

RETHINKING FORGOTTEN THOUGHTS

Onur Acaroglu, *Rethinking Marxist Approaches to Transition: A Theory of Temporal Dislocation* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 238 p. ISBN 9789004436664

Onur Acaroglu declares his intention to examine the possibilities of thinking about transition from a Marxist perspective. Needless to say, his intention can in no way be considered banal. It is not only in the East Central Europe region that transition predominantly refers to either a capitalist transformation of economy or a liberal-democratic turn in political imagination. Acaroglu attempts to approach transition through a somewhat *longue durée* Marxist prism, thus opening the problem of transition from capitalism to socialism. His argumentation, rather than focusing on historical analysis, helps us reinvent various seemingly extinct or overshadowed discourses on socialist transition, liberation, and pursuits of egalitarian societies.

Balibar Reading Althusser

In the introductory parts of the book, transition is localized within Marx's legacy. Convincingly, Acaroglu highlights the very possibility of the continuity of thinking about transition within the Marxist tradition, thus rendering the notion of tradition viable in accounts of today's crises predicament while also able to produce tangible intellectual environments to get out of those very crises. In his definition, transition is simply something inherent to political thought, at least since Hegel, despite attracting little theoretical attention. In this book, transition is, broadly speaking, primarily understood as an aspect of rupture at the transition moment which is embodied within the contingency of the space of possibilities.

After a short introduction to Althusserian interpretations of super-structural preconditions for the very thinking of transition, Acaroglu turns to Étienne Balibar's readings of Althusser. Balibar attempted to analyse transition within the aforementioned ruptured realm. He maintained that only at moments of overlap between class struggle and economic trauma is it possible to account for a transition that goes beyond capitalism (40). What he does in claiming so is actually to contest the rather vaguely interpreted idea of class struggle as the sole driver of history. According to Acaroglu, one particular feature of Balibar's thinking helps us shape the thinking of transition in what could

be described as a non-revolutionary manner. Balibar speaks of a “transitional mode of production”, such as the system of manufacturing that emerged at a moment between feudalism and capitalism where there was only formal submission to capital, while the symbolic order remained feudal. By symbolic order, he mainly refers to the ideological superstructure. Similarly, we can think of Koselleck’s *Sattelzeit*, a transition period between the Early Modern and Modern where key concepts such as citizen, state, and family developed new meanings. More generally, we can use Balibar’s approach to use such frames as analytical realms for understanding transitions. Needless to say, any such abstraction and generalization of the notion of transition comes at the expense of historicization and, thus, requires further specification and contextualization. Therefore, Acaroglu calls on Antonio Gramsci’s notions of historical and local understanding of the ruling classes’ practices with this aim in mind.

Gramsci’s contribution to the transition debate resides in a negative conveying of sorts. Gramsci observed that the bourgeois elites of his day, by introducing a vision of a good society, a narrative of a linear teleological string of events, and some sort of “natural” mode of existence that would be preserved throughout this narrative, attempted to prevent the transition to socialism. This attempt took the form of a return of “history”, where a notion of history proceeding without fundamental change made it possible to narrate history without transition. Among many manifestations of such a discourse there stands out a popular sort of a pseudo-Smithian argument that human nature and the inherent desire to acquire wealth led to the establishment of a capitalist society, after which no further transition is imaginable.¹

According to Acaroglu, Gramsci’s thought is unavoidable when examining transitions because, in contrast to universalist readings of Marx, Gramsci emphasized political and cultural factors, rooted in historical context, in addition to economic structures. In doing so, Gramsci populates with actors realms that had been left relatively vacant by classic historical materialism, and at the same time he intertwines their acts with particular historical and cultural backgrounds. More importantly, Gramsci recognizes differences between the “East” and the “West”. This could not have been done without him acknowledging the differences in outcomes in historical developments in Italy and in Russia. What is especially valuable when it comes to thinking transition – and this is a point on which Gramsci and Althusser would agree – is a notion that subjects carry “a sedimented set of historically constructed viewpoints and behaviours” (57).

The Discursive Turn: The Post-Marxist Gramsci of Laclau and Mouffe

As Acaroglu proceeds to post-Marxist approaches, he builds on Gramsci’s experience of the historical failure of the socialist transition in Italy. His emphasis on populism-re-

¹ Rutger Bregman, *Humankind: A Hopeful History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), p. 496; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London and New York: Verso, 2017), p. 224.

lated arguments, mainly those provided by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, contextualizes transition.

One aspect of this contextualization is Acaroglu's attempt to move beyond the ever-recurring debate on who is the emancipatory class-subject, that is to say, the subject capable of enacting transition to a more emancipated society. Within this realm, Laclau provides a direct response to the failed endeavours of the mostly European/American intellectuals gathered around the New Left to define the proletariat. His Argentine, more broadly Latin American, experience served as a vital refreshment of the Marxist discourse. This regional tradition allowed Laclau to speak of "the people". According to his line of thought, class struggle is subsumed under, or rather exists within, the popular struggle. One has to point out the trickiness of such a definition, since with the benefit of hindsight we can see how the current nationalist conservative or right-wing populist movements succeeded, at least temporarily, in hijacking the badge "we the people", as was implicit, for example, in the slogan "All lives matter" and was explicit in the discourse of German pre-AfD movements such as PEGIDA, which embraced the motto "Wir sind das Volk". Perhaps, together with Žižek, we should hear a note of caution whenever there is a popular movement, even a leftist one, because some of their demands could easily be uttered by a fascist too.² Laclau, addressing this possibility, warned that the working class failed to "hegemonise popular struggles and fuse popular-democratic ideology and its revolutionary class objectives into a coherent political and ideological practice" (62). Put differently, this is why Walter Benjamin claimed that behind every rise of fascism there is a failed revolution.

Acaroglu's main argument in the first part of the book is that transition is worth retaining as a sociologically grounded concept, and that there is value in using it in understanding perpetuations and disruptions of social processes. Even more importantly, Acaroglu sees history as a process of transitions. In doing so, he dismisses any teleological approaches and aims to grasp the historical contingency that results from the absence of any singular organising mechanism. His focus on Laclau's regional-experience-informed theory demonstrates the importance of introducing an element of contextual particularity into Marxist thinking on socialist transition. This allows him to further elaborate on other kinds of key particularities that can inspire experience-informed philosophical concepts.

No Emancipatory Horizons? Melancholy and Utopia

Acaroglu poses thinking of the future transitions within, or rather through the dynamics between melancholia and utopia, both as tackled by various leftist narrations. In doing so, he attempts to rethink positive projects which, in today's post-financial-crisis

² On the other hand, Žižek does dare people not to be afraid of being populist. Consider his comments in a debate with Jordan Peterson, accessed November 7, 2022, https://youtube.com/watch?v=lsWndfzuOc4&ab_channel=JordanBPeterson.

period, happen to gain track. Of course, given the unchanged economic and political situation of global capitalism, why would anyone suggest positive projects are gaining track. However, considering various nascent “disturbances”, such as the ever-growing popularity of undemocratic regimes, the intensifying rivalry between United States and China, the gradual recognition of the global climate crisis, or even the current COVID-19 crisis, we can easily assume that nothing is actually changing for the better. Acaroglu, nonetheless, positions the chapters on melancholy and utopia as some kind of precursor to the current debates on future projects among radical thinkers of the present.

Within Acaroglu’s endeavours, Benjamin’s reassessment of melancholy appears as crucial. Instead of understanding melancholy as an obstacle in the transition towards a more egalitarian society, Walter Benjamin grasped it as a positive resource of future struggles. In other words, the present is riddled with the incompleteness of the past (99). What Acaroglu implies is a certain openness to commemoration. He illustrates it through the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe situated in Berlin, which is “conducive to a positive construction of the future” (p. 100). Although such a reading provides rather a plausible interpretation of the installation, Acaroglu does not sufficiently acknowledge the fact that the very realm within which it is conveyed to the broad public appears to neglect aspects crucial precisely to the leftist tradition, and to the Marxist tradition in particular. Enzo Traverso suggests that traditions of anti-fascism and that of the GDR have been replaced by the “duty to remember” in order to pursue a newly established German national identity.³ One striking attribute that Acaroglu (following Traverso) overlooks, however, is that Benjamin was never faced with the shock of public excavation of all the wrongdoings of the Communist regimes in USSR, China, and elsewhere. After 1956, 1968, and eventually, after 1989, this can no longer be ignored. I maintain we should encourage more research into understanding how the respective events, which Benjamin never experienced due to his tragic death, might have influenced this idea of melancholy. Even if Traverso does not adequately address the traumatic memories of Communist regimes, his contribution is a solid step in this direction.

Nonetheless, Acaroglu establishes melancholy in order to pave the way for utopia. This approach allows him to present the current leftist discourses in a contextualized and fairly historicized fashion. The absence of utopia within leftist thinking is what demonstrates its subordination to the so-called “liberal consensus”, as Ivan Krastev would put it. Here, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek propose a tricky axiom, that is, that perhaps paradoxically we lose nothing if we acknowledge there is a huge portion of truth in the assertion that history has, in a way, ended. This, however, is no obstacle in theorizing utopian thinking anew. Especially, when one concedes that the “end of history” is itself a historical development. Badiou, for instance, as Acaroglu points out, recognizes precisely this pattern, the historicized understanding of a historically

³ Enzo Traverso, *Marxism, History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 14–16.

contingent impossibility of history, leading to new possibilities of action that react to this temporary end of history, such as those emerging after or during the financial crisis unfolded in 2008.

When it comes to tackling utopia, Acaroglu's most striking assertion is that neoliberalism is a kind of utopian thinking which, however, left-wing political actors frequently fail to perceive as such. This recognition of the utopian character of neoliberalism, which Acaroglu takes from Pierre Bourdieu, allows leftist transitional thought to break out of the ever-recurring focus on the past glory of the welfare state threatened by neoliberalism as its grave-digger. If neoliberalism is recognized as utopian, then it can be combated by an alternative utopianism rather than a return to what has already existed.

Practicing Transition

In the final parts of the book, Acaroglu develops a kind of cognitive mapping of the current substantial theories of transition as proposed by the left-wing intellectuals with an extra emphasis on theories of work. Acaroglu poses an underlying question of our times: What is the role of labour and work ethics in a vision of transition towards more equal and freer individuals and societies? Should we try to eliminate the apparently useless forms of labour that David Graeber calls "bullshit jobs"? Does the automation of such meaningless work liberate us from having to perform it ourselves, as Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams would perhaps claim? Or shall the left opt for a different approach?

Acaroglu positions Paul Mason's arguments in opposition to the so-called acceleration theories of authors like Srnicek and Williams, which he finds teleological and rather determinist. He is more lenient towards Mason's understanding of the digital developments as ultimately dangerous to society. Moreover, he maintains that a blind faith in modernization eventually obliterates the right-left division which, as a matter of fact, panders to capitalist post-ideological interpretations that approach transitions as something unnatural, inhuman even. However, Acaroglu sees flaws in Mason's notion that post-capitalist elements exist in the networked circulation of knowledge. Together with Jodi Dean, Acaroglu see no *a priori* egalitarianism or democratization of private property in the freer flow of information. Assumptions of the egalitarian and democratic quality of freely flowing information, argues Acaroglu, could easily play into neoliberal ideals about the self-sufficiency of unregulated interaction. One must agree here with Acaroglu in maintaining that there are no automatic or self-evident egalitarian outcomes. Mason nonetheless provides a corrective to his seemingly hasty optimism. Instead of proposing an immediate transition to socialism, Mason imagines an expansion of the egalitarian and democratic qualities of networked information in a "distinct phase of capitalism" which would prepare the way for a later socialist transition. Mason's proposal reminds one of Žižek's suggestion that we make small changes, so that one day those in power might wake up with a sudden realization that they are missing their symbolic "balls of power". Yet one still needs to be cautious when

assuming the incipient emancipatory nature of this transitional project, since various outcomes are always possible.

Furthermore, the same reasoning could be applied when dealing with universal basic income. There is nothing inherently leftist in this notion, but we can suppose it changes the perspective of labour, which could lead to the opening of new battlefields concerning our understanding of production. In addition, even liberal economists, such as Mariana Mazzucato in her seminal work *The Value of Everything*, attempt to reassess what we actually perceive as value. Such developments suggest the rather audacious notion that we might already be witnessing a multitude of smaller transitions.

Instead of understanding the post-work future as an inevitable outcome, more or less articulated by either accelerationist or post-capitalists like Mason, Acaroglu brings Benjamin's melancholy back into play. Acaroglu argues against the one-sided fixation on work that in his view has constantly haunted the left, as though the left could only relive past struggles and update them through the lens of current capitalist technological advances. He, by contrast, puts more emphasis on social reproduction than on economic transformation. Here, on the level of social reproduction, he remedies the lack of a Gramscian moment in the post-Marxist imaginations of post-capitalism. These visions of post-capitalism lack a consideration of subject definition, and thus do not sufficiently account for how any utopian economic programme can apparently be overtaken by nationalist, conservative, or right-wing regimes or movements, thus clearly obliterating the very *raison d'être* of utopian thinking. Acaroglu calls for establishing a wider hegemonic project within the realm of social reproduction, where any transition visions ought to be contextualized. Furthermore, he stresses the need for a clear definition of the beneficiaries that future-oriented projects have to bear in mind. For this, Acaroglu uses an umbrella term, "prefiguration", in transition.

Concluding Remarks

Rethinking Marxist approaches to transition as an audacious endeavour requires a variety of strains of intellectual traditions and interdisciplinary tools to be employed. It is thus extremely difficult to find the balance that would prevent the author from overwhelming the reader. Onur Acaroglu masters the drawing of that fine line between obfuscation and an enlightened reading of the issues analysed. On the other hand, although precise historization of the intellectual concepts presented in the book is aspired after, as it is perceived through the eyes of this historian I feel compelled to express encouragement for a more historically anchored analysis. Although, throughout the book, we encounter representatives of various schools and lines of thought, and the author offers a welcome bit of historical context, this reviewer would nonetheless have liked to see the author delve into other relevant writing from the periods in question, whether it be sociological, historical, or political. Such an approach would introduce a refreshing look at the respective intellectual endeavours of the authors being scru-

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tinized. Justifiably enough, this is, however, not the author's declared intention. One must conclude with the assessment that the book is not just about rethinking Marxist approaches to transition, but also, more broadly, about providing a vital new look at Marxist thinking in general while at the same time reaffirming Marxism afresh within current debates.

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