the liberal utopia according to which, in a well-ordered society, people will accept the supremacy of the lawmaker and of the judge, and the public itself will participate indirectly: that is, by accepting its own inferiority in the whole process of law that is only very slowly modified to fit people's

needs, aspirations, or life-styles. This utopia – it was a glory of American liberalism in the nineteen-seventies, when it took those fantastic proportions – is challenged worldwide by what I characterised before as the loss or limitation of citizenship, because these people won't strike, won't demonstrate, won't join parties, and won't go to the court either. Mass political activity is no longer inspired by possibilities or hopes of new legislation.

What was the aim of the liberals? Of course: peace, stability, and all that, not to mention well-ordered procedures within which to change things. But also, at the same time, political subjects and subjectivities should become legal subjects and legal subjectivities. By this they were conforming to the basic, abstract nature of the capitalist society – a level of abstraction imposed by capital, in which there is no longer a direct personal relationship to the ruler like in an ancient society, but in which every relationship between people is increasingly abstract. Indeed, as an employee of a corporation you don't have to deal with an owner, a chief, or a boss; similarly, as a consumer, a participant of cultural events through the mediation of digital culture and as a political subject you are legally subject *to abstraction*. What are laws? Laws are texts, rigid texts, so citizens are supposed to become symbolically, as it were, subjects in the literal sense of the word, part of the text, people who confront the text, read the text, modify the text, and, up to a point, become the text. And it is a highly abstract idea of what politics and citizenship mean. Well, this utopia has failed. But this was an intrinsic, inherent objective of bourgeois democracy, which has now failed dismally.

To offer people only two courses of political action, law on the one hand and war on the other, allegedly in order to meet the needs of the people, is simply not enough. It exaggerates or deepens the alienated character of capitalist society. People won't put up with it, and when they don't put up with it but don't choose revolution various social pathologies appear. What has happened is that although people are not content with this legalistic form of social participation and social change, they still accept a variant of the basic bourgeois idea of uniformity and abstraction. This is why they don't support heterogeneity, and what indeed isn't procedural in the dominant bourgeois forms of social and collective action appears to the population of the bourgeois states as an irrational intrusion and eruption of the foreign, of the alien, of the irregular, of the threatening, of the "abnormal," of the immoral, of the seditious. At certain times, this was captured in the historical figure of the Jew, and it is given other forms: the immigrant, the Muslim, the Jihadi, or, yet again, the communist – but this time only as a *revenant*, because true communists are, well, a spectre (or, if not, like the Bohemian-Moravian variety, a sad joke).

It is pathological in the sense that people are attacking exactly what could save them; I mean, heterogeneity could have saved them from the uniform domination of capital and law, of the capitalist state. Similarly to fascism, which was people's action against themselves. Yet these new pathologies cannot be characterised as fascism, because they aren't a political tendency or a movement. They are merely a term for certain types of political feelings and actions. People are turning pathologically against their own best interests that they cannot conceive of due to the absence of a critical culture. Such a critical



culture doesn't exist (in spite of all our writings and speeches) as it has only ever existed with the support of a counter-power, as historical challenges to the existing order. So you can't blame people since the conceptual tools are simply not at hand. It is rather telling how the radical Left is turning paranoid: leftists are often discovering the substance behind the façade, and this is transmogrified into "secrets," hence the monomaniacal preoccupation with the intelligence services and hidden powers and "deep states." It's as if the machinations of elite groups, which are nothing new to the world, would somehow unveil the mystery of contemporary society; as though capitalism were an obscure conspiracy, although it is obvious enough. All of this is a reaction to the vanishing of revolutionary substance, which is blamed on occult powers and incomprehensible plots.

You mentioned that the so-called state socialist regimes, unjust as they were, functioned as a kind of support – at least in the ideological sense – for counter-power or counter-culture. This reminds me of Fredric Jameson's notion of "liberated territory." Slavoj Žižek is following this in his *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* He's theorizing that even under the worst period of Stalinism the idea of socialism was present, for example, in the cultural production of the state...

Lukács said that Solzhenitsyn was the best socialist realist, in *Ivan Denisovich*, and he didn't mean it ironically. As I said in my essay "Back to Banality" and elsewhere, it's very conspicuous that the Soviet-type societies had indeed operated a transvaluation of values by putting physical work, hence the body, at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of values. This hasn't happened in any other society, it was an absolute historical exception in which not the spirit – be it religious, royal, philosophical, legal, or state *raison* – but the people who have to do manual work were put symbolically at the helm of social hierarchy. It wasn't merely glorifying the proletarian and the peasant, but, very interestingly, also glorifying the housewife. Housework was always the most despised kind of work and it still is. In my own milieu, which is more or less leftist, people are surprised that, as I'm living with a little child, I do the housework even though I'm a man. Seeing a man doing woman's work? Of course, people say that it's nice, they don't laugh at me, they are simply surprised that a well-known intellectual should cook and wash the dishes. This old contempt for housework and for women is very deep-rooted. So this glorification of physical work and of the housewife, although it contained some conservative elements, meant a major change. It was a withdrawal of recognition from the traditional social hierarchies and "value systems."

Traces of this are still noticeable sometimes in Eastern Europe – in the general popular notion of the good and bad, not in the official ideology, although official ideology sometimes tends to use it. For example, politicians are praising hard work when they want to discard unemployment benefits and lower pensions. Apart from that it is very interesting that the figures of the plebeian man and woman were symbolically at the "top" of society, because a critical attitude towards leaders was always possible, in spite

of totalitarianism and dictatorship. There was no “divine right of kings,” no anointment. Party functionaries, the prime minister, or the general secretary of the party were not presented as the most valuable members of society, the worker in the factory or on the fields was – symbolically, not materially, but this was a very important ideological element of politics which had practical consequences in the form of unprecedented social mobility and a very high degree of economic and social equality (but, of course, this had nothing to do with a classless society). This is why whatever Stalin might have wanted, he couldn’t talk like Napoleon or Hitler, because the system was still notionally based on the dominance of the lower classes, which was extraordinary, an absolute exception in the history of received ideas (*idées reçues*, you know: popular, accepted ideas).

All these elements are lacking today; we are back to a very reactionary society, sometimes reactionary in quite an old-fashioned way, say, like in the 1820s – from before the 1848 revolutions – that kind of thinking in which people are openly flaunting their contempt for the masses, with even people who consider themselves liberal saying that “we need a rule of law and we need legal guarantees to defend us from the passions of the masses.” Passions of the masses were always supposed to be evil and dangerous. Look at the rhetoric of “dangerous classes” in the 1830s. This is counter-Enlightenment – a typical “reaction.” At that time, these sort of people were calling themselves, self-consciously and proudly, reactionary. I mean Joseph de Maistre, or Louis de Bonald, or, later, Hippolyte Taine, and then, quite idiotically, Gustave Le Bon. (Revived in a more intelligent manner by Elias Canetti’s book on the “masses.”) This is obvious today when, for instance, respectable people are talking about the extreme right and the dangers of neo-fascism, and they say these parties are using the prejudices of the people, exploiting the nihilistic and destructive energies of the plebs. (So racism would be the spontaneous ideology of the masses, would it not?) Such nonsense would have not been tolerated thirty years ago in polite company, people just wouldn’t dare talk like this, it would have been bad manners and intolerably hidebound prejudice. But it is no longer the case, bourgeois democracy is being undermined by reactionary attitudes because it has less and less popular legitimacy and this legitimacy is undermined by the élites, not by anything or anybody else. The élites, as always, are afraid of the masses – this is a classic right-wing attitude – and the predictable result is a total negation of any philosophical or moral or rational approach to questions of the common good.

We are facing old-style reactionary politics practiced by very narrow élites. I am saying this although such an outcome wasn’t our intention in 1989; people then – including myself – were to a certain extent naïve, although I was never as naïve and sentimental as, say, Václav Havel. But basically we all believed that the “velvet revolution” and the rest of it might actually signal an ennobling, or at least an overhaul, of liberal democracy which was even then rotting away in the West. We thought it was, metaphorically speaking, like new blood coursing through old veins or a blood transfusion. That was nonsense – nothing came of it. On the contrary, even the problems of Eastern Europe have inspired Western business and political élites to accept the very aloft, distant, and

contemptuous élitism of today. For example, when you see the attitude of the conservative press in Britain concerning Scotland, what do they say? “If these idiots want to go, let them go.” It means that any popular or, God forbid, “populist” desire is by definition vulgar, stupid, unworthy of discussion. I think that the political, intellectual, and imaginative energies of the prevailing order are spent. This is the tragic decay of capitalist democracy, but without a victorious challenger. That explains the force of the post-fascist element, not because there is a strong fascist movement (there is no such thing, at least not separate from the mainstream *fascisant* right), but because there is no resistance to it – that is, to the *passion of inequality*, prevalent in the media, both in their neoliberal and their romantic-conservative guises; in all this, good old class hatred and contemporary racism are nicely blended.

If this élitism, this contempt for the masses, and this totally irrational approach to political participation and collective action is dominant, then how can you create an egalitarian citizenship or anything that resembles egalitarian citizenship, or a constitutional system in which every citizen is a participant in the elaboration of the common good? Everybody would laugh if I told them that the latter is actually the aim of the state or that we’re living in constitutional states and therefore we are active agents in establishing the common good... Who would take it seriously? I wouldn’t. So this is a very sad state of affairs. I am not mourning bourgeois democracy, but I think that it was better than an utterly chaotic autocracy. And please remember the anti-political stance of dissidents such as Václav Havel and György Konrád, and also please observe the current NGO myth of “civil society” – attitudes of perfectly decent people that willy-nilly denigrate the dignity of collective action aiming at constitutional and legal changes, as if these were not within the purview of private citizens, as if “legitimate coercion” (the essence of the state) did not involve us, only the rulers that we distrust, disobey, and despise; what we can do is tend to the victims. But preventing their being victimised is, again, the business of government, unelected by an “us” who don’t give a toss about capital, law, and power. And what’s worse, this Epicurean withdrawal is perceived as resistance.

What established liberal democracy? Who managed to implement, for example, universal franchise universal franchise? Who established political equality for women? Who established more humane immigration rights? Who wanted equal wages for equal work and so on? Well, the workers’ movement – it would never have happened without it. It wasn’t capitalism’s own moral energies. There were counter-forces and the historical challengers and adversaries who succeeded in setting up class compromise through effective blackmail and contained violence. Bourgeois democracy is a result of class compromise. It wasn’t the work of the bourgeoisie. We forget what an important component of public life the workers’ movement was. What is a comparable force now? Of course, we have this micro-politics we’re all doing on behalf of women, of the homeless, of migrants, of the unemployed, of LGBTQ people. Maybe the only still effective emancipatory movement is feminism: it’s weaker than it used to be, but it’s still a force. But all of that is quite plainly unable to change the situation as a whole.

To sum up, I don't think that the problem of post-fascism can be solved by a bourgeois state; it cannot defend the population from the aforementioned elements because post-fascist elements are imposed by the bourgeois state or, if you wish, by liberal democracy. There is no total unity on this, there are variations, but I think that only a new adversary culture can launch the real resistance. You will ask me how... it's very difficult to say. But if we refer to historical precedents, then – if I'm not very much mistaken – there was the Enlightenment before the French revolution. So I think that the left-wing intelligentsia cannot be relieved of these duties. One is involuntarily reinventing the genres of the Enlightenment – in my case, political pamphlets and articles. So it may be a long period. Victorious social and political movements are unpredictable, and, meanwhile, we'll have to do our duty.

You bring a specific understanding of the Enlightenment to your essay "On Post-Fascism." I was wondering if your notion of the Enlightenment is not too straightforward. I quote from your essay: "the Enlightenment [...] progress meant universal citizenship – that is, a virtual equality of political condition, a virtually equal say for all in the common affairs of any given community – together with a social condition and a model of rationality that could make it possible."<sup>2</sup> Is this really an accurate denotation of the period of the Enlightenment? I mean, what we understood as social and political progress that took place at that time was more or less made possible by slavery and colonialism. In other words, if post-fascism, as you wrote, "reverses the Enlightenment tendency to assimilate citizenship to the human condition," was there ever a moment in the past when the Enlightenment stream of thought was genuinely universal? At the same time, is it not true that the whole concept of the Enlightenment is, at least to some extent, a Eurocentric phantasm?

It was never a universal condition and it is Eurocentric. But historical parallels and notions are never perfect. When I think of the Enlightenment, I always think of Kant. I am no *Aufklärer* myself – who could be after Horkheimer, Adorno, and Robert Kurz? – and I've just noted the change in the bourgeois condition from the one related to the Enlightenment and the subsequent demise of the Enlightenment under fascism. Even the Enlightenment utopia of universal citizenship was abandoned. Of course, it was never truly realized: there was colonialism, and neither the bourgeois state nor the universal market was born of anything but violence, including genocide, racial massacre, and mass displacement of colonial populations. During the reign of such utopias, the greatest of *Schweinereien* were taking place. My handling of "the Enlightenment" is an abstraction culled from a very imperfect social reality. I don't think that imperialism and colonialism

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

can be logically deduced from the basic ideals of the Enlightenment, which of course should have included people of colour and women if it wanted to be universal.

Most certainly, the idea of a democratic utopia was constructed on the foundations of the Enlightenment; it must be based – as my subsequent work has uncovered – on the work of historians. The whole international system of human rights that was established by the UN charter, the Helsinki Conference, and continued by the European charter of fundamental rights – has to be considered in relation to the question as to how is it possible that Soviet lawyers actively participated in the formulation of the UN charter. It was none other than Andrey Vyshinsky, the chief prosecutor of the show trials of 1937, the foreign secretary of the Soviet Union at that time, who participated in the foundation of the United Nations and helped formulate its ideological character. What made the Soviet Union participate in the elaboration of the human rights legislation from San Francisco and Yalta to Helsinki? We shouldn't forget how unified modernity actually was. Emancipation and equality, industrial development, modern technology, the enlargement of the material base of human life – these ideas were shared by all, both by the Soviet Union and the United States. That was a common heritage of the Enlightenment that both communists and bourgeois liberals shared. Victory over fascism gave meaning to the life of my parents' generation. So, however paradoxical it may sound, and this is what people, obviously, cannot understand today, the Soviet Union was in its own horrifying and incomprehensible way quite sincere in believing that it was some kind of democratic power and formally took part in the international human rights régime because it considered itself to be ruled by the powerless. Absurd, of course, but rather interesting. Dominance of the poor over the rich was, after all, what the Greeks called democracy. Of course, it was an illusion, a mere "ideology," but it created some realities, and it was also a very powerful conviction and motivation for hundreds of millions of people – from Shanghai to Prague.

I think that the moment of 1945 was unique, and that from 1945 to 1989 we all, East and West, lived under the sway of this strange harmony of various Enlightenment utopias which held the United Nations together and prevented a war between the former victors in the Second World War. It wasn't only strategy and "the balance of terror," that is, nuclear weapons in both camps; there were also aspects in which these systems were secretly, yet closely, related. Therefore, when people started to notice that the Enlightenment utopia contained in these charters and covenants of human and civic rights simply didn't conform to facts... that was really shattering. This is why my essay on post-fascism has become so well-known, because it has shown these illusions to have crumbled in different ways – both in the East and in the West.

I'm using the term "Enlightenment" as a *terminus a quo*, as a comparison, not as something that can or should be rebuilt. Now, the question is that, since everybody is up to their necks in this weird end of universalism, including emancipatory aspirations that are supposed to build various autonomies – not republics, not world republics, but at

least autonomies for groups, individuals, cultures. They, too, participate in the *Zeitgeist*. There is no agenda for building a society for everybody in which an end of alienation can be imagined, in which universal emancipation is the final aim.

Therefore, there are two ways to go from here. One is chosen by the best elements among the liberals, who just want to save what has definitely passed. I have a little grudging sympathy for this, because it is a decent way of treating final defeat, but it's destined to fail. It's quite popular among enlightened bureaucrats in various institutions. Others are looking for new avenues, trying to reconstruct a very fragmented and fragile and fractious adversary culture, but they are affecting things in ways that are too small.

I don't think humankind is unable to generate something against exploitation and injustice and oppression and so on – if people had been capable of doing so in the past, they might manage in the future as well. Human nature, if there is such a thing, can't change so drastically, and certainly not only and always for the worse. So I'm not all that pessimistic. The question is: Do we have time? The deterioration of European societies is taking place very fast. I think, for example, that the increasing rôle of the secret services shows that the last vestiges of democratic participation are vanishing. Secret services governing, waging wars, keeping prisons, or controlling the courts through public prosecutors? That's quite a terrible development, even if I don't share the paranoias of a part of the radical Left. But it is undeniable that unaccountable public institutions and informal power arrangements at the top are playing an increasing rôle, from the international financial institutions to the para-states of the largest transnational corporations which make "liberal democracy" a travesty even for the more thoughtful people in the mainstream media.

The last argument of rulers has always been war. I don't know if we can wait indefinitely.

It seems that between 2000 and 2015, post-fascism has become very much a part of the political establishment. That is the main change – it's not a danger any longer, but an all-encompassing reality.

I believe that the concept of post-fascism is deeply connected to racism. The term "race" has not always been used to designate an ethnically identifiable group of people. I think that the French philosopher Étienne Balibar was following this conceptualization when he called broader practices of social exclusion "a racism without races." Ethnical racism has, of course, not disappeared, the opposite is true, but more and more people are stigmatized in a racist way although they are not necessarily identifiable on the basis of minor ethnicity. Am I right that this concept has something in common with post-fascism?

It's almost identical. Hungary is a conspicuous example of this, and there are more and more. I've just written about this issue – I analyzed the rhetoric of Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian prime minister, saying exactly the same things as Mr. Orbán. That is, that people in need of social assistance belong to inferior "groups," meaning "inferior races" or *ethnies*. So the poor and people in the slums are considered to be something like

the Roma. The old reactionaries called them “the criminal classes” or “the dangerous classes.” They are not treated so much as a hostile class now, rather as an inferior race. So far it has been a quasi-racialisation and ethnicisation of the social question. Take an international perspective – all this talk about the “lazy Greeks,” those “swarthy Levantines,” the “dark-skinned” proletarian nations of the Orient or of the Mediterranean. Again, this shows that the ruling class doesn’t have to confront its political adversary any longer, because the political subjectivity of the working class is dead. The proletariat as a political subject doesn’t exist any longer. This rationalization isn’t a completely new phenomenon as it began with colonialism. At that time proletarians of the South were called “*les bougnoules*” – the racist term for Arabs, mostly North Africans, in France. So it’s not totally new, but it has now become exclusive. In countries such as Romania, for instance, the term “*asistat social*” (the “socially assisted,” an extreme right idiom now accepted everywhere and which denotes “subhuman”) is used unashamedly in the media. The right, increasingly both the conservative right and the social democrats, would say that “we won’t pay for these people,” which means: hard-working, hetero “real” men are not inclined to pay for the debauchery and the bad mores of the inferior classes or underclasses or genders, assimilated to the notion of “inferior races.”

You are critical about the concept of human rights. You wrote that “[t]he current notion of ‘human rights’ might defend people from the lawlessness of tyrants, but it is no defence against the lawlessness of no rule.”<sup>3</sup> In his *Ethics*, Alain Badiou develops probably an even more radical critique of the human rights concept. He argues that since it is based on the notion of the human as a victim, “it reduces him [or her – LM] to the level of a living organism pure and simple.”<sup>4</sup> That is why it may look like the current human rights concept leaves no place for an emancipatory project...

The subject of human rights is somebody who has to be protected against the deprivations of an unregulated society – in other words, capitalism. That wasn’t a stupid idea; nevertheless, it was based on the classical dichotomy of state and civil society, or authority and the individual, in a class society. This isn’t satisfactory for me as a socialist. Not because I want less freedom, but because I want more. So my answer is twofold. If we consider capitalism to be a society which still has a future, than the weakening of the defence mechanisms for the weak individuals in such a society is fatal. That doesn’t mean that we should be neutral towards the depredations of market societies and market systems and the various disadvantages and dangers that flow from it, the twin perils of autocracy and chaos. The general human condition is in a sorry state – people are persecuted, killed, humiliated, raped, burned, exploited, despised, and disrespected as always. When you

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001), p. 11.



need a political action against this, you have to think very thoroughly whether you want the present structure (and to persuade its representatives) to help the unfortunate and the suffering, or whether you want a change that would create a more effective agency to succour them. Although I would prefer the second solution because I don't think that the bourgeois state in its current form is of any great help, I don't see real movements at the moment that would go against the present condition. Mere philanthropy, however noble and meritorious, is – unfortunately – hopeless.

Politically, the problem is proposed in the following manner: Are we willing to cooperate with human rights liberals and NGO people in defending the weakest? I don't think that it's class treason if one remains critical and clear about the fact that this is, indeed, class cooperation with the bourgeois left; that our ultimate ends as socialists are different and we therefore needn't accept the naïve or sometimes even mendacious ideology of the human rights liberals even while we are cooperating with them in order to save lives or mitigate physical suffering.

But we shouldn't have any illusions this time. I remember very well that in the East European dissident circles quite a few people were Marxists (I am not speaking of my personal experience, that was a bit more complicated). I mean people like Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuroń, Petr Uhl or János Kis. People like them were cooperating with other groups – Christian, liberal, even democratic nationalist – and all of them ended up as liberals.<sup>5</sup> Why? They thought that however correct Marx was in his critique of capitalist society, capitalism is nonetheless a lesser evil because it can be tempered, moderated, and regulated by a consequent régime of human rights (as a Bolshevik régime plainly cannot be), and that if this lasts long enough it can even ensure social equality. That was the conviction – simplified, of course – of my generation of dissidents. The Marxists among them gradually gave up, because they wanted the people to escape dictatorship, whatever the price, which is fine; but they didn't keep their critical distance towards bourgeois society and lost their political independence. So, by 1989, practically no East European dissident remained on the anti-capitalist left, including me. This mistake shouldn't be repeated.

The language of capitalist society is, indeed, a legalistic, juridical language which enlarges the human rights discourse that had been thoroughly criticised by Marx 170 years ago. Those criticisms are justified. Civil society (in terms of political economy, nothing but “free labour”) cannot function in anything other than in a capitalist framework, therefore reinforcing human rights means reinforcing at least one crucial aspect of capitalist society. One should keep this in mind when helping well-meaning liberals save lives, and one should not forget that this is not an alliance, but a common action in an urgent situation.

<sup>5</sup> For Petr Uhl's characterization of his own intellectual trajectory, see Petr Kužel's interview with him in this issue of *Contradictions*, pp. 169–184 (editor's note).



Now, unlike Badiou, you emphasise the concept of citizenship, coming from the Enlightenment heritage as well as human rights. Could you comment on your understanding of the relationship between the concepts of citizenship on the one hand and of human rights on the other? Is it possible to denominate the first in terms of activity and the second in terms of passivity?

Citizenship, of course, denotes an active feature of the same political framework. After all, if people have civic rights, it means they have the right to be citizens – an ability to participate and to interfere in the workings of the state. In the bourgeois state, there are social problems not regulated by human rights such as exploitation, social injustice, and inequality; however, members of society can nevertheless participate in the process of addressing social problems politically – in principle. So, formally, there is an aspect of political society such as suffrage, absence of arbitrary coercion, and so on, in which proletarians are the equals of their class superiors, the equals of the ruling class. For example, you cannot be arrested without a warrant, or your house cannot be confiscated if you pay your taxes. It's a guarantee against *arbitrary* discrimination and a guarantee of indirect participation in the running of the political state and of the government. This is the best position for subaltern classes that has been historically achieved *in a class society*.

But class society remains nonetheless a class society, and citizenship is not extended to actual participation – in systems of representative government, plebeians don't participate in the actual running of state affairs. Nor does it extend to "the economy," which is regarded by the dominant legal and political ideology of bourgeois society as being a private-contractual and not a public affair and hence not supposed to be a part of the public interest, of the common good. That is the greatest fraud of capitalism: to present labour as a contractual relationship between an employer and an employee and a free agreement somewhat similar to marriage. But this lie is the limit that can be achieved in a class society. It can, of course, be even worse; under, for instance, Nazism, fascism, or a military dictatorship, politics is a private affair of a narrow ruling group and not even an affair of the ruling class in its entirety. Well, what we have in bourgeois liberal societies is only external control and indirect influence, but there is a very important qualification. I mean the idea of equal citizenship – for all inhabitants of a given territory, which is not much, but which contains the marrow of an idea, of the equal moral dignity of all human beings. So the idea of citizenship is potentially universal – you cannot affirm it, and then persistently deny it to some. But this is exactly what is happening. In other words, post-fascism.

However critical we may be, we must be conscious of the fact that the socialist idea of emancipation is to some extent inherited, because the universalistic element is contained within the general idea of emancipation. Of course, countless people since Rousseau knew that an exploited person without means, without education, without freedom of movement, and without a political chance to attain all this does not enjoy equal citizenship. But it is horrible that even this utopia (exemplified in practice by the avoidance,

*at least*, of legal discrimination) is being given up by bourgeois society. It had first been abandoned openly by Hitler, and it is being abandoned today in a more veiled fashion, in non-dictatorial, allegedly “democratic” circumstances. Even this very limited bourgeois idea of citizenship is under attack and this must not be tolerated for a single moment. So I’m speaking not only about the practical consequences which are already visible, but also about an increasing acceptance of the fact that unorganised popular masses don’t really have a say, especially in the hard stuff of politics (taxation, defence, wages, monetary policy, foreign affairs, infrastructure, urban planning, and the environment).

This is reflected by such utterly quotidian occurrences as not voting at all, or by the refusal to join a trade union, or by the unwillingness to stand for public office, the last of which I share. I was asked whether I would be on the candidates’ list of a small leftist party. I felt no need to do so – I think parliamentarism is finished. I wouldn’t be elected anyway, so I wouldn’t risk much, but even symbolically I wouldn’t do it. So the active aspect of citizenship is disappearing. It doesn’t mean anything else than your being a passive member of a regulated national community.<sup>6</sup> Well, that is not what was meant by the French revolution when they thought about citizenship. It meant something more active and also much more dangerous – direct interference in public affairs naturally brings about several dangers of instability. Citizenship has become this kind of passive notion that used to be revolutionary.

You said that parliamentarism is finished, but one may ask what else? Is your critique comparable to István Mészáros’s critique in which he is calling for “an alternative to parliamentarism,” by which he also means drawing some inspiration from counter-systemic institutions of the former emancipatory movements? And if parliamentarism is finished, does it mean that it no longer makes any sense to focus on the parliament as the main site where decisions are being made?

My critique is similar to Mészáros’s to some extent, although I may not agree with him completely. I think that parliament is emptying out. The parliament, after all, is a body of elected representatives, and if people don’t want to elect them, if they don’t trust the institution... You know how unpopular bourgeois parliaments are everywhere. People know what to expect: no change. But apart from that, voting for the lesser evil again and again, well, that cannot last.

<sup>6</sup> Like in this anecdote from the 1930s about the Swiss border guard:

‘D’où êtes-vous, monsieur?’

‘Je suis un citoyen roumain.’

‘La Roumanie, c’est un royaume ou une république?’

‘Un royaume.’

‘Alors, monsieur, vous n’êtes pas un citoyen, vous êtes un sujet.’

Wasn't the parliamentary, judicial, and the constitutional system supposed to save Hungary from Orbán and his semi-dictatorship, indeed to prevent him from occupying the whole state? Liberals thought that it was. And yet it all went without a hitch for him, very simply and smoothly. And people still think: "Well, there is still a parliament, what do you want, what do you mean, there is no freedom?" Who reads constitutions?

I'll tell you something very old-fashioned. It is an insult to our intelligence and to our sensitivity and to our sense of humour to behold today's bourgeois politicians. I believe that the quality of a society is also apparent by its ability to select tolerable people for the top functions. And how about these packs of clowns and idiots governing the contemporary world, even countries of great tradition and wealth? That's what's frightening. There were those tapes on which Polish politicians discuss politics in private. How do these people talk? These are, forgive me, just vulgar pigs. And they are entrusted with the destinies of a great nation. It's insulting and it means that the whole representative government is losing its crucial role within the capitalist state. It will attract only the worst type of people – and if not, they'll end up like Syriza: conform or perish. Mr. Milo Đukanović, the boss of Montenegro, one of the best cigarette smugglers now operating, has just been recognised as a valid "democratic" chief of government by being invited to take his place among the leaders of the imperialist military alliance, NATO.

Parliamentarism is decaying very fast, and the left cannot really offer any competition to the far right. And the far right is also used as blackmail: if you turn against the liberals or against social democracy, the fascists are coming.

As you said, there are some local exceptions. Many people on the left are still fascinated by Syriza, Podemos, and similar organizations. But aren't these parties more or less still anchored in the framework of parliamentarism, which you regard as finished? For instance, it isn't possible to compare Syriza to a massive socialist party of, say, the nineteen-twenties, which meant above all the structure of a counter-parliament, and also of non-parliamentary institutions such as workers' education, printers, banks, etc. So what do you think about these local exceptions? If they won't be able to realize their programs under these circumstances, will it be yet another proof of the thesis that parliamentarism is finished?

I don't know what would have happened if Syriza, or such a party anywhere, would have tried to go beyond both the parliamentary and capitalist framework. That would have meant total opposition to the international order and a very sharp conflict with everyone. What would have happened if they had indeed behaved like a Marxist party or even a social democratic party of the past? I don't know. Maybe they would not have been elected.

I think that parliamentarism in this case too shows its contemporary limits.

The party system is losing its relevance. In ancient parlance, people today are not joiners, but quitters. All true political activity is outside the system, in "civil society," in

the NGOs, in charities, in internet or social media groups, in feminist, gay, or environmentalist movements, in the left underground, in what in the absence of a better term we still call “culture” and, yes, in the neo-Nazi paramilitary squads – in other words, in the old co-existence of moderate reformism and desperate protest.

Today, the lives of thousands of migrants are endangered at the European borders, while the once liberal political powers are adopting more or less anti-immigrant positions. In Britain, for example, Labour under Miliband apologized during the general election campaign of 2015 for the “far too open” immigration policies of the former Labour governments. It looks like everyone is critical of the concept of multiculturalism under these circumstances. Of course, all of these critiques – regardless of the name of the political party – are of a right-wing nature. This is why I see it as crucial to articulate a different, emancipatory critique of the concept. In your essay “On Post-Fascism,” and I quote again, you tried to do exactly that: “Multiculturalist responses are desperate avowals of impotence: an acceptance of the ethnicisation of the civic sphere, but with a humanistic and benevolent twist. [...] The field had been chosen by post-fascism, and liberals are trying to fight it on its own favourite terrain, ethnicity. [...] Without new ways of addressing the problem of global capitalism, the battle will surely be lost.”<sup>7</sup> Now, my question is obvious: What are these new ways or, in other words, what else should be done instead of just defending multiculturalism?

Miliband was not elected, among other things, because everybody could see his heart was not in it, he was ashamed to say that, he’s too nice a guy to believe in that, but he let his PR people persuade him. True racists wouldn’t say “on the one hand, and on the other hand, we made mistakes, but...” A true racist speaks like Cameron.

I still think that multiculturalism is giving in to ethnicism. And it is based on the idea of relativism implemented into policy: without judging any culture, any group, any aspiration, as long as there’s no trouble, people are welcome to exercise their foolishness. In other words, these people are seen as ridiculous, praying to gods we don’t even know, but if they don’t make any trouble and have something else to do, society leaves them alone. So there is an element of indifference in it which, of course, is opposed by the militant nationalism in the French version of *laïcité*; an aggressive secularism that is actually nothing but assimilationism and, ultimately, ethnicism. Again, this displays the weakness of the contemporary bourgeois state, because when there were tendencies aiming to assimilate minorities, it was believed that there was something to be offered to them. Being a Frenchman meant not only being of French ethnicity, but also sharing an idea of the republic. It was the same in pre-1914 Hungary, where Slovaks, Romanians, Serbs, and others were offered assimilation by the old liberal aristocracy: they could

<sup>7</sup> Tamás, “On Post-Fascism.”

become Hungarians and enjoy “the glorious Hungarian legacy.” However stupid these ideas may have been, they betrayed a kind of self-assurance of the ruling élites and displayed some degree of progressivism and benevolence towards the subjects. Think of the “Black Britons.” The élites have given up this line of thought. Nowadays we’re back to distinguishing between proper Brits and Pakistanis in Britain; and you may well be a Pakistani in Britain – if you’re quiet, you’ll be fine.

There are three great theorists on treating the issue of minorities: Otto Bauer, Rosa Luxemburg, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. These three addressed this issue at the pinnacle of the national conflicts of that time. Still, the best book on the topic is Otto Bauer’s *Social Democracy and the Nationalities Question*. This book for the first time spelled out the idea of ethnic and cultural autonomy and that made it very valuable. Where have we seen such autonomous republics in the recent times? Well, in the bloody Soviet Union, in Yugoslavia, and in other such places. As long as they existed, all those minority cultures flourished. I know it because I lived in Romania from my kindergarten years through elementary school until my university studies, and I could study in Hungarian. Free state education in minority languages? Territorial and cultural autonomy? That’s a Bolshevik inheritance. The bourgeoisie has never been sincere in its promotion of ethnic equality – it had to be forced to follow its own rhetoric. I believe internationalism, meaning recognition of all identities that wish to emancipate themselves and to contribute to the society, is still the way, and it’s much more than multiculturalism because it contains empowerment of the oppressed groups. You cannot clearly separate the issue of class from the issue of ethnicity. It is a very politically incorrect expression of Otto Bauer who said: *Rassenkampf ist Klassenkampf*. (Racial struggle is class struggle.) It is an exaggeration, but it’s essentially true.

Today multiculturalism isn’t satisfactory to anyone. Of course, even this indifferent tolerance is better than genocide, but what we need is emancipation and common creation of new communities from all these disparate elements of society. Now, when Frau Merkel says that “multiculturalism is dead,” she’s not being particularly nice or welcoming. Essentially, she’s saying: “Become Germans, or you’re in trouble.” And, compared to the rest, she’s still the best. The other day, Mr. Orbán was very laconic: “We don’t want any more of them to come, and those who are already here should go home.” That’s a clear message. Now we have practically zero immigration since nobody seems to be able to imagine that disparate cultural and ethnic groups could live together, because universalist political imagination has been lost with the universal demise of the workers’ movement.

And I don’t know how the minorities themselves will react. We have already seen some of these reactions – Islamism and such. For example, how will the Roma react to this persistent oppression of the Roma by the police around the entirety of Eastern and Central Europe?

How long will African-Americans tolerate racist anti-black police violence?

To use another example from the last British general elections, it is believed that at least the rhetoric of Labour was in some way slightly more left-wing this time. Its leader

repeated constantly that “Britain only succeeds when all its working people succeed.” Probably the main reason why this motto didn’t work is that it didn’t have a real resonance because there is simply no such decisive group that would identify itself with the denotation of “working people.” This brings me back to the question of an agent and the question of class, which was a central issue of your essay “Telling the Truth about Class.” According to the classical notion of class, it looks like the proletariat is now almost lacking as “a class for itself.” And also the position of the proletariat as “a class in itself” has changed profoundly. What could be done in this situation of the precarisation and dissolution of the working class?

This is of fundamental importance. Everybody in his or her right mind will recognise the presence of the proletariat as the main structural element of a commodity-producing society. At the same time, we know that the working class was also a political concept, the name of those alienated individuals who – if they want to be free – ought to put an end to capitalism and thus to all hierarchical society and to create a classless one. The recognition, on the one hand, of “the class in itself” as the *fons et origo* of capital creation and accumulation and the denial, on the other hand, of “the class for itself” in the subjective, active, political sense *simply reflects the bourgeois separation of the economy from politics*, the absolute conceptual and legal basis of liberal capitalism. This is conceding defeat – for eternity.

Nothing prevents us from looking for a workable idea of a new revolutionary agent. Marx and Engels found a small immigrant community of German workers in London to write their *Manifesto* for, which was more or less a spontaneous creation that resonated with many non-communist political currents, including those based on values like solidarity and self-help. This is how it started: the workers’ movement was at the beginning puritanical, egalitarian, solidaristic, and liberal. The analysis of the main social forces of today should be the primary question of radical intelligentsia. We should be better informed – not just empirically – but to think more profoundly about class than we did before.

The proletariat of today – and this was the case even earlier when it was not acknowledged by the movement – is no longer mainly industrial and is not even ‘productive.’ Many of its members do not work at all because they cannot and many still live in traditional servitude and personal dependence on plantations or in households or in conditions of semi-slavery. Like when the *Manifesto* was written. The disparate and variegated character of the proletariat was always the greatest obstacle for the revolution, as was discovered by Rosa Luxemburg, Hilferding, Otto Bauer, Lenin, Trotsky, Bordiga, Bukharin, Gramsci, and others. That is what “imperialism” means. But one of the functions of philosophy is to synthesise the infinite variety of human experience. (This is what Badiou means by “a politics of truth.”) The old Marxist conflict between “spontaneists” and “determinists” was, in the end, no conflict at all: both believed that the development of capitalism will of necessity lead to the communist *transcensus* without outside (conscious, deliberate)

interference. It was only two people – Lenin and Lukács, and later another two, Brecht and Benjamin – who saw that this is not sufficient, that the alliance of philosophy and “The Class” was necessary.

So, curiously enough, it is not “The Class,” which is lacking, but philosophy – and especially a link between the two. One of the causes of this is a strange combination of defeat and disappointment. It is small wonder that “the collapse of communism” (read: the slow decay of post-Stalinist state capitalism) was already the outcome of the disillusionment with this grandiose but substantially flawed version of modernisation, which inaugurated a system of commodity production and commodity exchange on the periphery whose false consciousness was “Soviet communism” and which ended up being nothing more than a welfare state for the boondocks without the appurtenances and paraphernalia of “liberal democracy,” as well as having a society that was more socially and morally conservative than the Victorian age but with a population listening to rock music with the corresponding sexual attitudes. Moderns wanted to be moderns and that was that. But the price for this small change – small, judged by authentic historical standards – was extremely high. So people managed to be disappointed with both communist “dreams” and capitalist reality. At the same time, the only important countervailing power – however poor a quality of one it was – that would uphold the ideal of a human condition devoid of exploitation vanished, and this has changed the political dynamic for ever. It was ultimately the rebel groups, which wanted true socialism and resisted the repressive apparatuses, which were defeated, not the one-party élites that have transmogrified themselves rapidly in the new national bourgeoisie and have made their deals with the West and with their local reactionary and chauvinist competitors. So we were defeated, unbeknownst to ourselves, by the capitulation of the régime we fought against. This irony would not have been lost on the author of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

But quite apart from Eastern Europe, in spite of the immense theoretical material assembled, particularly since the nineteen-sixties, Marxism was, on the whole, mostly critical and not revolutionary. Faced with the threat of total darkness, I submit respectfully that this state of affairs should be considered ripe for a certain change.





# INTERVIEW



# SOCIAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IS A DREAM I HAVEN'T GIVEN UP ON

## Interview with Petr Uhl, by Petr Kužel

*Petr Uhl (born Oct. 8 1941), Czech journalist, longtime prisoner of conscience and former member of the 4<sup>th</sup> International. Since the 1960s he has been one of the foremost representatives of the radical left in Czechoslovakia. In 1968 he was one of the main organisers of the Intellectual Association of the Left (Názorové sdružení levice), which attempted to propagate radical left theory and orient political praxis towards the radical left. In September of the same year, following the Soviet occupation in August 1968, the Association was dissolved. In December 1968 Petr Uhl was a co-founder of the Revolutionary Youth Movement (Hnutí revoluční mládeže). In December 1969 he was arrested for his activity in the Movement and was subsequently sentenced to four years in prison, together with 18 other participants who received lighter sentences. This was one of the first and largest political trials after 1968. During the course of 1969 approximately one hundred young people, predominantly students, took part in the activities of this movement.*

*In 1977 Uhl was one of the founders of Charter 77 and in 1978 he co-founded the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted (Výbor na obranu nespravedlivě stíhaných, VONS). During the same period he published the samizdat journal Information about Charter 77 – one of the longest-published samizdat journals in Czechoslovakia. The journal's*

*primary purpose was to provide information about the activity of Charter 77, VONS and other independent initiatives in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and other countries, while at the same time, as the journal stated, it aimed “to be an element of democratic control over the work of the spokespersons of Charter 77, the activity of VONS and the work of other Chartist or opposition collectives and groups.” In 1979 Petr Uhl was once again sentenced for his activity, this time to five-year prison term, and again he served the entire sentence.*

*After his release in 1984, Uhl continued to engage in activities directed towards defending human rights. He founded the East European Information Agency; he was present at the birth of the Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee, Czechoslovak-Polish Solidarity; he worked on the editorial board of the Czech version of Inprekor (Inprecor) magazine, which was published by the United Secretariat of the 4<sup>th</sup> International, and whose Czech version began publication in 1986.*

*After the revolution of 1989, Uhl served as a member of parliament in the Federal Assembly and, during 1990–1992, as managing director of the Czech News Agency (ČTK). He was also a member of the radical left-wing organisation Left Alternative. Beginning in 1991 he worked on the UN Commission for Human Rights, and in September 1998 the Czech government appointed him an envoy for human rights. He played an active role for example in campaigning against the establishment of a US military radar and military base within the territory of the Czech Republic, against the neoliberal policies of the governments of Mirek Topolánek and Petr Nečas, and against discrimination toward minorities. At present he works as a journalist, writing columns for the daily newspaper Právo, for Deník Referendum, and other media.*

*One of the central ideas promoted in his writing is the principle of social self-government as an alternative to parliamentary government. He formulated his ideas most extensively in his book Socialism Imprisoned: A Socialist Alternative to Normalisation (Le socialisme emprisonné: une alternative socialiste à la normalisation [Paris: Stock, 1980]). The book was published in Czech two years later by the exile publisher Index. His 1969 article “Czechoslovakia and Socialism” was also included in this volume. He further elaborated his political views in two later books, Justice and Injustice as Seen by Petr Uhl (Právo a nespravedlnost očima Petra Uhla [Prague: C. H. Beck, 1998]) and his recently published memoirs I Did What I Thought was Right (Dělal jsem, co jsem považoval za správné [Prague, Torst 2014]).*

Before 1989 you ranked amongst the fiercest critics of the former regime from positions of revolutionary Marxism. How did you come to revolutionary Marxism, and when did you first adopt Marxist positions as your own?

I came to revolutionary Marxism via authentic Marxism, Marxism without qualifiers. I gradually began to identify with Marxism during the first few years of my studies at

the Faculty of Engineering of the Technical University in Prague, under the influence of associate professor Jiří Hermach. On the basis of his lectures, he convinced me of the legitimacy of Marxist thought. He later belonged to the reform wing of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ). He was a member of the team that drafted the *Action Programme of the KSČ*. He worked at the Academy of Sciences. After 1969 he was expelled from the party and later he signed Charter 77. Within the Charter organization he worked with a group of former Communist Party members. Later he went into exile. Along with other factors, he had a very strong influence on me.

Due to the fact that, thanks to my father, I learned French at high school, I also had access to French literature. I was familiar with Trotsky, whose works had been relatively quickly translated in Czechoslovakia (*The History of the Russian Revolution* was published in Czech in the years 1934–1936, and *The Revolution Betrayed* was translated towards the end of 1937). But some books I had in French. Later, from 1965 onwards, when I was only 24 years old, I began to travel to France. At the time I went there upon the invitation of Alain Krivine, who was later a leading representative of the Ligue Communiste (which was renamed the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire in 1974). My wife and I are still in touch with his brother Hubert Krivine and his sister-in-law Catherine Samary.

How did you view the situation of the French radical left at the time in comparison with what you'd had the opportunity to see in Czechoslovakia?

I was in France at the time when the National Union of Students of France (*L'Union nationale des étudiants de France*, UNEF), which was then under the influence of the French Communist Party, began to fragment. It split into three factions, which then gave birth to separate organisations. One of these was what later became the Revolutionary Communist League (*Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire*), which was the French section of the 4<sup>th</sup> International. The second was made up of people who were termed “pro-Togliattis.”<sup>1</sup> This was a reformist, rather social-democratic group. The third was composed of those who remained loyal to the party line of the PCF. The latter were our common opponents. They were not only hardline pro-Muscovites, but also dogmatic. At the time I sympathised rather with the “pro-Togliattis,” but due to the influence of a number of circumstances, I eventually began to co-operate with the French section of the 4<sup>th</sup> International.

You were a member of the 4<sup>th</sup> International beginning in 1984, but you've never declared yourself to be a Trotskyist. What then were your objections to Trotskyism, and what motivations led to you leave the 4<sup>th</sup> International in 1991?

<sup>1</sup> After Palmiro Togliatti, the general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, who promoted the establishment of centres of the communist movement independent of Moscow. (Note P.K.)

Initially I refused to join the 4<sup>th</sup> International, since I had an unresolved issue with the class struggle, but mainly with their characterisation of the USSR as a bureaucratically *degenerated* workers' state, and their characterisation of the countries of the Eastern Bloc as *deformed* workers' states (according to them those states were not degenerate, because they had never been proletarian, and thus they could not degenerate; instead they termed them *deformed* workers' states). I had a problem with this not only at the time but also later. Nonetheless, when I was released from prison for the second time in 1984, I spoke to Catherine Samary (on the roof of the house, where there were no bugging devices) about the 4<sup>th</sup> International. The French section of the 4<sup>th</sup> International then selflessly provided support to prisoners of conscience and their families, regardless of who was who, whether they were Catholic, Protestant, atheist, Marxist or non-Marxist. Their solidarity was total, and my gratitude for their activity was so great that I said to myself that I must overcome any ideological disagreements. And so without declaring myself to be a Trotskyist I therefore also joined the 4<sup>th</sup> International. When someone referred to me as a Trotskyist, I slightly jokingly corrected them, saying that I was a revolutionary Marxist. People like me, especially if they're organised within the 4<sup>th</sup> International, are usually called Trotskyists by others. They frequently apply the term to themselves, but that wasn't my case.

And what's the reason why you eventually left the group?

In 1991 I left following a rather long conversation in Paris with Hubert Krivine and Catherine Samary. We spoke for several hours about the situation in Czechoslovakia. And they began trying to demonstrate to me that I was no longer a Marxist. At the time I grew angry, because I'm the one who decides whether or not I'm a Marxist, but I admitted that I was not a revolutionary Marxist and announced that I was quitting the 4<sup>th</sup> International.

You said that you rejected the theoretical view of the degenerated or deformed workers' state. But where did you stand for example with regard to the idea – which was developed also within the framework of Trotskyism – that what we were dealing with were not degenerated workers' states but rather state capitalism, and that a new ruling class, and not merely a parasitic bureaucracy, had formed within the USSR?

I broadly agree with the evaluation of Lev Davidovitch Trotsky, that state capitalism is nonsense, that it's a *contradictio in adjecto*, and as a result I don't use this expression to describe the regime in the USSR. Nevertheless, when I wrote my memoirs I felt the need to somehow delineate the former regime, and I inclined towards the term "state socialism." In Charter 77 we used to call that regime a dictatorship. Those of us who were bound together by a Trotskyist revolutionary Marxist orientation (this was the case, for example, with Jaroslav Suk), then very often we also used the term "bureaucratic dictatorship." But this term doesn't say a lot. In fact even Stalin criticised bureaucracy, and so eventually I inclined towards the term "state socialism."

The United Secretariat of the 4<sup>th</sup> International sent *Inprekor* magazine (in its English and French versions, *Inprecor*) to Czechoslovakia. In Czechoslovakia you were one of the main authors on the Czech editorial board of the Czech version of the journal. Can you explain what kind of journal it was, how it was founded and what kind of readership it had?

The name “*Inprekor*” was an abbreviation of “*Internationale Pressekorrespondenz*,” which was a journal originally published before the Second World War by the 3<sup>rd</sup> International. In the 1970s this journal was revived, and the United Secretariat of the 4<sup>th</sup> International began to publish it. It was published in a number of different languages (French, German, English, and Spanish). The Czech version, or rather excerpt, was published from 1986 onwards in Paris and was smuggled into Czechoslovakia. After November 1989 this magazine was published by Adam Novák.

Were there any other Trotskyist-oriented publications here under the former regime?

Earlier there was the journal *Information Materials* (*Informační materiály*). It was published in Berlin in the years 1971–1982, during which period 41 issues came out. It declared itself to be the magazine of “Czechoslovak revolutionary socialists,” and it was a platform for radical left thought. It was published by comrades in West Berlin: Sibylle Plogstedt, Ivana Šustrová, who is the sister of Petruška Šustrová, Richard Szklorz, Jiří Boreš, Jan Pauer and others. The name was taken from the Prague magazine *Information Materials*, which was published in 1968 in Prague by the Intellectual Association of the Left.

Were there any groups in Czechoslovakia that directly declared themselves to be Trotskyist?

In 1969 there were a number of people there who sympathised with Trotskyism in one way or another, but no group in Czechoslovakia directly declared itself to be Trotskyist. Even the Revolutionary Youth Movement wasn't univocal in its ideological orientation. Various influences were combined in it: Trotskyism, Che Guevara, Marcuse, the Frankfurt School; some members supported Maoism, etc. But it's true that Trotskyist sympathies were predominant.

Were there any Trotskyist organisations in other states of the Eastern Bloc, and did you have any contact with them?

Primarily in Poland there was a far left group. Modzelewski and Kuroń were educated enough to know that they couldn't refer to themselves as Trotskyists. The 4<sup>th</sup> International also didn't call them Trotskyists, but rather Marxists – and they were Marxists. Nevertheless, in social discourse they were commonly spoken of as Trotskyists. In fact they weren't Trotskyists, but I don't know if they were sentenced for it.<sup>2</sup> Adam Michnik, on the

<sup>2</sup> Kuroń and Modzelewski were sentenced in 1965 for writing *An Open Letter to the Party* (published

other hand, was convicted of Trotskyism, though he never was a Trotskyist. He wasn't even a Marxist. In contrast with classic Trotskyists, Kuroń and Modzelewski referred to the party politburo and the secretaries of the Central Committee as a *class*. For them, the relations to the means of production was the defining measure, and with regard to the fact that nobody else other than this group had these means at their disposal, and that nobody else decided on the use of these means, they conceived of this group as a *class*, even though it comprised only a few, or a few dozen people. In my view, though, it's not possible to refer to these people as a class.

So in Poland there was a radical left group based around Kuroń and Modzelewski. In Russia there was a group based around Memorial. These were the posthumous children of Trotskyists who died in the 1920s and 30s; they were posthumous in the literal sense of the world – children and grandchildren who were working for their parents' and grandparents' rehabilitation, political, juridical, and otherwise.

What about contacts with Yugoslavia?

I personally didn't have contact with anyone in Yugoslavia, but of course there were certain contacts here. For example, some people attended the seminar on the island of Korčula.<sup>3</sup> Jan Kavan went, as did others. Although he didn't profess to be an adherent of the radical left, he was very close to it. He was later involved in the left wing of the UK Labour Party, of which he was a member for several years. I don't remember if there were any such similarly oriented organisations in Hungary or Romania.

## France and the Radical Left

You said that you were in Paris in 1968. When exactly?

I was there at least twice that year. First in June.

So you experienced the echoes of the events of May.

in English in *New Politics* 5 (Spring 1966), pp. 5-46), in which they attacked the regime and called for workers' democracy. Kuroń was sentenced to three years in prison and Modzelewski to three and a half. They were released in 1967, but in 1968 they were sentenced again to three and a half years of prison for engaging in renewed political activity. (Note P.K.)

<sup>3</sup> Between 1963 and 1973, Marxist humanists associated with the Yugoslavia-based journal *Praxis* organized a series of meetings on the island of Korčula. These Korčula Summer Schools were attended by critical Marxist intellectuals from throughout Eastern as well as Western Europe, and they represented important events in the creative interchange of critical approaches within the framework of Marxism. (Note P.K.)



Yes, I experienced the echoes of May. Some student strikes, as well as workers' strikes in which students were involved in some way, were still ongoing. So I caught the tail end a little. I was in France for the second time that year from the end of July to the end of August. And it was there that I learned about the military intervention in Czechoslovakia. Hubert Krivine then took me to Brussels, where the United Secretariat of the 4<sup>th</sup> International hastily convened. There were about six or seven people there. They wrote a declaration in which they expressed support for Dubček's leadership, and at the time I told them: "Comrades, I'm not a member of your organisation, but surely you of all people can't be serious about approving the policy of Dubček's government like this." And so the whole thing was rewritten. A demand was formulated for the release of the political representatives of Czechoslovakia who had been kidnapped and taken to Moscow, but a certain distance from the policy of the Czechoslovak leadership was also inserted into the declaration, albeit in mild form. I slept at Ernest Mandel's flat, and then Hubert Krivine drove us back down various country roads to France. On the journey we had to avoid border controls, since I didn't have permission to enter Belgium – I had a visa only for France. Europe was unifying *via facti*, not on the basis of ideas.

Let me return for a moment to how you were affected by the atmosphere of May?

It had a pronounced effect on me. It's interesting how everything is connected. Shortly before my second visit to France that year I'd also been in Poland. I stayed for two days with Janusz Onyszkiewicz, who twenty years later became the Polish Minister of Defence. At the time, however, he was working as an assistant at the University of Warsaw, and he was living on the top floor of a building above the courtyard of the Warsaw Polytechnic. A student strike was under way there, and he explained to me how the bakers were taking bread to the students. He was enthusiastic about this joining of forces between workers and students – what the French term the *jonction entre ouvriers et étudiants*.

But in the end this joining of forces didn't materialise to any great extent.

It didn't, but it was characteristic that although the Polish and French students knew little about each other, they were asserting the same demands, they had the same feelings and the same movements could be seen in both countries. When, after returning from Poland, I left for Paris, I met with Charles Urjewicz, whom I'd known since 1965. Today he's an emeritus professor at an institution which was then called the École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes. For them Czech, for example, was an Oriental language. Around that time he also brought Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski's famous *Open Letter to the Party* to Paris, where it was translated and published in French.

And this is the document that you translated in 1968?

Yes, I translated it together with Miloš Calda, and it was published by the Prague Student Parliament.

Did the ideas of Paris's May 1968 in any way influence the thinking and mood in Czechoslovakia?

I tried desperately to make it happen, but I was quite alone. At the Charles University Faculty of Arts I gave a lecture when the strike of November 1968 was under way.<sup>4</sup> I managed to place political cartoons from French journals of the time in *Student*<sup>5</sup> magazine. There was a certain degree of interest, but it was nothing too impressive.

And did that November strike in some way link back to the events of Paris in May? Did it base itself on their example in some respects?

It linked back to Paris in that it was declared as an *occupation* strike. That word was used. There were undoubtedly common elements. But it linked mainly to the November congress of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and it was declared in advance that its aim was to support the progressive wing of the Communist Party against the conservative wing. I remember back then that Karel Kosík came into the assembly hall of the Faculty of Arts, straight from a meeting of the Central Committee, and he said that comrade Jakeš had also spoken at the meeting and that when he'd heard him speak he'd realised that it was no longer possible for both comrade Jakeš and him, Karel Kosík, to be members of the same political party. About six months later Kosík was either expelled from the party or left of his own accord, I don't know which.

You mention Karel Kosík, what kind of relationship did you have with him?

I used to bring him the *Information about Charter 77*, but I never got to know him well.

<sup>4</sup> On 18 November a three-day occupation of universities began in Czechoslovakia. This was a reaction to the results of the November congress of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, where the reformist wing of the party was de facto defeated. The aim of the strike was to support the reformist wing of the party, and amongst other matters to also support the retention of the Action Programme of the KSČ from April 1968. Despite widespread support for the strike in Czechoslovak society, the demands were ignored. (Note P.K.)

<sup>5</sup> *Student* was an influential student weekly published from 1965 to 1968. In 1965 its circulation was 30,000, and a year later this number rose to 40,000. In 1968 the magazine's editorial stance was critical and radical in its support for the Communist Party's new pro-democratic orientation. The last official issue of *Student* was published on 21 August 1968, the day of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. After the beginning of the occupation, five unofficial issues were released, but when Czechoslovakia's political leaders signed the so-called Moscow Protocol accepting the "brotherly aid" of the armies of the Warsaw Pact, the editorial board chose to dissolve itself. (Note P.K.)

## The Intellectual Situation of the Left

In 1968 the Intellectual Association of the Left, in which you were active, was founded. Could you please briefly describe this federation?

It was actually founded on the basis of an advertisement printed in the daily *Rudé právo*, and also in some other newspapers, I believe. It was placed there by Ms. Nováková. What was her first name... ?

Julie.

Yes, Julie Nováková. I replied to the advertisement, and as a result I met with Zbyněk Fišer (pseud. Egon Bondy) and his spouse Julie. He was absolutely hopeless as an organiser and had no interest in it, so I took over organisational matters. This organisation had members such as Jiří Müller, the left-wing Catholic Václav Trojan, the sculptor Rudolf Svoboda, the philosopher Jan Smíšek, Vladimír Říha, Štěpán Steiger, and others. Approximately fifty to a hundred people. We decided to hold various meetings. The main speaker was Zbyněk Fišer [Egon Bondy], and then there was a discussion about what he'd said. The meetings were held approximately once a month. We published the *Information Materials (Infomat)*, which we printed on a stencil duplicator with the support of the Ecumenical Council of the Church. I ran the magazine. In fact, I came here from Paris in June 1968 so that we could publish it. A discussion was held, and then I went back to France. Also in attendance for example was Pavel Filipi, today a professor at the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University, and Jakub Trojan, Protestants who sympathised with the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli state. There were also four secret police, who directly declared themselves to be State Security employees, though we didn't know whether or not they'd been sent there.

They just turned up and said that they were from the StB (the State Security agency)...

Of course. And we considered this to be correct behaviour.

## The Revolutionary Youth Movement

You mentioned the strike of November 1968. The Revolutionary Youth Movement in fact originated in connection with this strike...

Yes, the Revolutionary Youth Movement was founded by radical, left-oriented students, but there was also one additional group. This was a group formed by Václav Trojan and

## Interview with Petr Uhl

Petr Meissner. It was a group which represented, as I've called it, under a French influence, the *ouvrierist* deviation. They wanted to establish direct contact with workers and hold joint events. One of their actions for example was to carry paving stones into the cellar of the Faculty of Arts in order to use them as defence. So I don't know if that really made them more left-wing.

As regards the Revolutionary Youth Movement, I have here a thick notebook I wrote in prison. There were originally two such books, but I lost the first of them. This one actually contains what's in my criminal file; it doesn't contain much beyond that. (There's a copy in the National Archive, but there's also one in the possession of the Office for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism.) It has a number of sections: 1) The first section discusses the Intellectual Association of the Left and then also the Revolutionary Youth Movement – the sources are the RYM and its links to other organisations, groups and people within the country; 2) connections abroad; 3) activity of the RYM; 4) its material base; 5) a proposal for statutes and organisational structure; organisational meetings; 6) Jan Palach; 7) Addenda.

You're probably most interested in the connections abroad. This section has 26 sub-chapters: 1) The People's Republic of China, materials from the People's Republic of China; 2) Kuroń and Modzelewski – the *Open Letter*; 3) a Statement of the [German] SDS on Czechoslovakia; 4) Library and the importing of literature from abroad; 5) Preparation for West Berlin – a number of people from the RYM travelled there; 6) West Berlin – course of events and reception; 7) Ernest Mandel; 8) Duplicate from West Berlin; 9) Encoding of all types (although this was nonsense); and so on and so on.

It's all carefully sorted.

We were allowed only one pen in prison, but I had a four-coloured one.

In the records you mention here the magazine *Black Dwarf*. Did you contribute to it?

Sibylle Plogstedt wrote in it during the time we lived together. I contributed rather to *Rouge* and other journals.

Was Egon Bondy also involved in the Revolutionary Youth Movement?

No. And I didn't even offer him the option, or at least I don't remember doing so. Perhaps I mentioned to him that he could get involved, but in any case he didn't join us. In the Revolutionary Youth Movement, of the people who were older than me, the only distinguished figure was Štěpán Steiger. At the time he was the third member of our cell within the framework of the RYM. In the autumn of 1969 we changed the organisational structure of the RYM, since we knew or felt that it was necessary to act in a conspira-

torial manner. It was necessary to have a cell system. Sybille Plogstedt and I naturally belonged to the same cell, and we sought a third member, since the rule was that there must be at least three people to form a cell. The third in ours was Štěpán Steiger. It was a Francophone cell, so meetings were held in French.

## Charter 77

Can you say something about your involvement with Charter 77?

When we founded the Charter, I was one of eight people who met to discuss the form of the organisation's basic declaration. From the left there was also Zdeněk Mlynář, then Jiří Hájek, but there was also Jiří Němec, who was Catholic but had radical left views. Personally I was very careful to ensure that individual political conceptions and ideas were not projected into any documents of the Charter, which were intended to express the opinions and stances of the *entire* Charter. In this respect I had a dispute with Jaroslav Šabata, who on the contrary did everything in his power to include as much as possible of what he was politically advocating, which could be called Marxism. I was against this attitude. Together with Ladislav Hejránek, in this respect we endeavoured to ensure a kind of "Chartist political purity."

What was the reason for this? To ensure that the Charter could embrace the broadest possible range of ideological and political currents?

Yes, but it did have its consequences. When I came to Ladislav Hejránek, who was a spokesman for the Charter, with the intention of founding the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS), he greatly welcomed the proposal, but at the same time he was unequivocally and energetically against VONS being a part of the Charter. I had to recognise this. And so VONS did not become a part of the Charter.

And why didn't Ladislav Hejránek want VONS to be a part of the Charter?

Because VONS was not stated in the fundamental declaration of the Charter that all the Chartists had signed.

But if VONS had been a part of the Charter, considering how much attention was focused on the Charter abroad, this could to a certain degree have protected members of VONS against persecution.

Of course. But it didn't happen, and it didn't protect them. During the investigation and trial with VONS, the investigators were better able to avoid – and they did generally avoid – the word “Charter,” even if they weren't enable to omit it entirely.

When you were criminally prosecuted for the second time and subsequently sentenced, this generated a great wave of solidarity and support from abroad.<sup>6</sup> Can it be said that this support helped you, or did it rather harm you?

As regards the guilty verdict and the severity of the sentence, it's impossible to say whether it helped or harmed me. The authorities had various means at their disposal in that trial. For example, you weren't permitted according to law to be “in contact with a foreign power or a foreign agency.” At the time, the sentence for that was ten years. I got five. The “foreign agency” that we were “in contact with” was *Amnesty International*. Nevertheless, foreign support led to an improvement in the conditions of my imprisonment; it provided a certain degree of protection against the brutality of the State Security; it facilitated the early release of some prisoners of conscience and served as a warning to those in power against carrying out further repression.

How did Charter 77 function organisationally?

The Charter was not actually an organisation, even less so a democratic one. It had no democratic mechanisms. It was corporatist, although we didn't use that expression. There were certain groups which could be referred to as corporate entities. With the exception of the underground and the radical left, and also perhaps of the Protestants and Catholics, most of these entities were based around former members of the Communist Party who knew one another professionally. Many of them published their own journal and engaged in other activities. They were journalists, historians, sociologists, philosophers, etc. And the authors of the new document of Charter 77 contacted these groups, asking them whether they had any objections or additions. I took great pains to ensure that this took place, because in a certain sense it was a substitute for democracy.

<sup>6</sup> There was also a large wave of solidarity surrounding Uhl's first criminal prosecution in connection with his involvement in the RYM: “Solidarity with the sentenced members of the RYM was expressed in an ‘Open Letter to the Czechoslovak Government’ by the left-wing intellectuals Ernst Bloch, Ernest Mandel, Jean Paul Sartre, and others. Demonstrations against the imprisonment of RYM activists were organised mostly by national sections of the 4<sup>th</sup> International. Protests were held in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Italy, West Germany, West Berlin, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, the USA, Canada, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. In Paris, Bern, and Stockholm Trotskyists occupied the Czechoslovak embassy, in Stockholm there was a clash with the police.” Pavel Pečínka, *Pod rudou vlajkou proti KSČ [Under the Red Flag against the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia]* (Brno: Doplněk, 1999), p. 61. (Note P.K.)

By what method were the documents of the Charter approved?

It depended on the spokespersons. For this reason the principle applied that one of those three (there always had to be at least one, in exceptional cases two) had to be a former member of the Communist Party. One was from a Christian milieu, either Catholic or (more frequently) Protestant. And the third came from an artistic or otherwise unspecified milieu. So links to people from various circles were ensured in the selection of spokespersons.

And did all three have to agree?

Absolutely.

## The E-Club

During the period of so-called “normalisation” following 1968, there was also the “E-club,” in which Eurocommunist-oriented theorists and politicians were associated. What kind of relationship did you have towards Eurocommunism and the E-club?

We gave the name “E-club” to a group of around twenty people who were former members of the Central Committee of the KSČ. Those who were elected to the Central Committee at the Vysočany congress, but were not co-opted onto the Central Committee on 31 August 1968, were not counted as former members of the committee (this applied to about twenty people).<sup>7</sup> Only former members of the Central Committee (that is, not those who were not co-opted) could be members of the E-club. The “E” stood for “Eurocommunism.” This club included, for example, Milan Hübl, whom Husák later had imprisoned, Zdeněk Mlynář

<sup>7</sup> The Vysočany Congress was a hastily called extraordinary session of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, held on 22 August 1968 – one day after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. At this congress a resolution was passed condemning the invasion, and a new Central Committee was elected on which the Party's reformist wing predominated. On 31 August, however, Czechoslovakia's political representatives in Moscow signed under duress an agreement known as the Moscow Protocol, which declared the Vysočany Congress and its resolutions to be invalid. This agreement also declared the newly elected Central Committee to be invalid and declared the Committee that had existed *before* the Vysočany Congress to be the legitimate representative body. Nevertheless, in a compromise aimed at easing tension in Czechoslovakia, this original Central Committee co-opted certain reformist members of the Committee who had been elected at the Vysočany congress. Uhl thus refers to a group of reform Communists elected by the Vysočany Congress who *not* subsequently included among those co-opted onto the new, compromise Central Committee. (Note P.K.)

(who later emigrated), Jiří Hájek, Miloš Hájek, Rudolf Slánský, Jr., Vladimír Kadlec, and a number of others. Most of them were Chartists, but not all were. A custom was observed that the e-club would propose one of the three spokespersons of Charter 77. This practice developed after Jiří Hájek became a Charter spokesperson, followed by Jaroslav Šabata who, although he wasn't from the E-club, was seen by them as a kindred spirit. If you look at the list of spokespersons, in every period there was a former Communist on this list. But it wasn't former Communists in general who decided upon this; it was this E-club.

So, as far as we were concerned, that was the E-club, nothing else. I would like to emphasise that there were three people who could have been included in this E-club but chose not to be: František Vodsloň, František Kriegel, and Gertruda Sekaninová-Čákr-tová. Other Chartists who had been expelled from the Communist Party viewed them as "old school communists".

We've spoken about the Intellectual Association of the Left, the RYM, the Charter, and the E-club. I'd also like to ask about the Left Alternative. This was a project that emerged in the spring of 1989. After November 1989 the Left Alternative joined the Civic Forum. Could you outline what kind of organisation this was?

The Left Alternative was founded on 18 November 1989. We'd prepared its establishment and fundamental declaration about a month or two before that. It featured Jakub Polák, naturally Egon Bondy, Petr Kužvart, and others.

## After 1989

When a vote was held within the Civic Forum after November 1989 on its programme, there was a proposal that the means of production should be privatised. You and three other people at the time were against this. Do you know who those three others were?

I don't know, but I don't believe whatsoever that the phrase "means of production" was used. I can't remember it very well. It most probably relates to a meeting held in the Laterna Magica theatre. When I was released from prison, i.e. on 25 November 1989, I attended those meetings for a couple of days. And at the time it was the case that whoever turned up there voted, which is a trifle comical. I tried to bring a little order to the proceedings, so that for example there would be some kind of body which, even if unelected, would be in some way defined. Some kind of programme was approved, and I was one of few who didn't agree with the programme, but I can't remember the details.

And what was your idea of the direction that developments in Czechoslovakia could take after the Velvet Revolution?



I considered it the simplest and most realistic path to dust off the ideas and demands of 1968. These included, among other things, the idea of social self-government in the form of workplace councils. This was discussed, for example, by Rudolf Slánský, Jr. and Rudolf Battěk; a number of people wrote about self-governance at the Sociological Institute of the Academy of Sciences. But at that time I had so many specific practical tasks relating to the prison system and later the Czech News Agency [from February 1990 to September 1992 Petr Uhl was managing director of the Czech News Agency, ČTK – Note P.K.], etc. And then in June 1990 I was elected as a member of parliament to the Federal Assembly (I wasn't co-opted, I refused to be co-opted there),<sup>8</sup> and I had a lot to deal with. And there was no intellectual environment here that could have produced any alternative to parliamentarianism.

Don't you think it's a shame that neither the former communists, for example, nor those on the radical left, were able to propose a viable project that could have offered an alternative to privatisation and Klaus's market fundamentalism?

I think it is a shame, but those people were not interested in such a project. The former communists who'd been expelled after 1969 were so encumbered by a whole range of prejudices that it was difficult to find any kind of common ground with them. One exception for example was the father of Anna Šabatová, Jaroslav Šabata, with whom I did find common ground, because he was very consensual and at the same time a very intelligent man who understood my positions. But with the others it was very difficult. Their prejudices, which dated back to the 1950s, were deeply engrained in them and they didn't recognise any other approaches.

So do you think that there was simply no possibility of linking back to the programme of 1968?

I couldn't see any possibility. Because I was alone. There was also Jaroslav Suk, but to attempt to form a left-wing group I would have needed people such as Jiří Hermach or Zdeněk Mlynář, Rudolf Slánský, Jr., and others.

How do you view today's Trotskyist organisations? In the Czech Republic we have *Socialist Solidarity*. If you were to evaluate the activity of radical left-wing organisations in the Czech Republic, what is your view?

<sup>8</sup> The "Velvet Revolution" began on 17 November 1989. On 28 December 1989 the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly passed a so-called "co-optation law" according to which vacated seats in the assembly could be filled without calling new general elections, but could instead be filled via "co-optation," that is, through a vote taken by the Federal Assembly itself. In the course of December 1989 and January 1990, 76 mainly Communist deputies resigned from their positions, and new deputies were co-opted onto the Federal Assembly in their place. Petr Uhl refused to be co-opted and was regularly elected to the Federal Assembly in the general elections of June 1990. (Note P.K.)

I follow the activities of *Socialist Solidarity*, or at any rate of their magazine *Solidarity*. I read it with interest. I have a very good relationship with them, but the time when I would have been actively engaged, either as a member or a sympathiser, has long passed. I have a positive view of *ProAlt*<sup>9</sup> and other such groups. A substantial shift can be seen in society, caused by the government of Petr Nečas (far more than that of Topolánek).<sup>10</sup> People have taken a stand against the advancement of fundamentalist market principles, against the technologisation and technocratisation of power. This shift can be seen everywhere. In fact, even journalists no longer regard it as *entirely* taken for granted that they should push this fundamentalist, undiluted capitalism, and many are now open to the possibility that there may be other paths.

In the past you have advocated a programme of social self-government. How do you view the idea of social self-government today?

I am of the opinion that today the idea of social self-government lives on in conceptions of participatory democracy and in models advocating direct democracy. I haven't been so bold as to put together a group of people who, *after* November 1989, would advocate social-self government as an alternative to the parliamentary system, but I haven't given up on the idea that people should govern themselves within certain collectives. For me, social self-government is a dream I still haven't given up on.

What do you think today's radical left should focus on? And what kind of strategy should it choose?

I don't want to dispense advice. I still write, because I've written all my life, but I don't want to give advice.

<sup>9</sup> *ProAlt* was an initiative opposing austerity measures and promoting political alternatives. It was created in reaction to the formation of the neoliberal government of Petr Nečas after the parliamentary elections of 2010. (Note P.K.)

<sup>10</sup> Mirek Topolánek's government was in power during the period 2006–2009. It pushed through tough neoliberal reforms. Its mandate ended with a vote of no confidence. The government of Petr Nečas was in power during the years 2010–2013. Its fall was brought about by the so-called "Nagyová affair". In June 2013, the director of the Section of the Prime Minister's Cabinet, and the Prime Minister's lover, Jana Nagyová, was detained and accused of bribery and of organising the abuse of the authority of an official. (The latter accusation related to suspicion of misuse of the military intelligence service.) Then Prime Minister Petr Nečas subsequently submitted his resignation, bringing about the fall of the entire government. (Note P.K.)

# TRANSLATION



# CLASSES AND THE REAL STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY

*Karel Kosík*

*This study was originally published in the Prague-based Filosofický časopis (Philosophical Journal) as “Třídy a reálná struktura společnosti,” in autumn 1958 (Filosofický časopis 6 [1958], no. 5, pp. 721–733). The text immediately attracted the attention of Party ideologues, and its author was subjected to harsh criticism as part of the so-called “anti-revisionist” campaign that was going on at the time. The article is, however, of more than merely historical-political significance, representing a departure from official Marxist-Leninist positions. It also presents an important side of Kosík’s thought. The text was written several years before publication of Kosík’s best-known work, Dialectics of the Concrete (which first appeared in Czech in 1963), and in several respects “Classes and the Real Structure of Society” can be read as a preparatory study for the later book. As in Dialectics of the Concrete, Kosík approaches Marxism as an analytical method for effectively grasping reality in its totality. Criticizing the methodological limitations of modern sociology (as represented by Max Weber, Kurt Mayer, and C. Wright Mills), Kosík introduces here his conception of concrete totality. In contrast to the one-dimensional analysis of society taking into account only a single aspect, whether it be economic, political, spiritual or ethical, the materialist theory of class is presented here as a method for approaching society in its dialectically*

*conditioned complexity. We present this article here for the first time in English, in a translation by Ashley Davis. Missing bibliographic information and English translations of cited texts have been filled in by Pavel Siostrzonek. Editorial notes are included in brackets.*

## I

Although every Marxist analysis of society operates as a matter of course with terms such as class, bourgeoisie, proletariat, and class ideology, thus with categories which in their organic unity make up the Marxist theory of classes; a cursory critical glance reveals that the very commonplace nature of this contains within it a serious danger. In the immediate casual obviousness with which these terms are used, what is lost is, above all, the character and sense of the Marxist theory of classes; all that is new in Marx's contribution escapes us, and, moreover, that which makes of Marx's observations a genuine *theory* of class disappears. If we undertake a return journey from so-called "class analyses" and class interpretations to their theoretical starting point, we discover that their starting point is not the Marxist *theory* of classes as a whole, but rather various *isolated* aspects of this theory, which raise themselves up to the level theory itself. These include in particular the following:

1. Descriptive academism and scholastic socialism, which understands the theory of classes as a doctrine about the definition and classification of social classes and strata. In this approach, the Marxist theory of classes is *reduced* to a formally logical delineation of terms, to a determination of the differences between class, status group, and stratum. The critical spirit of this approach is exhausted in the accentuation of the fundamental aspect of classes – their connection to the ownership of the means of production – in opposition to bourgeois sociology, which for the most part situates social classes within the realm of distribution. A typical representative of this approach is Karl Kautsky.<sup>1</sup> It is entirely natural that bourgeois sociologists, who view the Marxist theory of classes from *this* perspective, reproach Marx for failing to define classes precisely anywhere in his work, for the fact that it is not clear *how many* classes he recognized, and so on.<sup>2</sup> This approach thus bases itself on the presupposition that correctly defining is enough to enable scientific knowing.

2. The apparent antithesis of the previous conception is empirical practicicism, which identified the Marxist theory of classes with a system of rules for the waging of class struggle – that is, with a collection of empirical notions of the forms and methods of

<sup>1</sup> A textbook example is the extensive passage entitled "Klasse und Staat," with the subtitle "Definitionen," in the second volume of the eclectic work *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung*, vol. II. (Berlin: Dietz, 1927), esp. pp. 3–31. [Cf. Karl Kautsky, *The Materialist Conception of History*, trans. Raymond Meyer with John H. Kautsky (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 249–259.]

<sup>2</sup> Marx is reproached for this "scientific" imprecision by the contemporary French sociologist Gurvitch. Georges Gurvitch, *La vocation actuelle de la Sociologie* (Paris: P.U.F., 1950), p. 341.

class conflicts. The relationship between this conception and the theory of classes can be likened to the relationship of cameralism to political economy. It is not a theory of classes, but rather a collection of empirical notions and rules derived from *immediate* practice and focused *immediately* on practice, without any theoretical mediation. In contrast with the previous academic and scholastic approach, which “acknowledges” the Marxist theory of classes, with the exception of the dictatorship of the proletariat (which is rejected by both the Marxist Kautsky and the non-Marxist Gurvitch), this approach emphasises the cardinal significance of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a criterion for adherence to Marxism. Nevertheless, no matter how enormous the *practical-political* gulf between the two conceptions may be, they concur on one important point: they understand the dictatorship of the proletariat *only* from the perspective of political tactics, and in this one-sidedness they either accept it or reject it. In both cases politics and philosophy are separated, and the dictatorship of the proletariat is not understood as a unity of the methodological with the revolutionarily and historically transformative, but rather exclusively as a question of regular politics, tactics, and political programme.

3. The interpretation of the Marxist theory of classes as a matter of uncovering latent class *interests*, of uncovering the social being as an essentially economic being. This approach, which sees it as the task of science to reveal what *truly* lies behind political, aesthetic, philosophical, and other opinions, namely class interest, holds up *interest* as the primary driving force of social events; it thus understands Marxism as a theory of hidden *motivations* of social conduct, which of course places it amongst subjectivist theories. Interest becomes the real subject of history. In place of Hegel’s logical categories, which are incarnated and shape reality, class interest comes to the fore as the Demiurge of the real. Instead of real transitions and concrete analysis, it is sufficient to have in reserve “interest” as the universal explanation of social processes. In this conception, Marx’s thesis that the human being is a set of social relations has been inverted and disseminated in vulgar form as *homo economicus*.

4. The empirical-sociological interpretation of the theory of classes, which has found popularity especially in Poland over the last two years. Two antithetical tendencies in the investigation of the class structure of contemporary society, appearing in the capitalist world on the one hand, particularly in American sociology, and in the socialist camp on the other, primarily in Poland, give the impression at first glance of merely trading places with one another. Within American sociology, the international representative of empiricism, a number of scholars now recognise the inadequacy of mere social research for understanding the class structure of society. In Poland, by contrast, sociologists flock towards empirical research as the decisive factor that should liberate social science from sterility and enable concrete scientific knowledge of the working class and other social strata of socialist society. These opposing tendencies are advanced – as it appears from outside – because the old methods, whose place they are now taking, have proven disappointing and have failed to produce the expected results. However, the positive direction in which these opposing tendencies are advancing is not entirely

unambiguous. It contains within itself the seeds of its future breakdown. In the United States this tendency is characterised by a deviation away from the empirical methods of Warens<sup>3</sup> and an inclination towards the methodology of Max Weber. Although Weber need not be and is not the endpoint of this tendency, he becomes at least a visible and clearly formulated goal which can be aimed for, and whose method and conceptual apparatus can be accepted without modification. In the United States this represents a complex and contradictory process, which contains tendencies of refined apologetics for as well as deeper criticism of imperialist society (the typical representatives of both of these tendencies, Mayer<sup>4</sup> and Mills<sup>5</sup>, who shall be dealt with further below, take Max Weber as their starting point). But the path of Polish sociology contains the latent danger that it will remain captive to the very impotence and sterility against which it has risen up. The adherents of empirical research, who justify the legitimacy of their discipline by arguing that it is necessary to gain knowledge of the working class under socialism (since it allegedly remains something unknown),<sup>6</sup> fall prey to an obvious error if they imagine that they can arrive at such knowledge by *this* means. The empirical revolt against dogmatic sterility is merely a protest against a past state of affairs; it does not yet represent its overcoming. A *critical* adoption of bourgeois methods of empirical research *without* a critical adoption and elaboration of the *Marxist theory* of classes must inevitably lead into a blind alley. Attaining knowledge of the contemporary working class means attaining knowledge of contemporary *society* in its internal structure and its concrete historical tendency. The complexity of this task is determined by the complex character of the epoch itself: the existence of two social systems in their concrete historical form.

A common feature of all the above conceptions, however much they vary in their details, is the fact that they are detached from the Marxist *method*, and as a result they understand the theory of classes as a finished result, an isolated question, detached from both the materialist conception of history and the revolutionary historical praxis of the proletariat.

The Marxist theory of classes, the core ideas of which are briefly summarised in Marx's famous letter to Weydemeyer,<sup>7</sup> differs fundamentally from the one-sided and distorted

<sup>3</sup> [It seems likely that the name "Warens" is incorrect. There was, however, a well-known American sociologist who fits Kosík's description named William Lloyd Warner (1898–1970), author of numerous empiricist studies on social inequality. Warner's theory of class was, moreover, discussed at length in an article by Kurt Bernd Mayer cited by Kosík below. (Editors' note)]

<sup>4</sup> [Kurt Bernd Mayer (1916–2006), Swiss-American sociologist whose work will be discussed in this article. (Editors' note)]

<sup>5</sup> [C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), the influential US-based sociologist. (Editors' note)]

<sup>6</sup> See Julian Hochfeld, "O programu výzkumu pracovního prostředí na velkých stavbách socialismu," *Filosofický časopis* 4 (1956), no. 3, pp. 441–448.

<sup>7</sup> Karel Marx, "Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, 5 March 1852," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39 (New York: International Publishers, 1983), pp. 61–65.



interpretations described above. The very fact that the ideas Marx expressed in this frequently quoted letter remain either misunderstood or vulgarly distorted in these interpretations testifies to the gulf between these approaches and the Marxist theory of classes. In the letter in question, Marx rejects the supposition that he had discovered the existence of classes and their struggle in society. Already before Marx, Ricardo in particular had uncovered the class anatomy of modern society, and French historians had also presented a *history* of classes and class struggles. Marx's contribution resides in the fact that *knowledge* of the historical role of the proletariat, thus the discovery of the *real* revolutionary subject of history, became the basis for establishing a *science* of society as a science of the *present*.<sup>8</sup> For Marx and Marxism, the issue of classes and the class struggle is not exclusively a political or tactical question; it is a fundamental issue of historical development, scientific understanding, and the revolutionary transformation of the present. On this basis it can be explained why classes and the theory of classes have not only tactical-strategic or sociological significance for Marxism, but also, and above all, philosophical significance, since from the perspective of *Marx's* theory of classes new formulations were developed for explicitly philosophical questions, such as the relationship between subject and object, necessity and freedom, absolute and relative truth. In a narrower sense, Marx's contribution to the theory of classes is characterised by two discoveries: Marxist historicism and the real revolutionary subject of history.

The connection of the Marxist theory of classes with both philosophy and political strategy and tactics fundamentally distinguishes Marxism from various sociological conceptions of classes, which essentially represent a mere description of the existence of classes but are not capable of uncovering the reality of classes – that is, they are not capable of becoming a theory of the real process of the abolition of *all* classes. These theories are either open apologia for capitalist dominion or mere sociological inquiries into partial phenomena of the class structure, torn out of their social context and developmental connections. In Marxist theory, based on *knowledge* of the historical role of the proletariat, praxis exists not as a foreign body which is attached from outside to a theory that has already been formed, but is rather a moment of this theory. Only on this basis can the traditional extreme of apologetics and utopia, in which bourgeois science operates today, be overcome: either ossification within the factuality of given relations and thus a petrification of these relations, or a creation of an ideal outside of society, outside of developmental tendencies, an ideal for whose realisation no forces exist.

<sup>8</sup> Engels considered "This eminent understanding of the living history of the day, this clear-sighted appreciation of events at the moment they occur" to be the principal characteristic of the materialist conception of history and the materialist theory of classes. See Frederick Engels, "Preface to the Third German Edition of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* by Marx," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 26 (New York: International Publishers, 1990), p. 302.

Marxist historicism resides in the fact that it understands the present as a transition, as a moment of historical development, thus as something mediated, though naturally it does not deny immediacy, that is, the uniqueness and specificity of each historical stage and epoch. The working class, as the real subject of the *present* epoch, is not an external and therefore impartial observer of the historical process, but an active, revolutionary agent thereof, which however stands above each of its concrete practical actions in the sense that it understands and realises this action as a *link* in the process of historical development and thus specifically places the action within the historical context.

Each epoch is immediate, that is to say unique, only thanks to the fact that it is mediated; nevertheless, as a product of prior development it is at the same time something different, since it is itself both a *producer* and a mediating link to the next developmental stage. From the standpoint of the proletariat, capitalist society is not only that which it is immediately, that which it is in its historical givenness, namely an exploitative order, but is at the same time something else, namely the material preparation for its own negation, the abolition of capitalism. The standpoint of the working class (that is, politically and methodologically, practically and philosophically: the dictatorship of the proletariat) is the search for a *practical* possibility for overcoming given relations. In this sense, this standpoint *more objectively* penetrates into reality than any so-called scientific objectivism, since it understands reality as *dynamic*, weighed down by internal contradictions, and does not cling to reality's facticity. The *unity* of the objective examination of reality (from the standpoint of the working class) and the revolutionary *transformation* of reality (the revolutionary struggle of the working class) is dialectical and dynamic: a higher degree of objectivity is made possible by the practical overcoming of existing conditions, by the discovery of a real path out of these conditions; but the search for this real path out is inseparably linked to a deep, concrete, and methodologically correct analysis of these conditions.

If it is not possible to understand the Marxist theory of classes as a finished *result*, which exists and can be used *separately* from its method, this means it is necessary to demonstrate positively how in the Marxist theory of classes the *discovery* of the proletariat as a historical subject connects to the elaboration of a dialectical, genetic-historical method (in opposition to abstract-analytical method).

Marx concurs with Hegel that all that exists is simultaneously immediate and mediated. Being is understood as a process. However, in contrast to Hegel, who as a consequence of his idealistic method *frequently* lapses into the speculative construction of mediation, Marx emphasises the mediated nature of things themselves and of objective processes; what matters for him is thus the logic of reality itself, not a logic that is an externally imposed. Whereas Marx infers transitions from the "*specific* essence" of the examined phenomena, transitions in Hegel form out of the "*universal* relation" of abstract categories. Marx remarks concerning Hegel: "It is always the same categories offered as the animating principle now of one sphere, now of another, and the only thing of importance

is to discover, for the particular concrete determinations, the corresponding abstract ones.”<sup>9</sup> This speculative method appears in vulgarised form in those proponents of class theory whose class analyses forego concrete examination and, in place of concrete determinations, find abstract determinations based on “class interest.”

In opposition to Ricardo and classical political economy, Marx *methodologically* points to the *existence* of mediation, and thus in opposition to the *analytical* method he holds up his genetic-historical method, and in opposition to general and forced abstraction he holds up his concrete abstraction. The analytical method of classical political economy bypasses mediation and reduces the various forms on which it is based, as if these forms were *given* presuppositions, to a single unity. Although this method reveals the *existence* and struggle of classes in bourgeois society, it considers these classes, together with the entire social order, to be a natural and therefore unchanging basis of historical development, which can be understood – as it is by Hegel<sup>10</sup> – as a *quantitative* growth, and not a qualitative development. “Ricardo”, writes Marx, “understands wage labour and capital as a natural, not specific historical, social form of the production of wealth [...]. Therefore he does not understand the specific character of bourgeois wealth.”<sup>11</sup>

In order for empirical forms of surplus-value – profit, interest, rent – to be developed genetically, that is, in order to abolish their givenness upon which they are based and which serves for Ricardo as a natural prerequisite for their investigation, it is necessary to arrive at a *deeper* abstraction, to uncover their common source, which is *independent* of them, to discover surplus-value as the substance of all of these historically phenomenal forms. Whilst vulgar economics petrifies the independence and isolation of the various empirical historical forms in which the individual components of the capitalist economy come to the surface and behave towards one another with complete indifference (profit as a function of capital, wage as a function of labour, rent as a function of land), thereby disguising capitalist exploitation, classical economics by contrast attempts to reduce these indifferent forms to their internal unity. According to Marx, this method is linked to the fact that “Ricardo exposes and describes the economic antagonism of classes [...] and that consequently political economy perceives, discovers the root of the historical struggle and development.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 10 [Kosík's emphasis].

<sup>10</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), § 248, p. 269; see also Hans Freyer, *Soziologie als Wirklichkeitswissenschaft: Logische Grundlegung des Systems der Soziologie* (Leipzig and Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1930).

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857–58*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 28 (New York: International Publishers, 1986), p. 256.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 31 (New York: International Publishers, 1989), p. 392.

However, the limited nature of this abstract analytical method lies in the fact that it does not go beyond the *given* existence of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, and is therefore incapable of abolishing this immediate existence by finding mediating links.

If, in classical political economy, the natural and permanent existence of classes on the one hand and the analytical-abstract method on the other *mutually* presuppose and complement one another, in Marx, by contrast, the exposure of the capitalist order and of the existence of classes as historically *transitory* phenomena is linked to the genetic-historical method, which arrives at the existence of these phenomena through a series of mediating moments, which of course abolishes the givenness of these phenomena and reveals their historically transitory character.

A Marxist who examines one or another historical epoch cannot pretend to stand face to face with indefinite chaos, from which he or she arrives at the simplest abstract determinations only by means of analysis. On the contrary, these abstract determinations already exist, and the Marxist is a Marxist because he or she uses them as points of reference which protect him from drowning in a sea of empirical material, and which enable him to distinguish the essential from the secondary – even if only tentatively, and making constant allowance for the revisability of both initial presuppositions and partial results. These abstract determinations and points of reference are terms like class, bourgeoisie, proletariat, and petty bourgeoisie. The Marxist theory of classes considers these fundamental terms to be initial principles of examination, to be something whose concrete reality is an abstract determination, which attains concreteness and therefore scientific character only in the course of and as a result of the examination. The Marxist method of proceeding from the abstract to the concrete is thus antithetical to the external subsuming of empirical material under general theses. (It is no coincidence that, in his critique of Lassalle, Marx counterposes and connects two fundamental errors of Lassalle's thought: ideologism and subsumption.) A scholar guided by vulgar Marxism has a choice: either to subsume factual data and empirical material externally beneath rigid, metaphysical entities called classes, or to enumerate a number of isolated general facts from civil history, to present a body of basic statistical data related to production and economics, to observe quantitative, external and statistically expressed shifts in certain groups of the population (the growth of the proletariat, the decline of independent entrepreneurs, etc.). In the first case, the selected facts confirm theses known in advance, and the scholar – whether consciously or unconsciously – *feigns* scientific analysis. In the second case the scholar manufactures, on a conveyor belt of “historical-class framing,” some kind of universal historical backdrops that *precede* the actual interpretation and, in their temporal priority, are intended to serve as a “materialist” explanation of the problem being addressed. Empirical facts are entirely externally subsumed under prefabricated, rigid metaphysical terms. The facts can only confirm theses that are known in advance. Concepts, conceptions, and categories, which *enter* into the process of examination *as already-made* and definitive truths, emerge from it in the same form, the only difference being that they have attached to them examples, random empirical data.

Empirically selected data and externally attached facts cannot change anything in concepts and categories that are understood, due to the disposition of thought, as rigid and immutable. And if in some cases it seems that these conceptions are enhanced and developed by *new* determinations, in reality what we have are determinations just as abstract and general as those that came before, which do not lend those terms any new *content*. In this sense, for example, the working class under socialism is characterised as a “qualitatively new,” “qualitatively different” class.

Because Marxism has already elaborated a basic system of social categories, for every Marxist the journey “back” from the abstract to the concrete is of primary importance. In Marx (and similarly in Hegel), the relationship between the singular and the general is not a relationship of externality, contingency, and therefore reciprocal arbitrariness and independence; it is a relationship of progression, dependency, conditionality, and organic unity. If general categories are known and facts are gathered and sorted, what remains is to undertake the journey back, that is, to conduct a scientific analysis that would find the mediating links between singular, empirical facts and abstract categories, mediations which would only then organically link the singular and the general in an organic unity; that is, in in-depth scientific knowledge. As soon as this process is conducted, abstraction is no longer an initial empty or general abstraction, just as facts are no longer empirical facts: a new quality is created, a concrete abstraction, a deeper and enhanced knowledge. Abstraction is concretely filled; it develops and is infused with concrete content, not in such a manner as a sack is filled with potatoes, but organically. Facts enter *organically*, not randomly or *generally*, into a definite, concrete whole, where they can fulfil their dual role: in part to acquire their own genuine meaning, to define themselves, and in part to reveal the connections of this whole, this totality; that is, to speak and talk not only of themselves, but simultaneously to be revealers, speakers, for the other. So for example Bernstein and the modern revisionists and bourgeois sociologists, who in opposition to Marx elevate the existence of the so-called new middle class – just like Marx’s vulgar defenders who deny or trivialise the new middle class’s existence – start out from the same methodological bases, despite the superficial antagonism between their standpoints: for both sides, this fact, this phenomenon, is examined outside of the developmental tendencies and specific character of capitalism. Or, in other words: for both sides this phenomenon is something independent, whereas in reality the phenomenon exhibits tendencies that reveal the specific character of contemporary capitalism.

The concrete concept of the working class – and Marxism is always concerned with concrete concepts, with concrete truths – cannot be exhausted by its relationship to the means of production. The concrete concept of the working class is not a starting point for examination, but rather its *result*. The concretisation of this concept is possible only by virtue of the fact that the most general abstract (and therefore in this sense *fundamental*) determination of the proletariat (as given by its position within production and its relationship to the ownership of the means of production) is set within the context of reality, and within this context the relationship of the proletariat towards the other

classes, the internal dynamics of its development, its function, etc., are revealed. Through this placement within a historical context, through confrontation with other classes, through the tracing of connections with society as a whole, through the exposure of internal contradictions, through the unveiling of those functions that follow from social classification, only then can there emerge an *organic* linkage of the a priori with the empirical, of theory with factual material, and only in this manner does it become possible to arrive at an enhancement, development and therefore concretisation of concepts. Abstract determination, which is the *starting* point of examination, through this classification gains an internal dynamic, *is transformed*, ceases to be an abstract definition and becomes a concrete concept. The antithesis of this method of progression from the abstract to the concrete is the method of immutable entities and mechanical subsuming. In this second, metaphysical method, a certain conception is placed within the context of reality in such a manner that during the course of the examination it remains constantly the same, unchanging, inert, an abstract identity. The concept is determined already before the examination, the results of the investigation are known in advance, and the so-called “scientific examination” is merely a collation of illustrations in order to confirm the validity of a lifeless entity.

The classical definition of class as presented by Lenin is the most general abstract determination. But is science a complex of abstract general determinations? In such a case it would be eclecticism, since it would bring together abstract determinations without identifying the real unity of determinations and arriving at a concrete totality. Since science is not a complex of abstract determinations, but rather a dynamic unity of concepts, even the concrete scientific concept of class cannot be exhausted by abstract determination and definition. Vulgar Marxism, which *immediately* links (by subsumption) abstract definitions (bourgeoisie, proletariat, petty bourgeoisie) with empirical material, does not lead to further, deeper knowledge of an unknown reality, but only to an apologia for facts on the one hand and to a tedious repetition of abstract determinations on the other. And if such a pseudo-scientific theory claims to explain reality, it must eventually come to an unbridgeable gulf, since it wishes to explain the living by means of the dead (entities, universalities, realia), to understand the developing by means of the immobile, to identify the dynamic and contradictory by means of the rigid, the complex by means of the simplistic, the rich and diverse by means of the one-sided. Whereas in one case it *subsumes* empirical facts mechanically beneath rigid theses, in another it *reduces* contradictory, diverse, concrete reality to simple, immutable, inert abstraction.

The concrete concepts of the “proletariat” and “bourgeoisie” represent a dynamic unity of many determinations, a synthesis of *all* fundamental features and aspects, a developmental logic not of one or another period taken separately, but of all history. Marx’s idea that the anatomy of the human being provides the key to the anatomy of the monkey is not a denial of historicism, but on the contrary manifests a dialectical historicism that does not succumb to the relativism and subjectivism of bourgeois historicism. This opinion does

not at all mean that it would be possible to explain phenomena corresponding to a lower social level, or undeveloped phenomena, by means of categories which correspond to developed and fully constituted conditions. As a result, it is a mistake to take the categories of socialism and communism that Marx arrived at on the basis of an analysis of the *most advanced* capitalist countries of his time and transfer them without any modification to a socialist society that has barely emerged from semi-feudal and largely undeveloped conditions. This leads to a *twofold* mistake: firstly, a certain historical phase of socialism is explained not as a *phase* of socialism, but as socialism in general, and the conditions, relations, and structure of this phase are more or less petrified as the ideal of socialism. By this it is implicitly assumed that socialism does not develop: this does not mean that this attitude does not *empirically* admit the possibility of development. In fact, in this empirical aspect under socialism precisely, growth is emphasized. But this development is understood in exclusively evolutionary terms, as the quantitative growth of certain given constant elements, which are immutable. Secondly, that which is understood as the developed phase of socialist society, or as the initial phase of a socialist society that has emerged from a revolution in a highly industrialised country in which the proletariat forms the vast majority of the population – that socialism which is therefore, in a certain sense, the *programme* for every other socialist country – is interpreted as an actual state, is seen as a level that has already been reached.<sup>13</sup>

The Marxist theory of classes is a scientific theory because it is capable of presenting and identifying with maximum precision and specificity the following:

1. an image of the social stratification of each society taken as a whole at a given stage of historical development, illustrating all the relationships of the classes and groups within the framework of this whole;
2. the physiognomy of each class and social group in all their aspects, economic, social, political, moral, and intellectual, within their mutual relationships and with regard to society as a whole;
3. the developmental dynamic of each class and social group, analysing the transformation of the functions of social groups, and presenting a description and theory of their origin, development, and demise.

<sup>13</sup> The political and, naturally, also the methodological aspect of this reality is stressed for example by Lenin in his famous reflection on the Soviets. “The result of this low cultural level is that the Soviets, which by virtue of their *programme* [Kosík’s emphasis] are organs of government *by the working people*, are *in fact* [Kosík’s emphasis] organs of government *for the working people* by the advanced section of the proletariat, but not by the working people as a whole.” V. I. Lenin, “Eighth Congress of the R.C.P. (B.),” in *Collected Works*, vol. 29 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), p. 183.



## II

The famous characterisation of Max Weber as the Karl Marx of the bourgeoisie<sup>14</sup> shares the imprecision of all commonplace idioms. Above all it creates the impression of Weber as Marx's equal, bourgeois antipode, and that his work is therefore explicable primarily as a direct bourgeois-idealistic reaction to Marx. This characterisation disproportionately inflates Weber's significance, the originality of his thought and of his critique of Marxism. If we are to remain with this traditional image, we believe that a far more precise characterisation is that which places the intellectual production of Max Weber within the context of the Marxism of the Second International, namely of the contradictory continuation of Marx's work carried forth above all by the theoreticians of pre-war German social democracy. Weber's work is not an idealistic reaction to Marx's dialectical materialism, but rather to the vulgar and economic materialism of the Second International.<sup>15</sup> Weber is a bourgeois antagonist, critic and at the same time travelling companion of the opportunistic distortion of Marxism in the era of the Second International. This is not a mere historical matter. Coming to terms with Weber's theory of classes means essentially exposing the methodology of the vast majority of contemporary bourgeois sociologists engaging with the issue of classes and social stratification. The objections of these sociologists to Marxism are almost always a mere repetition of Weber's argument.

In Max Weber, the economic factor of vulgar Marxism is transformed into an economic aspect, from the perspective of which it is possible to examine society.<sup>16</sup> This transition from objectivity to subjectivism is a consistent elaboration of the idealistic critique of economic materialism. If the economic is no more than one factor and one aspect of reality amongst others, how is it objectively possible to justify the privileged position of this aspect, of this one factor in relation to the others? Max Weber, who replaced factor with aspect, merely performed the vulgar economists' intellectual work for them.

Marxism, however, acknowledges no privileged economic factor, which would, in a decisive manner, determine the other parts or factors of society. The economy occupies

<sup>14</sup> Albert Salomon: "[W]e may call Weber the bourgeois Marx." Albert Salomon, "German Sociology," in Georges Gurvitch and Wilbert E. Moore (eds.), *Twentieth Century Sociology* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1945), p. 598.

<sup>15</sup> See Karl Löwith, who however reaches these conclusions in a different context and from a different perspective. Karl Löwith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, trans. Hans Fantel (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> "The quality of an event as a 'social-economic' event is not something which it possesses 'objectively.' It is rather conditioned by the orientation of our cognitive interest, as it arises from the specific cultural significance which we attribute to the particular event in a given case." And elsewhere (even more emphatically): "[I]t is self-evident that [...] a phenomenon is 'economic' only insofar as and *only* as long as our *interest* is exclusively focused on its constitutive significance in the material struggle for existence." Max Weber, "Objectivity" in *The Methodology of Social Sciences*, trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1949), pp. 64, 65 [emphasis in the original].



a special position both in society and in the examination of society only because the economy is neither a factor nor an aspect but the *real structure* of society. If Marxists therefore use the concept of economy together with vulgar materialists (and their idealistic antipode Max Weber), the two camps understand something entirely different by this term.

Vulgar materialism, which reduces the individual realms of social reality to economic factors, is a late and economic modification of mechanical materialism, whose basic method of explaining reality resides in reducing all forms of movement to a single basic, elementary – the simplest possible – form. This mechanical materialism shares the same fate as vulgar economic materialism in that it must sooner or later be supplemented and surpassed – by idealism. In this sense it is understandable why Mills calls for the economic determinism of Marxists to be supplemented by “political determinism” and “military determinism.”<sup>17</sup>

The term “economy” in the work of Weber, Mills, and Mayer is not identical to the Marxist conception: in the first case it means the “economic” *distribution* of social *wealth*, whereas in Marx distribution is merely a moment of production, and therefore only one aspect of the economic relationship. What Weber and Mills call “the economy” and “the economic” is not, in Marx’s conception, a defining factor but rather a derivative one. Whilst Mayer for example asserts that Marxism means giving priority to this “economic” moment over the moment of power and over social status, Marxism in fact demonstrates that this so-called economic moment is just as derivative as the moment of power and as social status, since in all cases what we have are only certain aspects and relatively autonomous realms, whose concrete content is determined by the real structure of society. From the disharmony among these three of moments, Mayer infers a crisis in the current theory of classes: “the personal social status of the given individual in this industrial society [industrial society is what today’s ‘sensitive’ bourgeois sociologists call capitalism – KK] is not necessarily the exact equivalent of his class position at any given moment in time. It is precisely this difference between class position and social status, i.e. the problem of the interrelation between economic inequality and the differential distribution of power and prestige in contemporary society which has given rise to the conceptual difficulties and confusions which permeate modern class theory.”<sup>18</sup>

The confrontation of Marx’s and Weber’s conceptions of classes demonstrates that Weber and his American devotees are burdened in their theory by economic determinism, despite the fact that they attempt to incriminate Marx for this, whereas Marx’s conception of class conversely has nothing in common with economic determinism. This economic one-sidedness in Weber’s theory of classes is necessary in order to provide space

<sup>17</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 277.

<sup>18</sup> Kurt Bernd Mayer, “The Theory of Social Classes,” in *Transactions of the Second World Congress of Sociology*, vol. 2 (London: International Sociological Association, 1954), pp. 322–323.

for other autonomous factors, which are supposedly just as important as classes for the analysis of society and social stratification. We have here Weber's famous trilogy: class, social status and power, three independent and fundamentally autonomous dimensions of social stratification. Since Marxism views society one-sidedly from the perspective of the relations of ownership – as is argued by certain contemporary American devotees of Weber's theory of classes – it cannot grasp problems that are not directly linked to these relations of ownership and the phenomena that spring from them, problems such as power, status, and prestige. As a result it is necessary, if social stratification is to be grasped, to add to classes further independent dimensions – social status and power.

Marxism naturally does not deny that categories like power and social status have reality and usefulness as particular dimensions of social stratification. However, in contrast to Weber and Weber's school, Marxism does not consider these categories autonomous with regard to the social order.

In this respect it is necessary above all to clarify how Marx's conception of class differs from Weber's. Weber situates classes within the sphere of distribution (the market), whilst in Marxist theory classes are bound to the mode of production and to ownership of the means of production. The determining factor of class affiliation for Weber is the "economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income [*ökonomische Güterbesitz- und Erwerbsinteressen*],"<sup>19</sup> from which it follows that "[p]roperty' and 'lack of property' are [...] the basic categories of all class situations,"<sup>20</sup> and that "[c]lass situation is [...] ultimately market situation."<sup>21</sup> In light of this, having access to property on the market is decisive for class affiliation, and the fundamental difference between ownership of the means of *production* on the one hand and ownership of goods or commodities on the other is effaced, and in place of the fundamental Marxist categories – the *exploited* and the *exploiters* – there appear the imprecise, confused, and ambiguous categories of *the propertied and the propertyless*.

The American professor Bernard, who openly draws reactionary and apologetic consequences from Weber's theory, whilst simultaneously vulgarising it, reproaches Marxism for apparently failing to fulfil the prediction of its founder concerning the polarisation of society into the propertied and the propertyless. It is unnecessary to place excessive emphasis on the fact that the Marxist analysis of society in general and capitalist society in particular is not based on the categories of the "propertied" and "propertyless." These categories were used by *pre-Marxist* revolutionary and socialist literature in its attempts to express social antagonisms. It is clear that analysis employing these categories is extremely primitive and imprecise. The Marxist theory of classes is not based on the relationship

<sup>19</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 927.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 928.

between the rich and poor, the propertied and propertyless, but on the relationship of the immediate producers to the conditions of production, to the means of production. In contemporary bourgeois sociology, the above division has become the basis for an apologia, since it places the fundamental dividing line between the decisive groups in society within the realm of distribution. The opinions of professor Bernard concerning the American road to a “classless society,”<sup>22</sup> of professor Mayer on the idea that the class structure of contemporary American society shall be transformed in the near future into a middle-class society in which class antagonisms disappear,<sup>23</sup> of professor Schelsky<sup>24</sup> concerning the “destratification” (*Entschichtungsvorgang*) of West German society, are based on the fundamental categories of Weber’s theory of classes.

The scientific value of the modern theory of classes can be measured in terms of how capable it is of serving as a guide to the concrete examination and explanation of the complex and contradictory processes which are taking place within the class structure and social stratification of socialist and capitalist countries. From amongst the various types of social groups, Marxism has identified classes as large communities of people that have decisive significance for the character and determination of the structure of society and for the dialectic of social change and social development. This theory enables us to differentiate, within the entanglement of transformations that are already occurring in today’s society, between *structural* changes that alter the character of the entire social order and secondary, derivative changes that merely modify the given social order.

The American sociologist Mills reproaches Marxism entirely in the spirit of his teacher: “The simple Marxian view makes the big economic man the real holder of power.”<sup>25</sup> This conjecture is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the Marxist method as elaborated with the greatest thoroughness especially in *Capital*. Marxism asserts only that the ruling *class* of each social order is *simultaneously* the bearer of the wealth, power, and prestige of the given society. Whether each individual member of this ruling class, or each of its strata, components or groups, obtains a personal union of these spheres – wealth, power, and prestige – depends on the empirical circumstances. It is therefore entirely vulgar to imagine (and to attribute this nonsense to Marxism) that the richest capitalist in the land must at the same time make power-related decisions of a fundamental and nationwide significance, or that he enjoys the greatest respect, etc. Marxism insists that the distribution of wealth, the hierarchy of power, and the gradation of social status is determined by inherent regularities that ensue from the real structure of the social order at a specific stage of its development. The question of how power is

<sup>22</sup> Jessie Bernard, “Class Organisation in an Era of Abundance,” in *Transactions of the Third World Congress of Sociology*, vol. 3 (London: International Sociological Association, 1956), pp. 26–31.

<sup>23</sup> Kurt Bernd Mayer, “Recent Changes in the Class Structure of the US,” in *Transactions*, vol. 3, p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> Helmut von Schelsky, “Die Bedeutung des Schichtungsbegriffes für die Analyse der gegenwärtigen deutschen Gesellschaft,” in *Transactions*, vol. II., p. 360.

<sup>25</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, p. 277.

distributed within the given society, how the *power hierarchy* therefore operates, what is the measure and ladder of social esteem, what is therefore the *scale of social status*, and finally by what method wealth is allotted, how society is divided into the propertied, less propertied, and propertyless, thus how wealth is distributed – all of these dimensions, which Weber and his school consider to be autonomous, are in fact derived from the *real structure* of the social order.

We therefore return to the basic difference in the understanding of two fundamental categories – class and the economy – which differentiate Marx from Weber. For Marxism the economy is the *real structure* of a given epoch of human development, but is not an economic factor which conditions other factors, political, intellectual, moral, and other. As a result, economic categories are *simultaneously* social categories. Their specific nature as economic categories resides in the fact that they are an intellectual reproduction of the real structure of society. The social position of people in production and their relationship towards the means of production is therefore not a “purely” economic matter but rather an economically social matter, and *this is why* the materialist theory whose fundamental idea Marx formulates in *Capital* is possible: “It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers [...] in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice.”<sup>26</sup> The difference between genuine Marxism and vulgar economic determinism (and its bourgeois-idealist counterpart) resides in the following: vulgar materialism considers economic power, which is expressed in terms of property and wealth, to be the decisive ultimate cause, which determines politics, ideology, morality, etc. In contrast with this, for Marx the economy is never a so-called economic category; it is always, rather, an economically social category, and in this sense the economy can create a real structure which determines the concrete content of politics, ideology, morality, etc. This in-depth socio-philosophical understanding of the economy has in the most recent period led certain critics to deny the “economic” content of Marx’s *Capital* and to speak of it as an exclusively philosophical work.<sup>27</sup>

The second fundamental difference between Marx’s conception and Weber’s conception is that for Weber class is exclusively or primarily an economic category (in the aforementioned sense, which is not the same as Marx’s), whereas for Marx class is a concrete social totality with several aspects and determinations. How would it be possible to interpret social phenomena in class terms, broadly understood, if class were merely an economic factor, if it were thus, in relation to society as a multifarious whole, only a single, economic aspect of reality? To remain in this position means either to replace class analysis with economic simplification and vulgarisation, or to reject class inter-

<sup>26</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 927.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, the Catholic critic Jean-Yves Calvez, *La pensée de Karl Marx* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1956).

pretation as one-sided and flattening. Class in the Marxist conception, understood as a group of people occupying a definite position within social production and in relation towards the means of production, contains within itself *all* moments of social life, since the people who form classes are not mere abstractions (they are not for example “*homines economici*”) but rather are sets of social relationships in all spheres of the human essence, thus practical, intellectual, emotional, moral, and others.

Those vulgar notions that reduce class analysis to a mere “objective state,” which is understood to be a purely quantitative description of the external aspects of classes and of the class composition of society, are at best *merely* one element of class analysis. From here there also springs a frequent error on the part of philosophers, literary historians, and art historians, who believe that for their historical analyses of philosophy, literature or art they can take these “situational schemes” from historians and on *this* basis explain the issue in question, namely the historical form of social consciousness, in materialist and class terms. The reconstruction of a certain historical reality as a concrete historical totality does not presuppose a mere “historical framework” or a bare class skeleton, but on the contrary this bare skeleton is a mere abstraction and the historical framework is merely a pedagogical introduction to the “atmosphere” of the time. The Marxist analysis of classes, and therefore also the class-based analysis of reality, means the reproduction of reality as a unity of economics, politics, and social and intellectual life as determined by the real socio-economic structure.

The scientific significance of the categories of Marxist political economy, such as the law of value, surplus-value, and the concentration of capital, resides in the fact that they provide a theoretical explanation for observable phenomena of social life that, repeating themselves *a million times* and operating daily, determine human existence. The materialist theory of classes is an ideological reproduction of reality not in one, single aspect, be it economic, political, intellectual, moral or emotional, but in a concrete, dynamic totality, which gathers together all of these moments as parts and moments of the whole. A historian who for example studies the foundation of popular democratic Czechoslovakia and conducts a class analysis focusing only on *economic* and political aspects must be aware that in *this* form his or her analysis is incomplete and one-sided. This naturally is not the kind of bias that is necessarily shaped by the choice of this subject matter; it is rather a methodological bias that shapes the examination of the selected subject. The thought and sentiment of people, their ideology and psychology, are not determined by *abstract* relationships and definitions, however fundamental and important they may be, but by a complex of real, tangible, everyday living conditions which grow out of these fundamental conditions and relationships. What determines the thought and sentiment of people, their behaviour, conduct, style of life and naturally also their conception of the world, is not abstract affiliation to one or another class *in and of itself*, nor even their relationship to the means of production taken in abstraction, but rather the million-times-repeated regularity, the everyday existential conditions which reproduce these thoughts and feelings. A scientist who wished to study the working class

in Czechoslovakia after 1945, to demonstrate its concrete, real character, who thus wished to present a conception of this class as a concrete historical totality and not as a one-sided abstraction or an empty scheme, would naturally have to start out from fundamental determinations such as revolutionary change in the relations of ownership, but could not remain on the level of these most simplest determinations or, worse, consider them the *result* of his or her investigation. The decrees on the nationalisation of key industries in Czechoslovakia, a legal act by which capitalist ownership of the means of production is transferred to socialist ownership, could not *by themselves* create a socialist working class from the earlier proletariat. The main factors in the formation of the socialist working class were, first of all, the *revolutionary* process, the revolutionary class struggle, one legal aspect of which was the transfer of key industry into state ownership, and, second, the *real* position of the working class in the system of production. This, however, means that the relations of production are not identical to the relations of ownership, to ownership of the means of production. The relations of production of socialist society involve not only the legal fact that the means of production are in the ownership of the whole nation, but also, and above all, the real conditions in which the workers practically realise their role as the new *ruling class*.

January 1958

# REVIEW ESSAY





# PEOPLE, MULTITUDE, SOCIETY

*Joseph Grim Feinberg*

Alexandros Kioupkiolis and Giorgos Katsambekis (eds.), *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today: The Biopolitics of the Multitude versus the Hegemony of the People* (Surrey, Eng.: Ashgate, 2014), 258 p. ISBN 978-1-4094-7052-6

## Two Narcissisms of the Present

Paul Rekret begins his contribution to this new volume by invoking what philosopher Jason Read has called “the narcissism of the present.” How common it is, remarks Rekret, that we see passing historical phenomena as eternal conditions, that we understand momentary changes in our existence as evidence of essential but hitherto latent ontological processes, which have only now become manifest. (133) In 1914, the working class had been growing in size and power and self-consciousness. The class struggle of the moment had revealed that all history was the history of class struggles. The momentary preponderance of industrial labor had revealed that all wealth had always been derived from labor. The imminent proletarian revolution revealed that humanity had always already been waiting for the working class to arrive and save it. But by 2014 the working class had been declining in power and confidence (if not in numbers), and it seemed that it had always already been destined to decline. *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* presents – and complicates – two lines of thinking that have attempted to account for and draw conclusions from this new reality of apparent proletarian

decline. And the volume asks – implicitly – whether these two approaches can escape their erstwhile “narcissism.”

Beginning in the late 1970’s, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau developed one of the most thoroughgoing attempts to rethink socialism in light of the apparent waning of the working class. Shifting their hopes from the proletariat in itself to broad coalitions of progressive forces, they took what had long been considered a temporary socialist tactic and made it into a resolute strategy and a renewed vision for political change: The labor movement needed to join forces with other social movements. But this was not in order to regroup and prepare for a future in which could again act alone. Rather, it never should have tried to go it alone in the first place. It was widely seen as unrealistic to hope that proletarian revolution would, in the near future, achieve the transcendence of social tension. But Mouffe and Laclau went further, arguing in effect that this had always been an unrealistic hope and, moreover, that the transcendence of social tension never should have been hoped for in the first place. The working class was now fragmented, and now it was argued that politics as such had always been characterized by fragmentation. Social forces in this fragmented environment had to find new means of coming together, and politics had suddenly always been a matter of forming and re-forming alliances, of calling on “the people” (or some equivalent empty signifier) to unite and establish a new hegemony or counter-hegemony. We could no longer foresee where radical politicization might lead, and it turned out that we could never make such predictions in the first place, because politics, and therefore democracy, and therefore radical democracy, and therefore the world they create, are shifting and contingent.

About twenty years after Laclau and Mouffe came to prominence, the collaborative writing of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri captured the attention of the young left. They observed that the working class was not alone in becoming fragmented and ineffectual as a unitary social force. The bourgeoisie had also become fragmented, and so had the state and party systems that the bourgeoisie had once (more or less) controlled. Power had become dispersed and reconfigured in a worldwide “Empire,” and now it appeared that always – or at least since the beginning of the modern age (interpretations vary) – power had been capillary and decentralized, permeating lived life as “biopolitics.” The traditional working class was no longer capable of combatting Empire, and now it turned out that “the multitude” had always been a more adequate vessel of revolutionary activity than the working class, that only the multitude was capable of establishing a new world beyond the oppressive and (in any case) obsolete institutions of the state. It was recognized that the working class could no longer fulfill its historic mission of emancipation simply by negating its current alienated existence or by participating in antagonistic party struggles. The multitude, by contrast, was supposed to posit its own new forms of life. Then it seemed that active human existence itself had never really been accurately characterized by negation and overcoming but had always already been positive and self-generating. And from this positive and self-generating character of human action it followed that politics too was and had always (or long) been a matter of embodied

activity rather than distancing representation. Political transformation was not and never should have been a matter of struggling over the meaning of signs that stand in for other signs. It was a matter of enabling emancipatory affect to freely build and flow.

But *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* takes its point of departure a bit later. By the time of the Euro-American economic crisis of 2008, the Hardt-Negri antipathy to state and hierarchical representation had been eclipsed in many leftist circles by a hardnosed insistence on pragmatic political organization, which could be manifested in renovated communism (as in the cases of Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou) or in a more modest, gradualist radicalism (as with Mouffe and Laclau). But the global outburst of occupation movements in 2011, from Madrid and Athens and Santiago to Cairo and Madison and New York, seemed to return to a more Negri-esque horizontalism. The movements were huge, contributing to the overthrow of regimes and to a marked shift in political discourse, all without establishing fixed, hierarchical organizations or centralized coordination, and without participating in the structures of the state. Maybe the utopians had been realists all along.

By 2012, though, most of the occupation movements had been effectively suppressed or had otherwise lost steam. The most apparently successful of them, the Egyptian revolution, resulted in the electoral victory of a conservative who opposed most of what the less electorally capable revolutionaries had hoped for; then the conservative was in turn replaced by a military ruler more repressive than the one the revolution had deposed. Meanwhile, in Greece the social movement's desperate but hopeful energy was increasingly transferred into a political party that was already poised for electoral victory as *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* went to print. The Laclauian struggle for political hegemony, seemingly old fashioned a couple of years ago, has triumphantly returned – and by the time this review is published, it will have already ushered in a new round of disappointment. It would seem that the present is (has it always been?) pregnant with the past.

### Toward a Synthesis?

The discussions in *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* are refreshing, among other things, for having largely left behind this kind of most-modernism, this seemingly endless succession of claims to the mantle of exclusive contemporaneity.

Several articles in the volume accept the established lines of debate and take sides either with Hardt, Negri, and the multitude or with Laclau, Mouffe, populism, and hegemony. They apply their favored approaches to recent events, but they do not expend too much effort claiming that the latest social changes have made their less-favored approaches obsolete. Although Benjamin Ardit, for example, entitles his article “Post-Hegemony,” in fact he does not pursue too adamantly the rhetorical implication that we have really moved beyond hegemony and made it “post.” He focuses his attention, rather, on taking down the contrary thesis, arguably implicit in Laclau and Mouffe's thought, that hegemony is now the only game in town. Another article in the book is co-written by

Richard J. F. Day, author of a book entitled *Gramsci is Dead*. But here Day, like Arditi, does not develop the claim that Gramsci's concept of hegemony has really "died." His claim is simply that the concept of hegemony does not offer the *best* lens for viewing the key activities of social movements today, whose importance lies more in their defense of plurality than in their achievement of hegemonic universality. Saul Newman is a bit more tendentious when he claims that hegemony, whether in its Laclauian or Leninist-Gramscian form, really has become ineffective as a political strategy: "There is no more Winter Palace to storm" (96), he writes, and he implies that there is no longer an effective parliament to be elected to either, because state institutions have ceased to be an effective center of (bio-)political power. But Newman does not develop this argument too far. His emphasis is on the fact that movements like Occupy have done something *more* than build hegemony. Then, when Yannis Stavrakakis counters these articles in the volume's most sustained defense of the Laclauian approach, he does not claim that all emancipatory social action can be reduced to struggles over hegemony; he only states that in order to become *politically* effective, such action usually requires some kind of counter-hegemonic project involving unification around shared representations. "[I]nstead of erecting a wall between horizontalism and hegemonic processes," he writes, "wouldn't it be more productive to study their irreducible interpenetration?" (121)

All seem to agree that hegemony is something but is not everything. How, then, can we capture the relationship *between* hegemony and those transformative processes, or aspects of processes, that do not in themselves follow the rules of hegemony? Several of the articles in *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* take this question as their starting point. In the volume's introduction, Alexandros Kioupkiolis and Giorgos Katsambekis lay out the conflicting principles of the multitude on the one hand – defined by horizontalism and the absence of leaders – and of the people on the other – which, in the Laclauian conception, is formed in the process of constructing hegemony, and which therefore requires hierarchically organized structures that can stand above and unite those people who are represented in "the" people. On the one hand, there persists an undeniable desire for equal participation; on the other, there is an apparent necessity of concentrating power and value in representative bodies and signs.

In their separate contributions to the volume, Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis work their way further through these tensions, suggesting that the opposing phenomena can be understood within a single conceptual approach attuned to the "hegemony of the multitude" (in Kioupkiolis's terms) or the "multitudinous people" (as Katsambekis provisionally calls it, for lack of a more euphonious label). Both authors share Laclau's belief in the indispensability of hegemony for the long-term success of collective movements today. But rather than rejecting the notion of the multitude as useless or even harmful nonsense – which is more or less what Laclau himself argued – Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis acknowledge the novelty and positive emancipatory effects of "multitudinous" modes of activity. As Katsambekis puts it, there may really be no need to *choose* between the two.

The egalitarian, decentralized multitude is one moment in the existence of the people. The people's identity can never be fixed and wholly controlled from any center, because it is inherently fractured and is continually disrupted by the multitude. The multitude itself competes for hegemony as a sign – an empty signifier – uniting all radical democratic struggles (186–187). Or as Kioupkiolis puts it, the multitude reminds us of the need for constant vigilance to prevent hegemony, however necessary it might be, from negating the liberatory principles that radical democracy strives for in the first place. Uneven power and hierarchical representation may be necessary, but that does not make them good. If the multitude can be integrated into hegemonic political processes, it could serve the positive purpose of continually undermining and renewing them, “fuel[ing] the relentless subversion of hierarchies, closures and new patterns of domination from within, holding out the prospect of a world beyond hegemony in a universe still bridled with it.” (166) The integration of the multitude into popular hegemony does not erase the tension between them. But in Kioupkiolis's persuasive conception, this can be a productive tension. Although horizontality “cannot be a permanent state,” it can be a “horizon of ongoing struggle” (164). Hegemony, perhaps, could be a permanent state, but it's doubtful anyone would want to live in it if it were not continually challenged by something like the multitude.

Nevertheless I wonder whether this multitude-hegemony synthesis can really be accomplished so easily. When the multitude is brought into the structures of hegemony, is it still the same multitude? When hegemony is perpetually subverted by the multitude, is it still the same hegemony? Is it possible merely to select and combine the best features of hegemony and multitude? Or might it be necessary first to dissociate those features from the entire conceptual and practical structures out of which they arose, and then to articulate them in a new, emerging whole?

Marina Prentoulis and Lasse Thomassen, in their contribution to the volume, point to at least a couple of aspects of the multitude and hegemony that might have to be reconceptualized in the course of bringing them together. In their terms, there would have to be “hegemony without a vanguard,” and there would have to be a kind of “self-organization” that is, at the same time, “not immediate and spontaneous” (215). The concept of the multitude, after all, is fundamentally incompatible with the principle that the masses might be directed from above by a vanguard, if by vanguard we understand, as Prentoulis and Thomassen implicitly do, an organizational elite that is external to and independent from the masses. If the multitude becomes hegemonic and yet remains in some sense a multitude, any leadership of the multitude would have to be in some way *led* by the multitude. At the same time the fundamental principle of hegemony is incompatible with pure spontaneity and immediacy; human relations are always socially and politically mediated, and human action is always organized and planned, even when it does not work out as planned. A “multitudinous people” would have to develop forms of mediation that are adequate to its principles of horizontality and maximal participation – or else it might have to identify appropriate modes of mediation that are already

in place in the multitude's activity, but which multitude theorists, with their emphasis on spontaneity, have obscured or denied.

Rekret, however, suggests that the challenge runs still deeper, because the concepts of multitude and hegemony are not only associated with different social phenomena and conflicting political strategies; they are also drawn from mutually irreconcilable ontologies. For Hardt and Negri, the existence of the multitude reveals but also depends on a certain conception of existence as such: the multitude is primordially ungovernable, uncentralizable, and unstoppable because social being in general is fluid and indeterminate or, rather, absolutely self-determined. For Laclau and Mouffe, meanwhile, hegemony is a (the) central category of effective emancipatory activity because (as Arditì points out in this volume), in their view social being as such is governed by the logic of hegemony, as diverse actors unite and divide themselves around shared representations. If the multitude can achieve hegemony, then social being cannot be absolutely fluid, because hegemony dams and redirects the flow of being. And if the multitude can take hegemonic form, then demands for absolute self-determination would be reduced to tautology, because the social would determine itself regardless of what specific rules it determines for itself; both the multitude and the hegemonic elites would amount to self-determinations of social being. At the same time, if "the people" can become "multitudinous," then the people cannot be governed wholly by the logic of hegemony, and one must modify Laclau's claim that hegemonic logic "is the very logic of the construction of the social" (quoted by Arditì: 21). A truly multitudinous people would obey a logic of its own. And this may or may not have anything to do with ontology.

### Beyond the Bio- and the Political

What could that logic be? Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis, and less explicitly also Pren-toulis and Thomassen, have sketched certain aspects of it. Stavrakakis, though clearly committed to a Laclauian outlook, proposes several amendments that may enable La-clauianism to better account for the embodied, affective phenomena that the Negrian outlook emphasizes. Still, it remains unclear whether a thoroughly new, *integral* approach to the multitude *and* hegemony is possible at all. The new form still floats precariously between the mutually antagonistic systems from which it arose. The "multitudinous people" does not yet have its own proper name, and it does not yet appear as part of its own coherent whole.

Perhaps it is not inherently necessary to reconcile the dialectical confrontation of two approaches in a newer, better synthesis (especially when both these approaches have rejected the hope for dialectical syntheses and call instead for more open-ended conceptions of how tensions develop in history). If the competing approaches are driven to adjust themselves without losing their distinct individuality, radical theory will continue to benefit from their ongoing confrontation. Nevertheless, the discussions in *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* point to the possible inadequacy of this state of affairs. They point to the existence of two sets of phenomena that are crucial

to contemporary projects of emancipation, but which are accounted for by two different and largely incompatible sets of terms. If it is important to grasp the *interrelation* between hegemony and the multitude within a complex whole, it is worth asking whether a different conceptual framework may be better suited to the task.

One might begin to glimpse the outlines of such a framework by addressing those aspects of the material that are most contested, those points of greatest tension between established conceptions of the multitude and hegemony.

As several contributors to *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* observe, the question of *representation* raises problems for both approaches. One side of the debate complains that representation is fundamentally unjust; the other side insists that representation is inevitable. In their own terms, both are right. But both views are also incomplete, because there are multiple kinds of representation, and these exist alongside multiple kinds of non-representation. Representation is probably a part of all human activity – humans think by creating abstract signs that stand in for loose bundles of perceptions; they communicate by circulating those representational signs; they can act together because they share certain (collective) representations; and they can draw apart by opposing established representations and proposing new ones. Yet not *everything*, or at least not every aspect of everything, is representational. People signify, but they also feel and do; people represent themselves, but they also *are* themselves. And politics take place on both levels, in struggles over representation *and* in rearrangements of embodied experience. If at a given moment one or the other (or perhaps yet another) pole takes precedence, that is more likely a function of historically determinate change than it is a fundamental feature of being. A fully elaborated theory of the multitudinous people could grasp representation as both a persistent feature of human existence *and* as a historically contingent fact, which at certain moments comes to the fore and at other moments loses efficacy and salience.

The problem of *mediation* is similar. The multitudinous strand of thought (along with its many precursors) presents mediation as inherently dominating or alienating. The hegemony-oriented strand is undoubtedly right to object that mediation is inevitable, that people never really interact immediately but interact always through some kind of structure that influences the character of their interaction. Yet being inevitable does not make something unassailable. The question, rather, might be differently posed: What *kinds* of mediation may be preferable to other kinds? Moreover, if the *feeling* of immediacy is a real feeling, then what kinds of mediation provide the experience of immediacy? And, if I may borrow a term from anthropologist William Mazzarella, how is such “im-mediation” *organized*? And if the false feeling of immediacy is a problem, in what does its problematic character rest? And, finally: How might more *legitimate* modes of mediation – modes that are not experienced as alienating – be brought into being, without unduly deceiving us about their mediated (and never immediate) character?

Part of the difficulty in providing coherent answers to these questions – answers that respect both the legitimate desires of the multitude and the practicalities of hegemo-



ny – is that the two concepts operate on different levels of analysis and are applied to different spheres of social activity. Laclau and Mouffe base themselves in the sphere of the political. They acknowledge social context, and they lead occasional forays into the economy and the arts, but their primary concern is with how social change can be achieved through specifically political action – the articulation of complaints into demands, the mobilization of people around representations of justice and injustice, the establishment of hegemony within political culture and, ultimately, within structures of state power. Hardt and Negri, by contrast, do not merely deny the importance of politics as a distinct sphere of action; their entire conception of social change concentrates on the extra-political, that is to say, on the bio-political, on microstructures of power that reach into the crevices of personal and libidinal practice. Laclau and Mouffe are able to offer a perspective on politics, while Hardt and Negri's biopolitics is less a politics than an *ethics*, a way of caring for the self and of relating to others, coupled with the rather messianic belief that this mobilization of affect will, almost without coordination, quicken our steps along a path toward collective salvation. For Hardt and Negri, salvation is not achieved by political victory; it is immanently contained in the multitude's many disparate steps.

If the prophets of the multitude and the practitioners of hegemony are operating in different spheres, they can both be right, and yet they might have nothing to say to each other. We might be able to accept both approaches; but the two approaches might never actually meet. Of course, implicitly we tend to sense that Hardt and Negri really do have a political strategy, derived from the generalization of their micropolitical imperatives. But their theoretical perspective offers little space for identifying the structures of articulation between micro-practices, specific mobilizations, and general social transformation. At the same time we can (though we less often do) read certain ethical/micropolitical implications into the thought of Laclau and Mouffe, based for example on the inherent value of antagonism, struggle, and debate as against the dull injustice of total social harmony, whether it be imposed in the present or imagined in a post-revolutionary future. But in order to reconstruct this Hardt-Negrian politics or this Laclau-Mouffean ethics we must go beyond the bounds set by their approach.

What if we grounded our approach neither in the political nor the ethical/micropolitical, but in the *social*, which contains them both? By "the social" I mean that sphere of human existence whose extent is determined by the reach of all human relations, in their generality and in the shape of their multiple particular forms. The lens of the social focuses attention on the relationship *between* different social spheres as they combine in concrete structures to form the social whole. The political, in which hegemony operates, *does* relate to the micro(bio)political, where the multitude advances. But this relationship is largely invisible from the vantage point of politics – which makes it easy for someone like Laclau to dismiss the multitude as largely meaningless nonsense. And the relationship is similarly ungraspable when seen from the vantage point of the multitude, which,



not without reason, experiences the political as a power imposed from outside. Each sphere draws from the other – without quite grasping the significance of what it does.

It seems to me that from *this, social* perspective a positive program for a “multitudinous people” could begin to be conceived. The ethics of the multitude could be framed as a guiding principle of politics and could serve, as Kioupkiolis suggests, as a continual corrective to the inherent hierarchies and strictures of hegemony. We don’t need to insist that it will ever be possible to live in a world free of representation and mediation in order to ask how political action and social forms can be as participatory, egalitarian, and non-alienating *as possible*. It is probably true, as several contributors to *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* argue, that the utopian hopes of multitudinous movements can only be fulfilled, however partially, if they are coupled with some kind of new hegemony, within structures of political power. But it is probably also true that the social imperatives of radical democracy can only be realized, or at least can be approximated and approached, if pragmatic politics are pressured from within and without to establish more horizontal forms of participation and representation. It would seem that “radical democracy” can only be made truly radical when the bounds of its own politics are shattered by what lies beyond. Democracy only becomes radical to the extent that its practices of hegemony are bent under the weight of (something like) the multitude.

In order to achieve this, it seems to me that it might be necessary to resist the temptation to hastily ontologize. A given approach may operate in one specific sphere of social existence – the political or the biopolitical – but it becomes problematic the moment it raises the particular experience of this sphere to the level of universal being. An approach may find that history has brought its favored sphere of operation into momentary light, but it gives into the narcissism of the present when it claims that the momentarily salient (for example, political or biopolitical) sphere has always already been the basis of the other spheres. The notion of the social might offer a way of encompassing, situating, and conceptualizing the interaction and potential transcendence of multiple spheres.

Then, maybe, as the bounds of politics and biopolitics break down, the multitudinous people could open itself to socially embedded history. Maybe its advocates would not feel the need to claim eternal validity on the basis of momentary truth but could continually respond to their present world, adapting to it without accepting it. They could seek to be adequate to a moment that is always inadequate to their ideals. Without succumbing to fashion, they could provoke their generation. And, before ontologizing, they might be content to socialize.

The beginnings of such a shift, it seems to me, are palpable in this book.



# REVIEW



## MACHT UND WIDERSTAND

Ilja Trojanow, *Macht und Widerstand* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2015),  
476 p. 978-3-10-002463-3

Ilja Trojanow's latest documentary-fiction novel deals with two men, Metodi and Konstantin, who grew up in the Bulgarian countryside, went to school together but have been personal and political opponents ever since Metodi informed on Konstantin. While this secured Metodi a high-flying career in the party bureaucracy in Communist-era Bulgaria, Konstantin spent most of his adult life behind bars as a political prisoner after blowing up a statue of Stalin. Following the fall of the iron curtain, Metodi advances from a party bureaucrat who tortured prisoners to a become rich businessman, while Konstantin, who remained committed to his anarchist ideals, lives in destitution and commits his life to uncovering a state security system. Trojanow illustrates this development with de-classified documents from the Bulgarian secret police, which he intersperses throughout the novel in order to illuminate the extent of the espionage system, which reached into the most inner circles of families.

The novel is based on countless interviews with both state security officers and political prisoners, who come together in the figures of Metodi and Konstantin as narrators of their own stories. This is complemented by original de-classified documents. Years of research mean that Trojanow can show two sides of "Communist" Bulgaria through the characters, who are living and contradictory beings fraught with fears, doubts, desires and passion. While this is unlike many political novels in recent years, where characters simply come to stand in for political ideologies, the characters might still be criticized for being superficial in their politics. Thus, Konstantin's anarchism remains something of a personal trait handed down from his father and not grounded in a theoretical perspective of social change. While in jail it is his dream that works like Marx's *Kapital* (which he has read seven times) will be no longer needed. Meanwhile, Metodi does not morally justify his own Communist and authoritarian politics at any point within the novel.

Metodi's story is driven by appearance of a young woman at his door one day. She tells him that he is her father and that he impregnated her mother while he was a prison guard and she a prisoner. They continuously meet up and Metodi believes that his past political opponents want to smear him and set him up for his past crimes. He then begins to believe that the woman is acting on someone else's instructions. He interrogates her

and treats her like one of the “criminals” he had to deal with during the Communist era, as he cannot remember whether anything had happened between him and said female prisoner. This story line draws on the way in which former state bureaucrats are plagued by collective amnesia and have not had to face justice for the crimes they committed during more than 40 years of dictatorship. With this story Trojanow implicitly shows how the Communist Party’s power affected all spheres of life. Party bureaucrats like Metodi had access to sex and women at all times and used many of the women who desired a better life just as rock stars, football players and Donald Trump do today. For all the antagonism that exists between Metodi and Konstantin, the two are united by their relationship troubles and the way they prioritize their passion for politics above their female companions. During his time as a high-ranking official in the party bureaucracy, Metodi entertains two women at the same time, both of whom decide to pick him up from the airport after a visit to Moscow. This means he loses both and settles down with a woman who couldn’t have children and is nothing special, just a steady woman who cooks for him and isn’t bothered by his obsession with the daily political routines of the bureaucracy, and later of his business.

Metodi’s paranoia surrounding the young woman’s appearance in his life becomes understandable when one reads Konstantin’s side of the story and learns how he was persecuted during the Communist era for upholding the very ideals that the state bureaucracy claimed to represent. From his early teen years Konstantin organized anarchist activities with his peers after picking up anarchist writings by Proudhon and Kropotkin from his father’s book shelf. Despite being a small group, they always feared state security. Thus, Konstantin and his anarchist groupuscule needed to organise in cell structures with each comrade only having one contact. However, their system was not fool-proof, and Konstantin ended up imprisoned after the attack on the Stalin statue. Given the fragility of power and the little organized resistance, power and resistance are experienced through the prism of a paranoia which even haunts the characters once the regime has collapsed. In this sense paranoia becomes the governmentality of the Bulgarian state during the Communist era and after the fall of the Eastern Bloc.

Konstantin’s story is driven by the desire to uncover the web of the espionage and state security that persists after the fall of the iron curtain. For this Trojanow has dug up from the state archives original documents on dissidents, which show the depth of Bulgaria’s system of state security and espionage. These vignettes demonstrate that Konstantin was up against a web of informants which even extended to his older brother, which he finds out is the main reason he ended up in jail. Even though the documents are now publically available, one day the state archivists decide to not give him any papers, only to flood him with information the next day, making it impossible to process everything. Then they raise the price for photocopies so that he cannot actually afford to copy vital documents. At one level, this is symbolic of the way in which people suddenly had “democratic” rights but did not have the financial means to make use of them. This is also highlighted by the contrast between how Metodi and his family travel around the

European Union and how Konstantin has only left Bulgaria once since the iron curtain fell, on a cheap bus tour. At another level, this shows how the past has not been worked through collectively, but rather remains the task of the individual citizen. This individual responsibility for working through history is paralleled by Konstantin's loneliness and the fact he no longer feels the same with his comrades as he used to; unlike his fellow resistance fighters, he is also obsessed with restoring some sense of justice and revenging himself on Metodi. By placing Konstantin's and Metodi's story in one book, Trojanow makes a useful contribution to a kind of collective working through of Bulgarian history, similar to that which other societies have embarked on, such as South Africa with its concept of Reconciliation or Germany with its acceptance of historic guilt for the Holocaust.

These narrations are interspersed with short vignettes from the years which Konstantin and Metodi recount in their narration. For example, 1953 and 1956, the year of the abortive East German uprising and the year of the failed Hungarian revolution against Stalinism, respectively, are retold from the point of view of the year itself. By placing a year in the position of the narrator, Trojanow uses an innovative literary device which highlights how years of world historic proportions attain personal characteristics akin to those of a human. This allows Konstantin's and Metodi's experience of rationing and of the tightened state security to be read as actions by the year itself. To some extent it might even be argued that presenting these years as characters shows the way in which 'their' actions affected the lives of Metodi and Konstantin. In doing so, Trojanow reinvents a collective consciousness of history, as the two sides of Bulgaria enter into dialogue over how they experienced a particularly eventful year. This contributes to the sense that Trojanow seeks to construct a collective story of the Communist era, a story that can bridge political divides which continue to exist today, but which can also transcend the perpetrator-victim narrative, which is the result of an individualized approach to historic events.

Given the book's title, it seems appropriate to ask what the novel contributes to our understanding of power and resistance. Through the overall story, and through the character of Metodi, Trojanow is able to show the continuity between the old ruling bureaucracy in Bulgaria and the new bourgeoisie, which became rich in the wake of the fall of the iron curtain and the privatisation of state enterprises. Metodi's descriptions of his *family* parties and gatherings and those of the *political* party meetings during the Communist era strikingly resemble each other. This further underlines the continuity between the power of the unaccountable ruling cliques, who live lavishly while the Bulgarian citizenry remains powerless and continues to be exploited. Metodi is well aware, however, of the fact that the money possessed by this new ruling elite is not real power. The transition has left the same people in power. Authoritarian power is therefore not anonymous; rather, it takes form and manifests itself in Metodi's character. This allows the author to move away from the view that the system was run by a group of faceless bureaucrats, and to show how power manifested itself in people's personal lives as well. Trojanow thus devises a story of the collective Bulgarian experience through a story of personal

retribution. At the same time, Trojanow shows that devising a collective narrative does not mean that people are not individually responsible for their actions.

When it comes to resistance, this does not work so well. Trojanow tends to postulate resistance as a personal characteristic rather than the consequence of any type of ideological commitment. Konstantin's cell mates are anarchists, fascists, Trotskyists, a heretic of the official Church – all of whom are suddenly united in their opposition to the Bulgarian Communist system. Here it would have been interesting to explore the nature of right-wing opposition to Communism and the way today the right wing in most of Eastern Europe has hegemonized opposition to the current state of affairs and has framed the social question in its own terms. This would have added a level of depth to this political novel which continuously draws parallels between the past and present. It would have also illuminated how sincere the right-wing opposition to the Communist regime was. Yet Konstantin's anarchism means that Trojanow can present a critique of Bulgarian Communism from a leftist, anti-authoritarian standpoint, which enables him to recuperate the leftist and progressive causes of social justice and economic equality. This is a necessary task, given the weakness of the extra-parliamentary left and the lack of sustained intellectual left-wing critiques of the Eastern Bloc. The fact that Konstantin opts for terrorism to bring about social change in Bulgaria raises the question of the legitimate means to get rid of an illegitimate government; but more importantly perhaps, it also raises the question: Why does Bulgaria celebrate its Communist resistance fighters against the Nazis but not the resistance fighters against the Communist regime? Metodi had been a resistance fighter against the Nazis during World War II and had a successful career within the Bulgarian Communist Party and as a businessman afterwards, while Konstantin remains an outsider for his entire life even after the regime he fought against finally falls. The answer to the second question does not lie in the fact that both are resistance fighters, but in the fact that the system, regardless of its ideology, rewards compromise and opportunism rather than the kind of stubbornness that Konstantin displays.

Konstantin displays this stubbornness until the end. When he calls one of his anarchist meetings to discuss Metodi's sudden death, a man enters the room. He would like to participate in an action against Metodi. But Konstantin recognizes him as the judge who sent him to jail and sends him away immediately. Konstantin, however, is angry that he never managed to get justice for the crimes that Metodi committed against him and others, as death took Metodi first. He doesn't let that deter him, however, and he starts ringing up his old anarchist friends, most of whom have either died before Metodi, or can no longer walk. Konstantin puts together a sound system and disrupts Metodi's funeral with an anarchistic carnival, which gives him some satisfaction at last.

Trojanow's story is very particular to the Bulgarian context. It shows the way in which Bulgarian history continues to be either written from an anti-Communist or a Communist perspective, as these fault lines continue to exist even since Bulgaria joined the European Union. Trojanow has written a great political novel that masterfully re-



constructs the Communist era, through characters in the party bureaucracy as well as the anarchist underground, contrasting this era with the post-Communist period. The novel shows the continuity between the old Soviet-style system and today's regimes in Eastern Europe, and it does this without being politically heavy handed, but with a depth and clarity that shows Trojanow's research into the subject matter and the continuity of power beyond a given political system. Through the first-person narration, the reader enters into this world and into the characters' inner lives during a period of adjustment and transition. Trojanow's method of adding short vignettes from defining years in the history of the Eastern Bloc is a way of contextualising the two character's actions and the political circumstances that influenced their decisions. On another level, these events also reconfigure the balance of power between the poles of power and resistance and the characters' adherence to these two poles.

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