

Left theory for the 21st century VOLUME II

# Living in Dark times

Edited by  
**Michalis Bartsidis & Costas Douzinas**





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Living in Dark times

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Cover: Maratos Andreas, The sound of steps III, charcoal and pastels on paper, 2005



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# Introduction

**T**his volume reflects on the dark side of our times, the negativity that radical political strategy must address, manage and transform. Negativity appears either as a dialectical moment of passage or as the return of evil in biopolitical governance in many guises: the authoritarian turn of democracies, the economics of inequality, the pandemic, the lockdown and the state of exception, the politics of fear and the multiple violations of liberties and rights. All these combine in neo-conservatism, neoliberalism and far-right populism and create a major challenge for democracy and the left.

This volume focuses on some persistent themes that have emerged in the current historical conjuncture: The first examines biopolitical governance, the state of emergency, restrictions in the use of public space, the weakening of social rights, the increase of exploitation and inequalities. The pandemic conjuncture brings to the surface the vulnerability of life and politics and exploits citizens' fears and anxieties.

The second question is about the development of authoritarian conservatism and far-right populism (Trump, Bolsonaro, Orban, Brexit, etc.) with its tendency to disconnect from common institutions. These reactionary ideologies erect frontiers to keep the 'other' out, manipulate the public sphere, turn the mainstream media into machines of misinformation and propaganda, strengthen state repression and surveillance in an orgy of 'law and order' measures. These developments lead to the shrinking of democracy.

This type of negativity functions as the cement of anti-left ideology. It appears internationally in campaigns against left populism and in Greece in the anti-SYRIZA front. It is obvious that extreme violence is unleashed by the state against all forms of resistance leading to the increase in police powers and repressive laws in anticipation of a rise in resistance and uprisings triggered by the latest round of multiple crises.

Current developments in Greece, particularly in March 2021, confirm our initial working hypothesis. Implementing a pandemic management strategy that relies mostly on consecutive lockdowns is inextricably linked to the intensity of repressive apparatuses and

their action against mobilized youth and people (universities invaded by police forces, incidents of arbitrary violence in squares and neighborhoods, Kafkaesque cases of human rights violations). On the other hand, the strategy of preventive anti-violence by the state and its ideological underpinnings are unraveled through the imposition of the “Law and Order” doctrine which aims at consolidating and maintaining the anti-left front since the fall of SYRIZA government.

These problems arise on the ground of the crises of our time: the economic, the refugee and the pandemic crisis. All three are intertwined with the climate disaster. Its denial is emblematically cultivated by the forces of destructiveness, but is inescapably proved by the pandemic.

How do the two tendencies converge and diverge? What dialectical form allows the acknowledgment of the Other and the ‘restlessness of the negative’ to play its positive historical part?

This volume aims to carry out a reflection that addresses today’s political stakes for institutions, social movements and strategic practices. It hopes to contribute to an effective resistance and rejection of racist, hierarchical, authoritarian ideologies and practices of far-right populism. At the same time, it contributes to the creation of a large popular democratic and emancipatory front in Europe and beyond.

The participants in this volume help reconstruct an ideal that promotes the common good and the sharing of common goods. An obvious example is the case of medicines and vaccines that through nationalism and appropriation by ruling elites has become a defining issue of the times. We should reinvent the concept of public interest and respond to feelings of fear and insecurity through a new democratic public power.

The dark times existed before the pandemic: neoliberalism attacked both humanity and the planet. Now new questions arise: how does power deal with life itself, human life. What is the value of human life now especially for people who risk their own lives working in pandemic conditions? The pandemic is aggravating the vulnerability, insecurity and fear that people felt in the past because of poverty, inequalities, exclusions and exploitation. But as the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy put it here, the relationship between life and death has now changed. In the past, our lives were threatened by

wars, exploitation, small-scale catastrophes; but life prevailed over death. Now we have an extension of death, a change in its meaning as it takes on a form of perpetual destructiveness. Death now covers the whole public sphere, the imaginary and our souls. It takes the form of extermination and destruction. The fear of death is literally pandemic. Individuals, classes and masses live in a state of constant negativity. This constant “living with death” makes the world exclude the imagination, avoid thinking worthy of its name, let alone thinking of another better life and society. A constant panic, a constant insecurity makes fear freeze souls, bodies and minds. The negative situation of the collective passions (affects) had been formed long before, mainly due to the absence of a historical way out and liberating visions. However with the pandemic it worsened much more, leading the subjects to confinement and internal exclusion.

These are the two possible developments, as Nancy reminds us, based on his reading of Hegel. On the one hand, governments and especially the current Greek government use the fear in an instrumental and totally cynical way to tear down age old rights and victories; to tear down modernity with a legislative “flash war”; to tear down social rights, public space and common goods.

On the other hand, the virus has put life in mortal danger and reminded us of the values and institutions that could actually protect us. People now think of social and biological vulnerability, previously hidden by unrestrained narcissism and consumerism. They came to understand that “in the state of exception” we cannot base our lives on individualism, but rather social solidarity and concern for the other. It is not the markets that provide the necessities for our biological and social survival, but public goods and services.

What are the duties and responsibilities of the left, what is its historical mission? Our proposals and the quests of the left must be oriented to a crossing of darkness, to a reconstitution and recomposition of a new idea of socialism. We are preparing to participate in a new “transformation of affects”: from the fear of isolation to the joy of solidarity and common life. To turn fear into a feeling of common life, into a co-feeling that “we are together”. If, when the pandemic subsides, states return to business-as-usual, the reactions of the people everywhere, especially the youth, will become massive, even subversive. The fulfillment of such restoration will signal the destruction of hope, turning to a moral horizon of cynicism and nihilism.

This entails the reconstitution of politics. The responsibility of the Left is huge. The pandemic has created the necessary ideological background for the Left to approach society. The reconfiguration of situated values opens up the possibility for a total societal transformation. More and fairer economic measures should become part of a wider project for social change and productive reconstruction based on the values that the pandemic has brought to the fore: public goods, social justice, solidarity, protection of the planet. That said, what would be the meaning of love, solidarity and sharing in the Commons when perceived as institutional bonds? Being sensitive about our common vulnerability and precarity, it would mean that we would no longer talk about what we used to be together and is now lost. On the contrary, drawing on different identities we would speak about what we are going to make together from now on. When transindividual experiences move us away from conditions of common despair, indignity and stigma, and bring us back to a common life, even if in social distancing, and to the human-citizen zone, then cosmopolitics emerge. Instead of a thanatopolitical suffering in sadness and hypocritical cosmopolitanism, such actions of common suffering in joy, are the ones that regenerate an idea of a common life.

Since the vision, its old values and institutions, have been severely damaged during the 20th century, the Left needs to give them a contemporary meaning. We need a new social pact that will be formulated through a wide social dialogue, placing primacy on public goods.

The local and international system that provoked the crisis of 2009 is responsible for the destruction of common and public services, for the lack of interest in protecting society.

Let's give an example of how this can be done. Vaccination has been administered in a selective way that benefits the privileged. The panic among the people is exacerbated by the fact that the ruling elites and the tendency of the negativity of neoliberalism and authoritarian conservatism in general impose an image of "the one who saves himself". When we see Trump leaving the global climate change organizations, the WHO, in other words, leaving every common human institution with a de-link, a permanent exit, brexit, this image of the appropriation of monoclonal antibody drugs, of special access to the best hospitals, all this is a shock to the modern treaty where we fought for equality and to some extent we achieved it. In the face of this image, people can react, get angry and

revolt, or freeze further and become frustrated with everything precisely because they do not see an image of a common values, they do not see anything that connects them to each other. The proposals of the left should calmly demonstrate “images” of sharing, as is already the case for the distribution of vaccine patents as well as medicines. As long as the panic of appropriation prevails, we will not have a reaction, a challenge, an uprising to an emancipation or an institutional reorganization of societies, but on the contrary, it can get even worse. This is a historic stake whose outcome we cannot know at this time.

Overall, it is argued that apart from individual and collective - beyond individuals - responsibility and obedience, when it comes to relations of domination and subordination there is always an immanent evolving interaction, alignment and of course divergence in the making, enforcement and exercising of the rules. In other words, freedom, taken as life “under the guidance of reason”, is ensured by the polis and good social relations that the polis is fated to protect. The fact that individuals’ and groups’ being responsible aligns with the state’s restriction measures should not lead to assumptions of blind subordination, dominant individuation and dark times for freedoms and democracy. The exact opposite scenario is equally possible. This fact could also signify a “necessary freedom” where increasing individual and collective power lead to increasing state power and vice versa. The outcome is not predetermined. It is rather our current challenge while in quarantine and on our way out of it.

The papers of this volume comprise three thematic sections.

The first section, entitled “Hegemony, democracy and the rise of the far-right: fear, hope and security”, contains contributions that delineate the competitive trends and strategies regarding the crisis of the modern context of emancipation and democracy, the “fear of the masses”, the restoration of authoritarianism and hierarchies. Costas Douzinas maps the contemporary radical theoretical and philosophical movements, structuring the context of the questions and working hypothesis of this volume. Employing key-concepts, such as conflict, immanence and political subjects, he formulates the methodology of radicalism, re-establishing as guiding principles the values of freedom, equaliberty, and socialism. Gerasimos Kouzelis shows that the historical scope of the ideological changes that we are witnessing concerns modernity in its entirety. This understanding is necessary in order to reinvent a collective imaginary for the defense of democratic

demands. These are followed by critical-historical accounts of the theoretical-political movements of Marxism and the left that gave rise to interesting ideas and policies: the case of Austrian Marxism by Walter Baier, the case of post-marxist hegemony and populism by Yannis Stavrakakis, and, within the same theoretical framework, the case of new municipality as counter-hegemonic paradigm by Alexandros Kioupiolis.

The discussion in this section resonates with our project's first volume on the theoretical account of the Greek experience of left-wing governance. In the face of the ongoing neoliberal power, but also the first serious blows it suffered in terms of governance during the pandemic, the authors confirm the proposals put forward regarding the radicalization of democracy, the pluralistic and contingent construction of subjects, and the emancipation as constant struggle.

The second section, entitled "The pandemic and the global lockdown: technologies, biopolitics, climate crisis" offers interesting accounts of some aspects of the unexpected global condition of the pandemic. Adam Geary argues that what militates against a response to viral infection, to the common vulnerability of our shared human substance, is the condition of class. Bounding up together the meaning of the human condition and the condition of class, he describes a new idea of solidarity. Konstantinos Kavoulakos shows that the conception of the global crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic as a dialectical process is not only of theoretical interest but it is also the condition of our ability to deal with the crisis as an opportunity for social change. The evaluation of applied models (e.g. the liberal models of herd immunity, the mild state intervention model as well as the Asian-authoritarian model) allows for a new awareness of the crisis and a new orientation in the relationship between nature and society. Dealing with a similar topic, Todd McGowan examines the role of experts in current models of governance, whether pandemic or not; a role aimed at restraining enjoyment as opposed to the role of far-right populists who cultivate the absurdity of constant freedom and appropriation. In the biopolitical framework of analysis, Paul Guillibert takes as his point of departure the following "biopolitical paradox": the global fluidity of the Covid-19 in terms of crossing borders (biological, national, epistemic) has called for territorial responses typical of sovereign States, the strengthening of national borders. It was in order to regain biopolitical control over resources and populations that sovereign states extended and strengthened the new border regime during the health crisis. Politicizing the pandemic thus implies acting simultaneously on the capitalist causes of the ecological disaster and on the sanitary effects of public health policies. Tsianos and Parsanoglou argue that the end of the anthropocentric climate change signals the

end of the neoliberal hegemony at the level of its elites composition who abandon the neoliberal “corset” of ideological hegemony, moving towards a green new deal. The re-emergence of the leading role of the state and the Green New Deal together with the globalizing challenge of precariousness, namely its structural exclusion, creates a privileged space of politicization, favoring the politics of symbiogenesis against the market.

In the third section, entitled “Negativity in history and left politics: separations, universals, utopias”, we put together papers that deal with our working hypothesis, deploying the category of negativity in history, politics and the construction of subjects and identities; papers that raise the question of what it means for left theory to reflect and engage politically to the present in critical times. Philosophical approaches which are based on the Hegelian conception of the negative and traverse contemporary interpretive assumptions - the Frankfurt School, and especially Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch (Athanasiou, Iakovou), or even the “aleatory” (Bartsidis) -are put into dialogue with psychoanalytic re-conceptualizations of negativity and the death drive as a precondition for the rebellious potential of freedom (Vosniadou).

Instead of adapting to a reality illustrated by current positivist thinking, we should, on the contrary, address left theory and politics through the aporia that characterizes the relationship between the impossible and the absolutely necessary. As Athanasiou writes in the present volume, “the im-possible does not simply denote the opposite of the possible, but rather ‘introduces into the possible’”; it creates an urgent need for justice, it allows for a critical stand in the present and it teaches us what it means to resist. A common axis appears in the conceptualization of the utopian element with different significations, than the ones that is commonly used, namely as something distant and inapplicable. This requires the opening of the multiform relations between temporalities -past/present/future- instead of their coincidence in a linear perception of time. In this way, the opening of paths of criticism will also be possible, and through them alternative imaginaries are to be formulated and the givenness of the present is to be troubled. The concept of utopia could emerge from the intertwining of despair with hope (Athanasiou-Adorno), or from the intertwining of the awareness of vulnerability and melancholy with the courage, cunning and power of the oppressed (Iakovou-Benjamin), or it could even be about a theoretical utopia which is necessary for a courageous shift or a leap into a gap in order to identify the object as political objective (Bartsidis-Althusser); in all these versions, what we aim at is identifying a target that is simultaneously a path.

In a separate section of this volume, we put forward the significant theoretical and philosophical intervention of Jean Luc Nancy. In a few pages he outlines the entirety of his philosophical thought on negativity, death and life, giving us a source of inspiration, consolidation and encouragement.

*Michalis Bartsidis & Costas Douzinas*



## On negativity

Good afternoon, Costas Douzinas has asked me to contribute to your work with an intervention on negativity, which I am very glad to do.

There are two kinds of negativity. There is the negativity we go through, the one we traverse, and there is the negativity where we stop, the one we tarry with. It seems at first sight obvious, that the first is the good negativity, the one we get through, and the second, is the bad one. The first one would be the dialectical, Hegelian negativity, and the second seems to be devoid of all resources. In that second one, we would see nihilism.

But, actually, both negativities can be found in Hegel. When Hegel declares that Spirit lives only on the condition that it does not shrink from death and tarries with it, he does not hasten to say that the Spirit will arise again from death. Therefore, it is very insufficient to consider dialectics as a machine for negating negation, in order to reach a final positivity. I will come back to this in a moment.

To stay by death, to tarry with death, is perhaps not simply transitory. Moreover, the sojourn in death is not transitory, because the negation of the negation does not have the same character as the first negation, the one that negates the first and simple position. The first negation is abstract, it negates the abstraction of the position, but the second negation, Hegel explains it very well in the great *Logic*, the second negation, is double: it negates by maintaining what is denied. So, Hegel says that this moment can be divided into two, and we have four moments instead of three. For the second negation maintains what it denies, while passing onto a new position.

But this new position is ultimately, in Hegel's own words, nothing more than the first abstract position, which has become concrete. And so, the final position is the living, concrete, actual position, in action, in realization. So in this sense, there is no fulfillment, no end of the *Aufhebung*. In terms of "life" and "death", the negation of the initial abstraction is not the life that negates death, because the abstraction is not even death yet. With death, we are in the concrete of life, life both denies death - it relives - and maintains it - since death is part of it.

In this sense, it would seem that Heidegger's Being-exposed-to-death is nothing more than a reformulation of this thought of Hegel's. And if one forgets... or rather, if one does not forget, that God's death is also the death of an eternal life, which is supposed to ensure a definitive passage through all the dead, towards a final, terminal life, which itself knows no death, then one can understand that after God's death, modernity is found before the task of dwelling in death, and not only before the task of escaping from it or suppressing it.

But the problem of modernity is, I think, precisely the fact that it has erased this task, to tarry with death.

Perhaps this task was not entirely clear from the outset, perhaps not even to Hegel himself, or perhaps it was clear to him (but) with a clarity par excellence and truly speculative... and on the other hand, we are left, partly because of Hegel or a certain interpretation of Hegel, with a projection, the projection of history as a succession of negativities that are crossed through to reach a final positivity and a negation of all negations. This projection has greatly contributed to this erasure of what was, and still undoubtedly is, the task opened by the death of God.

Let's look again closely at the characteristics of the two negativities. The first, the one we pass through, is a negation of the abstract. Now, the negation of the abstract and the negation of this negation, considered simply as the negation of another position... these two moments are only formal, says Hegel, only the third moment is concrete, only the third time is the life of Spirit. Because it is not a final product, but rather an uninterrupted movement. This means that if one distinguishes well between what is negation and what is negation of negation, then, Hegel says, one can count the three times (of the movement) as four. In the most formal terms, if you like: being, nothing, becoming (*he counts the terms*)... becoming is infinite. In terms of Hegel's system: Logic, Nature, Spirit... Spirit alone is the concrete, and it is the incessant movement of negativity negating itself, negating the abstract negativity of Spirit in Nature and negating that of Nature in Spirit.

So if we put it in terms of death ... first abstraction, second death, third death of death.

It is not a victory over death, which would precisely be the theological proposition, but rather there are two possible victories: death, and a sojourn in death, that gives us something to think about. For what is it to tarry with - Hegel uses the word? To tarry with something is to experience a place, a habitus, an ethos, it is not to just pass through.

Let's try a transposition of this onto our history, a transposition that will perhaps be more faithful to Hegel, I think, than the usual representation of a Hegelian "end of history".

1. First position: immediacy, prehistory. Of course, a lot happens in prehistory. But there, man sees himself neither as an object, nor as the subject of a course of history. We are in a register of reproduction. Life reproduces itself, existence reproduces itself.
2. Two: history, negation of immediacy, production. Production, of course, which takes on very different forms depending on the continent, with a decisive Western moment, which is properly the moment of production, but this does not prevent that in a general way throughout the world. In China, and even in Latin America, a series of phenomena have taken place, of which, in a way, the West is the most dynamic form, and therefore, the most negating form. So history, negation of immediacy.
3. But, today, where do we stand in relation to production, that is to say, in relation to the negation of immediacy indefinitely reconducted into a surplus of production?
4. Today, there has been a negation of production in favor of information. It is another kind of negation, quite different in one sense. For production, here, is not negated as one would expect, it is not negated in such a way that we would return to reproduction, that we would return to the concrete and final truth of reproduction. Production is rather transformed. Information does not suppress private ownership of the means of production, it has actually increased it, and by a great deal. So the negation of negation, if we consider our modernity as a negation of negation, is very far from bringing us back to a revisited archaic reproduction. And it is, undoubtedly, on this point that Marx's power has to some extent remained blocked, stopped. Marx would have liked to go back to an immediacy of a supposedly primitive community.

At the same time, production gets entangled in its own extrapolations, and in pure and simple oppositions, not at all dialectical oppositions, that invade the whole scene: oppositions between rich and poor, sovereign/non-sovereign, powerful/impotent, collapse or a guaranteed future. This is not the life of Spirit. These oppositions that arise

and repeat themselves within production are not the life of Spirit. On the contrary, they reflect a kind of stagnation in calculation, and in a short term register. And this means that there is no dwelling in death. It means that we do not tarry with the negativity that we ourselves have implemented and put in play, of which, the “death of God” is, let us say, the emblematic formulation.

Hegel was unaware of this situation ; of course, he could not have foreseen it. But now, let’s read Hegel again:

But the Life of Spirit is not the life that that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself.<sup>1</sup>

And Hegel adds a little further on “this tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being”.<sup>2</sup> Of course, we should examine precisely this very surprising word, “magic”, which operates this reversal (*Umkehren*) of the negative being — since the reversal is not exactly an *Aufhebung*...

For the moment here, let us remember this: it is by tarrying with death, in the face of death, that the life of Spirit, life as Spirit, experiences the negative’s own operation, its “magic” operation....

But what is death today? Not only all the deaths, which of course keep accumulating, deaths from diseases, wars and exploitation, but what is death today if not the death of God, that is to say, the deprivation of meaning of all deaths and all lives together with all deaths. This is what we call nihilism. Perhaps rarely before today have we reached nihilism in such a concrete, palpable, constantly present way, in such a multiplicity of ways.

Now, perhaps not so far from Hegel, Nietzsche wanted precisely to try to understand that we should perhaps tarry with the heart of nihilism instead of turning away from it, instead of rejecting it and condemning it, in the name of values: this is precisely

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1 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit, Preface*, translated by A. V. Miller, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 19, §32. [*Phenomenologie des Geistes*, Preface, Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, 1988, p. 28-29, lines 8-12].

2 Ibid.

why Nietzsche speaks of values, in the name of values that are precisely negated, annihilated, taken down to nothing by the death of meaning.

Nietzsche's most acute formulation, which in my opinion would correspond perhaps best to the fourth moment [of dialectics], if you like, of Hegelian dialectics, is this formulation found in a posthumous fragment:

“Introducing a new meaning is the task; provided that it is understood that the task itself is meaningless.”<sup>3</sup>

This question is not about a form of negativity that we can go through and traverse. It is a question of understanding the birth of meaning, the possibility of introducing, bringing in meaning as being detached from the perspective of a global meaning, which would give a final meaning to all productions, introductions, initiatives, inventions, creations of meaning. This is not a negativity that we can traverse.

What does it mean then, “not to traverse” ? Death that everything today presents to us unceasingly, every day, all the time, through terrorism or wars, industrial or road accidents, work accidents, ecological devastation, famines, migrations, settling of scores here, urban and police violence there, suicides, incurable diseases, interminable ends of life... this polymorphous death, which presents itself again and again every day and without stopping, what if it were nihilism itself? For it is no longer the death that it once was, the death that never ceases to threaten us, amidst the dangers of an unknown world... it is, on the contrary, today's death, it is what resists our knowledge and mastery of the world. More we know about the world and more we become masters of the world, more we see appearing to us this face, once again polymorphous, of death as pure and simple negation.

A death, which we would all the more like to cross, but that we lack the means to cross, unless we trust ourselves to some form of religion. In fact, this death is the expression of the dominant feeling of our time. And the dominant feeling of our time is, I would say, “save yourselves”, “run for your lives”.

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<sup>3</sup> "F. Nietzsche, *Complete Philosophical Works, XIII: Posthumous Fragments (Autumn 1887 - March 1888)*. ("Einen Sinn hineinlegen - diese Aufgabe bleibt unbedingt immer noch übrig, gesetzt daß kein Sinn darin liegt", Nachgelassene Fragmente (NF-1888), 9, 48.

So, our time follows a time, a very long time, of course, a time, which indeed began before Hegel, and which seemed to be completed or wrapped up with Hegel... so I am trying to show that Hegel himself already understood something different than that... we have been in a time, which has not stopped saying “we will be saved”, or better than just saved, we are going to fulfill ourselves, in the end we are going to become man in his plenitude, man in his totality, civilization in its entirety.

Today, there is no longer any prospect of fulfillment or salvation. And that is why I said that today's motto is “run for your lives”. And “run for your lives” means panic, it means everyone doing what they can to save their little piece of life, and we live in a world of panic, because we live in a world of destruction, annihilation, extermination, eradication, well, I could go on...

So, then, we have to ask ourselves what “tarrying with death” could mean. I would say that it means at least, to take this state of the world completely seriously, to stop taking it as a negation that we will be able to traverse, that we will be able to go through again. Trump's election, as I speak now, seems to be confirmed, but I would say that it doesn't matter whether this changes or not, the bottom line is still there. The basis of Trump's electorate is still there. And many other electorates around the world. Electorates or simply opinions, opinions that have been given out, submitted, handed over to anything that might help to flatter the feeling of panic and of “run for your lives”. We must take it seriously, we must stop at it, we must ask ourselves once again, as Nietzsche did, how could we introduce a new meaning, while knowing that this task is altogether meaningless?

Either we do that, or, and this is indeed perhaps another way of understanding the sojourn that there is in death, or we have to accompany a real end of the world. Then, there would be no new meaning to be introduced because we cannot even rise up to a final absence of meaning ... it doesn't make sense.

On the contrary, it is a death by too much sense that would be happening to us now. A death by too much identification, too much assignment, too much organisation, too much computation, too much calculation, if we have to talk like that. Then perhaps yes, the task that makes no sense would not be the non-task, the task beyond all the tasks that could qualify as the destination of the animal of meaning that we [humans] are. But

contrary to this task that makes no sense, there could simply be the last task, that is to say the task that cannot even be accomplished and which, by not accomplishing itself, in fact, opens up to a negation in which the sojourn would no longer be one. Because when one is themselves dead, one no longer dwells where one is.

*Jean-Luc Nancy*

*Translation: Ioanna Bartsidi*





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## A Discussion with Jean Luc Nancy

In the final session of the Conference, a round table discussion took place with Jean Luc Nancy, which was coordinated by Michalis Bartsidis, Scientific Director of NPI and attended by, among others, Athena Athanasiou, Aristeides Baltas, Costas Douzinas. We considered it important for the objective of this volume to include a significant part of this discussion. The arguments developed by Nancy in his main lecture are more thoroughly explored, while more aspects were added and crucial ideas emerged. It was one of the last philosophical interventions of Nancy and we felt it was our duty to publish it in a written text. The transcription was followed by a careful editing to clearly convey as clearly as possible Nancy's speech in the English written language.

### **Costas Douzinas**

Bienvenue Jean Luc. It is with great pleasure that we welcome you and thank you for joining this conference, with this the wonderful talk you gave to us. We heard it earlier. And we wish to thank you more generally for the generosity of your spirit, the great elegance of your speech, the way in which you are illuminating aspects of our current predicament. We had a short discussion earlier about your talk and of some general aspects of your work. So, let me ask you to give us a few concluding thoughts and then perhaps you may answer to some questions from our participants. So, thank you very much again and over to you I give you the floor, Jean-Luc.

### **Jean Luc Nancy**

Thank you, Costas. So, first of all excuse my poor English. Well, the issue is about negativity as absolute negativity. My concern with negativity today is that we are, maybe we still are, one way or another, in the process of coming to a certain understanding of the Hegelian dialectic. In the understanding of how the negative moves to the positive. And finally, to the positive as true. Maybe in the way Paul Guilibert spoke about Benjamin. I understand very well that a big crisis may open possibilities or a new utopia. But I would like to discuss the very idea of utopia. Now, what about negativity in Hegel? I start from Hegel for two reasons. First, because Hegel is the first thinker of modernity and, second, because I think that negativity in Hegel is not well understood when we consider it as a way of passing to a new positivity. Why? Because Hegel himself at the end of the *Logic* explains that the third moment of the dialectic should be perhaps understood as a fourth. Hegel writes: "We can count four times". Why? Because the third moment is not simply the negation of the previous moment and

the production of a new positivity. The third moment is at the same time and together negation and position because, with the third moment, the negation is combined with positivity. So, the third moment, as Hegel writes, is not final: it is perpetual movement. The third moment is, precisely, movement between negation and position. So, there is no simple and unique position, negation is still there. And then, I would like to link this ending of the *Logic* with the beginning of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* where Hegel, as you know, writes that the spirit is not afraid of death. But the spirit remains; it stays here. Hegel uses a word that means something like “to dwell” (demeurer). What does that mean? If we take together the two texts, the *Logic* and the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, it means that negativity is not to be overcome. The overcoming of negativity occurs through negativity itself. In the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel writes, in this very strange phrase, that this staying or dwelling in negativity or with death/in death is the “magic tool” with the help of which it is possible to go to a positivity’s magic. What does Hegel mean by magic? He doesn’t say. So, we try to find out. It is very strange that Hegel writes that. I think that “magic” means here that there is no way to explain or to deduce or to logically arrive from staying in negativity to positivity. Or maybe we could say that “magic” is ‘there’ all the time, that it has something to do all the time with immediacy; that something is transformed, is immediately transformed. So again, negativity is not “overcome” but “transformed”; and, according to the *Logic*, this is not simply transforming positivity with negativity forgotten; but it is “transforming” something while negativity is there remains.

Then, I would like to ask put a question to our own thinking, that is to Left theory, a question which makes up informs the very purpose of the present meeting: should we understand something new, something different, that constitutes our going from the negative to the positive, understand how we can stay in negativity at the same time as we are moving away from it? Maybe that would mean, at least, that we have to do something with death. And this is indeed involved with the various crises; it makes clear how we have a difficulty with death. We don’t know what to do with this difficulty, so we are fighting against the virus, which is absolutely normal. But we are doing this as if it were impossible to organize the idea that death by the virus is one of the many forms of death, of the fact that we are mortal. Our mortality is never taken into account in our thinking of history. Maybe precisely because Left thinking has been all the time thinking about history, a historical thinking of history as a process going towards a final issue, *totalment*, as Marx writes. This is not a criticism of Marx; it was absolutely normal that Marx thought in terms of progressive history. Perhaps we can keep the idea of progress, but of a certain kind of progress. Because the present crisis is exactly a crisis whereby

we have come to know that each progress is also a going back. Even every progress in medicine is at the same time a retreat because it brings new difficulties and so on. And this opens a way of thinking about technology and about the idea of progress. So, I just wanted to say the following: what does it mean for the earth we live in on, to think of a history to come, a history that we should understand less as a continuous progression towards a final outcome but as a succession of events, of chance? Truly, we have to fight no wand to try to make what is possible at best; but possible at best not only in the manner of progress because progress now knows itself as its own negation. Therefore we have to become, I would say, stronger than the negation in progress; which is to think again, yes I repeat, to think about death. Not only about death but about the mortality of man in general. But I don't want to continue. We must now discuss.

### ***Athena Athanasiou***

Thank you. I would like to acknowledge the importance of Jean-Luc Nancy's intervention which calls upon us to address sensuality, vulnerability and finitude, and, furthermore, to ask what it means for Left theory to account for finitude. It is particularly significant in the context of the cruel biopolitical moment that we call "the present" not to devalue finitude or disavow vulnerability, but rather to mobilize them as a way to collectively think and enact alternative and radical democratic ways of being in common and being together. Jean-Luc Nancy's sense of the world, as a way to politicize finitude, is an absolutely necessary point of entry into the critical tasks of the contemporary left theory and praxis. I think Jean-Luc Nancy's work on Hegel, and especially the powerful idea of the restless negative, opens a way for us to engage with the political implications of this remarkably renewed and radical re-appropriation of Hegel's work for the Left. This project to revise the common idea that Hegelian dialectics culminates at the moment of a final and total synthesis, enables us to account for the contingent, the inconclusive, the singular, the singular plural, and also finitude, desire, the idea of being in common. This is arguably very relevant to contemporary left re-appropriations of the political and I find it absolutely urgent to address the philosophical and political importance of such revision, which actually is also a gesture to recapture Hegelian thought from the Right and to repoliticize it for the purposes of left theory. So, once again I want to thank you, Jean-Luc, for offering us the generous gifts of your thought and your public interventions all these years. For me, they have allowed us to go beyond the comforting ontological divisions "negation versus affirmation", "optimism versus pessimism". I would like to thank you for these gifts of courageous thinking, and I will always remember with affection our intellectual encounter for the purposes of a radio interview a few years ago in Athens, which Costas mentioned earlier. Thank you.

### ***Jean Luc Nancy***

Thank you. You speak about finitude. And then we have to introduce another name than the name of Hegel. This is the name of Heidegger. And negativity in Heidegger belongs to being itself. Maybe, not maybe but it is certain that Heidegger himself, in a certain way converted being in a kind of complete positivity when he doesn't stop to speak about, *dasein* etc. Heidegger has a difficulty to keep the negativity he introduces himself in the being itself. So maybe our task is to help Heidegger not to go beyond Heidegger.

### ***Athena Athanasiou***

Absolutely, yes, I agree.

### ***Costas Douzinas***

As I said, Jean-Luc, we had a long exchange just before you came on your talk. So, I don't want to repeat myself, the comments I've made. Let me just put to you a certain provocation. You discuss the two negativities: the negativity which we can call with Kant the radical evil and then the negativity that you stay in, as you put it, you remain, and you dwell with it and then you move on. Now, I remember that in your great work on globalization and mythology, the ideas of nihilism and mythology. You said that globalization is that huge expansion of exchange value, of something that does not have use value but just exchange value, therefore has no value and as a result it is nihilistic. Now the covid, the virus, in a sense is a symbol, an effect and a symbol of globalization. It moves everywhere, it enters cities, neighborhoods, bodies, in order to kill. It is nihilistic in that sense. Death is its aim, if we can speak in those terms for a virus. So, globalization is nihilistic. The virus is nihilistic. But could we not see in the way in which many societies, particularly societies in the South, in the South of Europe, in the Mediterranean but also in the Global South, have responded to that bad evil, radical evil precisely. Could you say that with the evil returning to being it turns there is a turn to solidarity, to all kinds of ways of answering this radicalness of death, as an absolute death with no further hereafter, by remembering, returning to that vulnerability and the way in which we can answer the vulnerability, which is being together? Which is returning to an ontology of togetherness, of being one with the other. So, could we also see that perhaps that radical evil of the Covid could actually help recreate a sense of being together?

### ***Jean Luc Nancy***

Certainly, certainly. This Covid may help us in this way. Certainly. But then the question is how shall we understand the "together". Because, there is a way for the "together",

I would say that is the Chinese way: all Chinese are together. It is not enough to say there is an authoritarian even totalitarian government in China, no. There is, certainly, this government, but there is something else not only in China but in South Korea, in Vietnam, actually as well. There is the togetherness as a common working in order to produce more etc. And then maybe the question now is to know if we will move towards a complete mankind of this kind or some other. Then for the people of the South, as you say, how shall togetherness be? Are we in the togetherness of mortal people? Recently I thought about this, the question of equality. All the time we speak about equality, and this is what it is equal in the democratic way of thinking. So, what is the reason of equality? We don't know. We say we are equal because we are all human people but what are human people? Nobody knows. We still talk about the whiteness of man as a natural white; in such a case we have the perception of mankind and then of togetherness as something which is not togetherness. But it is, I don't know how to call that, it is to be, most like our image now on the screen. They are not together, each is in their room and of course we communicate through speech but we know it is not the same as if we would be in the same place, that is, with the presence of our bodies etc. So, then the togetherness understood as togetherness of mortal people, something that every culture before the modern culture understood very well. This is certainly something we have to talk about again.

### ***Costas Douzinas***

Yes, I agree with you. Just one comment. Because of course you answered my question by saying that against the nihilism of globalization and individualism, there is a communitarianism of communion which is a communion to death, is in being together until death and so on.

### ***Jean-Luc Nancy***

If you come today, I don't know, to a meeting of a leftist party - if there are still leftist parties somewhere – and you say “you know, my comrades, we are together because we are equal, equal and free, and so on and even maybe fraternal because we are mortal.” All the people Everyone will laugh at you. They will respond “what are you saying? That's not the question now.” Of course, it is. And again, we come to a bad negativity, I would say; everybody will say “yes, we know. We are mortal people. This is very sad but we cannot do in another way avoid it. It would be better to be immortal.” And this is precisely something that comes today with the transhumanism, an idea of the immortality. So, it needs a whole reflection is needed about what it means to understand that an immortal life is no longer a life. If we would live eternally, then what would even the sense of the life be? All the time we We are always asking for “the sense

of the life” but where is a sense of life, if life is immortal? eternal, if we are immortal? This is just so. The sense of the life, of the biological condition we call natural life is precisely to be born and die. The transmission of life is something that goes from one to the other, so is the separation of the death. And of course, this is not easy to accept. And secondly, I think that no culture has been happy when people die. In every culture people are sad. But there are ways to take in this sadness; which is more than a sadness, it is to take in the community the absolute loss as such . That is how we come we say that, or I sometimes think about the burning of people’s bodies, I mean non-religious burning, all the non-religious burning I have seen in my life, has been an attempt to make it a quasi-religious ceremony, to make a ceremony out of it; where a ceremony as such is already something religious. So, how can we invent something like that? Maybe the virus helped us because precisely we were very shocked by the death of people. Last spring in Italy, in Bologna, it was a time when people were shocked with the view of people going ‘away passing away quickly and almost in isolation. But why were they shocked? It means that still we have a sense of what is to do deal with death; and of course this is not only a question of what to do as an exterior external practice. We could even invent even a socialist or communist burning, but what I mean is that it needs the spirit of the community is needed.

### ***Aristides Baltas***

Let me thank Jean-Luc for his comments and let me formulate a rough idea. The idea is in a way to return to Spinoza who puts the body in the first place. Second, for him life amounts to the joy of life, without undermining or denigrating finitude; and, third, his famous phrase that “nothing is more important to man than another man”. Bodily important, in all kinds of ways, in social surroundings, if you like, which will somehow help each one to become better than he is with the help of others. Moreover, there is here an idea that comes rises against what is being said in Genesis: man is created after the image of God and is master of everything on earth. To a lower degree than God, of course, but master nevertheless. This has been the defining attribution of the human race, of the human kind, and this has been the core idea of the civilization of capital. And from this point of view the virus helps us, let’s say, to relate to our finitude as well as understand that our responsibility is not just man but life in general, as you just said, life on the planet, life of the other animals, life of the plants, life of the planet as such. And this is what the virus itself, as it were, puts on the agenda very strongly. In conjunction with this, as I think you also said, we should try to reinvent how we treat death, how not to be afraid of death, how to understand the absolute loss of somebody we love but also take into the account the ceremony required to do that. Because mourning is not

independent of ceremonies, I mean ceremonies domesticating mourning and letting life generally go on. I think all these ideas, which I gathered from what you said, are an important point at the theoretical level. I mean we should invest, try to discuss, to understand all authors, starting from your work and going backwards to, I don't know, Epicurus and try to cope with this question of death and mourning also practically. Not just isolate the issue in theory or isolate it in discussions about bodies but also in everyday action wherever we are, whenever we will be free from our being locked in our homes. And here solidarity enters in many ways. From Italy to all over the world, solidarity has been an important factor of the fighting against the virus, I think. And such solidarity is again the idea of "nothing is more important to man than another man"; this is the basis of solidarity and this is something which has to be expanded and institutionalized, so to speak, taking into account all the corresponding political implications. Thank you.

***Jean-Luc Nancy***

Thank you. I only want to say that "back to Spinoza" opens the question of what it means to go back in history. I like Spinoza very much, but Spinoza belongs to his time. So, how are we to understand Spinoza today? How can we understand the Substance Spinoza posits? I agree with you, it is not easy, but we can understand what it means to go from the first to the third way of knowledge. That it makes sense for us to think everything about sadness and joy etc. But Substance? What is Substance? So, what can we do? Where is the Substance? So, if Substance is the general technological, economical process, then Substance is production, self-production.

***Aristides Baltas***

It's the world's self-production. I mean galaxies are in Substance and in Substance. The solar system is in substance. The earth is Substance and in Substance. And all of us particularly, of course.

***Jean-Luc Nancy***

Yes, but the earth and the sun and all the galaxy are now objects of our domination. We have conquered space and we are going I don't know where. We control not everything but almost everything. What is very good is that now we understand that this control destroys, the earth as well as the space. Maybe we are destroying all the galaxies without knowing that we are doing that right now.

***Aristides Baltas***

Of course, yes. It's to get out of the idea of control, if you like. Forget controlling. In the

sense that we don't control, we don't want to control. We want to participate in the fate of the world. Not to control it.

**Jean-Luc Nancy**

Yes, but in order not to control, like in order to be more in solidarity and so on, we need something and I don't know how to call that something because I 've known only the names for spirit or spirituality. We need a spiritual revolution. But a spiritual revolution is not a new religion; it is a change of cast of mind. Already, I think in the 20s more or less, Valéry wrote a very small book with the title *The crisis of the spirit*. And Valéry was not a spiritualist in the religious meaning; Valéry however was already able to feel that something in the spirit, that is in the world or in the position of, perhaps, mankind – for Valéry much more the western part of mankind – did no longer work. That is why we are exactly in the situation of the Roman people, say of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, where, when you read some text, you are very much surprised because they say exactly the same things we say when we are sad: everything is gone, there is no longer Rome, there is no longer the value of Rome. Of course the Romans who was were not Christians and the Christian people at the same time didn't care about history, about what happened to mankind. They didn't care because the Lord will would come tomorrow. So, there was a gap between the then actual situation and the “the Lord who will come tomorrow”. Which perhaps today it is not exactly the same, but it is active in the Evangelists, not to speak about the Islamists. I mean that now there is something like either “there will be a kind of salvation” or “everything is lost”. That is the condition especially of the Left. The left is in mourning of the left all the time. What does that mean? I think that it means certainly it certainly means that many things are very important things; I think we have to work with the mourning of the Left for the Left itself.



# **HEGEMONY, DEMOCRACY & THE RISE OF THE FAR RIGHT: FEAR, HOPE & SECURITY**





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# Radical philosophy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Costas Douzinas

The term “radical” is etymologically related to the roots, the foundation of an entity. Radical theories, parties or policies break or uproot a system of thought or institution, as the Greek corresponding term *rizospastiko* (the breaking of roots) indicates. Radical politics is about the overthrow, the thorough-going political transformation, of the existing state of things. Interestingly, the term radicalisation and radical politics is linked today more with right wing and fundamentalist beliefs than those of the left. What does the radical left mean today?

After 1989, the Left accepted that liberal capitalism is the terminal stage of humanity while publicly denouncing “the end of history” motif. Grand theory and the politics of radical change were abandoned. This changed with the economic crisis and the end of the new world order. Theory made a comeback in the 2000s. Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* became a publishing success,<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, the Elvis Presley of theory filled theatres, the *Idea of Communism* conference I organized at Birkbeck College, London in 2009 became an international success.

What about politics? The return to the grand narratives famously abandoned in Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism, was precipitated by the world wave of resistances in the 2010s from the Arab Spring to Spain, Greece, to Turkey and Occupy Wall Street. The reactionary period that followed the defeat of the wave of resistance in 60s came to an end. History returned, according to Badiou. Party politics, parliamentary and governmental institutions went through a process of rapid delegitimation after the great reversals and betrayals of the nominally left parties, the communists in the East, the Social democrats in the West. Popular movements, struggles and desires turned down conventional politics and adopted a near-revolutionary passion.

The rise of SYRIZA was prepared by perhaps the greatest wave of social mobilization and acts of resistance in post-dictatorship Greece, a sequence of events that started in December 2008 and came to an end in 2015 with the January victory of SYRIZA and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard UP, 2000).

the July referendum. I was asked to stand for SYRIZA in my home city of Pireas in the September 2015 elections. SYRIZA won again, and I was elected. Returning to Greece as an accidental and reluctant politician, I became a chronicler of the first ever radical left government in Western Europe and a participant observer and ethnographer of the tribe of politicians. An ethnography of the radical left involves three things:

- a. mapping out the positions of left political philosophy,
- b. drawing lessons for the radical left from the rise and government of SYRIZA,
- c. working out the link between the two.

John Gray recalls that Mrs. Thatcher participated in meetings of the Conservative Philosophy Group and the Institute of Economic Affairs, where she learned the basics of neoclassical economics. They were marked “by an almost Bolshevik sense of urgency for far-reaching transformation of government and the economy. The feeling was one of radical discontinuity with the past.”<sup>2</sup> Would the SYRIZA government have fared better had it organised a regular seminar on the work of Poulantzas, Negri, Laclau, Rancière, Badiou or Žižek? Perhaps, we don’t know. We can do it retrospectively by briefly presenting key theoretical positions that unite versions of radical philosophy, by clearing the ground for the return of the radical, linking them to our experience and drawing lessons for the strategy of radical politics.

This first chapter carries out the mapping of radical philosophy schools. It is organised around a number of key concepts. The second moves to the other two tasks.

## **A. Left political philosophy**

### **1. Conflict**

The new world order and neo-liberalism announced the end of class struggle and ideology, the age of post-democracy, the rule of experts and markets over politics, and of the grand centre-right, centre-left coalitions. A first task of radical philosophy was to reassert the inescapability of conflict. Now this has been done through a motif

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<sup>2</sup> John Gray, “Warrior Woman” *The New Statesman*, 20 March 2000 at <https://www.newstatesman.com/node/150968>

of rupture, or break, that persists in the face of a post-political routinization of politics. Philosophically the inspiration for this position is the poststructuralist quest for a concept that cannot be coopted into the structure for a point or break that disallows the closure of the system whether it is difference in Derrida, the punctum in Barthes, the real in Lacan, the abject or *chora* in Kristeva, or the other in Levinas and Lyotard. In political philosophy, this process has followed either Carl Schmitt's definition of politics as a friend-enemy antagonism or the Mouffe / Stavrakakis position of antagonism as the institutionalization of lack, negativity, passion and force evident in *jouissance*.

Now for reasons I cannot go into now – the negative as a limit-point – I believe that both theoretical rigor and experience leads to a different theorization of antagonism closer to the Heideggerian division between the 'ontological' and the 'ontic', between Being and beings. It was transferred to a distinction between politics (*la politique*) and the political (*le politique*), initially suggested by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy.<sup>3</sup> The distinction has been used in various forms by Claude Lefort, Alain Badiou, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, Antonio Negri, Jacques Rancière, Étienne Balibar and Antonio Negri. 'Politics' refers to the practices of conventional politics, routine political life: government and opposition, parties and debating, lobbying and horse-trading. The 'political', on the other hand, refers to the way in which the social bond is instituted and concerns the deep rifts in society. It marks is 'the ineliminable antagonism serv[ing] as the foundation, the condition of possibility for the organized and channeled struggles of politics.'<sup>4</sup> Politics organizes the institutions and practices through which order is created, normalizing social co-existence in the context of persisting conflict. The function of politics is to express, condense and provisionally mediate social and economic conflict, to build legitimate authority against the permanent background of unavoidable antagonism. In the same way that 'ontic' beings exist in the space of forgetting and recollecting Being, the quest for legitimate power takes place in the field of relations of force, in which two powers operate and compete: *Potestas*, the force that keeps society together through the domination of the few over the many which is superimposed on *potentia*, the constituent power of the people which remains dormant and returns occasionally, like the repressed.

What form does conflict take and who is the social and political subject of radical change?

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3 Philipp Lacoue Labarthe and Jean Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political* (Routledge, 1997).

4 William Rasch, *Sovereignty and its Discontents* (Birkbeck Law Press, 2009).

## 2. Political subject

For traditional Marxism, social classes are constituted outside politics – in productive economic activities, which distribute people into clearly demarcated class positions. The socio-economic changes of late capitalism, however, have undermined the solidity of the working class, turning the bulk of the population into salaried workers, multiplying class positions and bringing into politics non-class identities and collectivities. No single party or ideology can claim to represent the class or to offer undisputed leadership. Philosophers attempted, therefore, to develop a non-essentialist theory of the social field, politics, the political subject and tried to trace a political strategy of break with the dominant social order. Let me examine briefly some in the context of the “Greek spring”.

**Jacques Rancière** displaces social division from class to the excluded. Normal politics is preoccupied with questions of distribution and rational agreement, its dominant approaches, the economic and deliberative. Real politics erupts when a group or class excluded from political representation demands to be included and must change the rules of the game to achieve that. Antagonism is the result of the tension between the structured social body, where every group has its role, function and place, and ‘the part of no part’.<sup>5</sup> This type of antagonism is a dispute about ‘social visibility’, the frame within which some are seen while others become invisible. Politics is precisely the attempt to challenge social hierarchies and abolish inequalities; it ‘turns on equality as its principle’. The Athenian demos demanding to be included in politics was, at the same time, the whole population and those excluded by the aristocratic rulers. Similarly, when Olympe de Gouges argued that if she and women were recognized as political subjects by the revolutionaries who condemned her to death, they should also be given political rights.<sup>6</sup> The political subject is therefore not given and will be determined by the specificities of exclusion. Today the principle of universality or equality is embodied in refugees and undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, the poor, the precariat.

This is a corrective to traditional conceptions of the ‘aesthetics’ of politics. Radical politics involves administering and changing regimes of visibility. This means that ‘affective and moral economies’ have a key role to play despite left indifference, as we saw over the 2008 student insurrection and the Macedonia dispute. However, the groups that

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5 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

6 Rancière, “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?” in Balfour and Cadava eds., *And Justice for All?*, 2/3 South Atlantic Quarterly 2004, 197.

attempt to enter the field of social vision, the ‘parts of no part’, are the recipients of the protection of human and social rights. The SYRIZA government had to move along two overlapping juxtapositions. That between a government of all Greeks, and its own leftist followers and, second, between class politics and the politics of identity and human rights. The four sides converged momentarily in 2015.

But when the government was unable to deliver on its class promises, identity and human rights, a recent addition to the party’s ideology became a privileged site of intervention. In the refugee crisis, we had a reversal of the famous Hannah Arendt position. The human rights of refugees were given priority over the political rights of citizens, something that leads to a moralization of politics with its own difficulties. The refugee problem teaches that the excluded groups who become customers of state provision and protection are not the subject of radical change. A radical strategy tries to incorporate them into the politics by insisting that everyone who lives here has all the rights of those who are here, including full political rights.

**Badiou’s** theory of the ‘event’ helped us understand the unpredicted, unplanned and leaderless wave of resistances, particularly the occupations. We are at the end of the interval of reactionary capitalism which followed the last revolutionary period in the 60s and 70s, according to Badiou.<sup>7</sup> Recent uprisings have placed radical change on the agenda again. Its realisation needs a strong affirmative idea, a vision or image of the good life, for Badiou, the “idea of communism”, and a highly disciplined organisation. He dismisses the state, left parties and the economy as concerns of radical politics.<sup>8</sup> The left is part of a structural imposture, he claimed, in an argument we had about SYRIZA’s victory. The radical left differs only in ‘nuance and detail, a minimal further redistribution without any foundational changes in the dominant capitalist logic’. When I distinguished between social democracy and the radical left, Badiou called me a ‘useful enemy’, because, “despite his links with emancipatory movements, he offers a ‘beautified and limited’ picture of the situation and does not realize that we must begin from scratch, following the example of the 1840 revolutionaries in ‘ideology, political criticism, types of mass action, organization’”.<sup>9</sup> Following Kant’s approach to the French revolution, I pleaded guilty.

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7 Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History* (Verso 2012).

8 Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (Verso 2012).

9 Alain Badiou interview to Maria Kakogianni, ‘On the occasion of the publication of *The Greek Symptom*’, 27/4 2014, Avgi (in Greek) at <http://www.avgi.gr/article/2414442/alain-mpantiou-me-tin-eukairia-tis-kukloforias-tou-tomou-«to-elliniko-sumptoma»> (my translation).

Badiou cannot offer much help to a left government except to say that we must prepare, or at least not be shocked, when the miracle of the event arrives.

**Hardt and Negri's** multitude – a manifestation of the society of immaterial production and the general intellect helps understand the social composition of late capitalism.<sup>10</sup> The multitude has replaced class as the totality of people who reproduce themselves and capitalism through their immaterial labor. Empire unites the multitude in a global network of economic dependence and integration, while 'sucking' its life force. The novelties and inventions in communications and information technology demand networking, open access to information, the sharing of resources. But the central control and disciplining imposed by owners and managers undermines collaborative invention and creation. In agriculture, science, technology, medicine and culture, the novel is created in open collaboration but is immediately transformed into a closed source of profit protected by patents and copyright. We have therefore reached the point when capitalism destroys people and the planet without reason for existence. A rupture with capital is possible and timely. What we need is to 'eliminate bosses because an industrial control over cognitive work is completely dépassé'.

The theory of the social multitude gives useful analytical tools. But only the multitude in assembly, the people as demos in the occupations, can initiate radical change. The multitude is the social foundation, the *demos* the political subject. The horizontal organization of the occupations prepared radical change but could not succeed on its own. Complementary strategies, the street and the ballot paper are necessary for radical change. As in Badiou, a clear distance from state and left parties is proposed. However, Negri partly mitigated his argument when he voted for SYRIZA in the 2014 Euro elections.

**Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe** pushed the deconstruction of Marxist ontology to its logical end.<sup>11</sup> Politics is not a 'level' of the social or a superstructure. Political subjects are not constituted outside of politics in society or the economy and do not have 'objective' social positions or interests. On the contrary, social relations are structured by the political intervention.

The social field is fragmented, riven by differences, tensions and conflicts between classes, professions, interests and ideologies, for example between civil servants, private

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10 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (Hamish Hamilton, 2004).

11 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Verso, 1985).



employees and professionals, between the employed and unemployed, high and low earners, citizens and immigrants. To win, the left needs a hegemonic intervention that manages temporarily to attenuate tensions and emphasizes the common interests of the popular side. Classes, sectors and groups on this side “us”, accept that the differences with “them”, those on the other side, “them” are more important than their local and sectional divisions.<sup>12</sup>

The SYRIZA strategy in the 2015 elections, and in the July referendum, comes closest to Laclau’s left populism. An ensemble of unrelated demands, struggles and campaigns become linked through a series of equivalences. The dividing line between us and them was the attack on the programmes imposed on Greece by the EU and the IMF. The anti-memorandum strategy had a combination of an economic component, the promise to reverse the huge impoverishment of the people (40% reduction of per capita income), a national dignity/national liberation element (against the IMF and German attack on sovereignty), and a democratic component attacking the post-political rule of experts and emphasising direct democracy. People concluded that their common interests were greater than ancient right-left enmities and recent party rivalries. It was radical democracy at its best.

After the lenders defeated Tsipras and the third memorandum was signed, the anti-memorandum strategy was no longer available. Laclau’s populism is perhaps the best strategy available at points of great tension, but his generalizations make it difficult to distinguish between, say, the progressive Latin American populism and extreme right-winger demonization of the immigrants. As different particulars fight to colonize the universal, we need normative criteria to distinguish between progressive and reactionary ‘universals’, or between radical and fascist rejection of austerity. A left hegemonic intervention should combine a class front and social movement/identity fronts, distribution and recognition, or body and language. However, both must be encompassed by a popular front that addresses class interests and moral/ideological values using rational arguments and emotional address.

Finally, our friend **Žižek**. His theory of the ‘radical act’ targets state power in order to introduce a ‘new socialist order’ that challenges capitalist ‘worldlessness’. Žižek, unlike Badiou, does not advise withdrawal from state politics and, unlike Negri, he does not reject the party form or the left. For him, on the contrary, the problem lies with the social

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<sup>12</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005).

movements that emerged in the wave of resistances exercising direct democracy. He considers them powerless, if they have not been already coopted into the capitalist machine, and therefore dangerous. It was a mistake. When the Greek multitude became a demos, voting citizens, they voted massively for the radical left. Žižek supported the left, and when it conceded and signed the third programme, Žižek praised its courage of hopelessness. Answering the criticism that SYRIZA's policies were too moderate and social democratic, he writes that "SYRIZA was heroic and dangerous, it does pose a threat to the present orientation of the EU – today's global capitalism cannot afford a return to the old welfare state."<sup>13</sup> Žižek admits that "the left lacks a serious vision of how to reorganise society".<sup>14</sup>

This is the responsibility of left theory and strategy.

### 3. Methodology of radicalism

1. Most post-Marxist theorists consider politics and philosophy as separate discourses and practices. Rancière argues that political philosophy is the attempt to rid philosophy of politics, to suppress the disagreement and conflict inherent in politics. For Alain Badiou, the four forms of thinking, politics, philosophy, art and love create their own truths. If philosophy tries to develop an independent political logic, it becomes bad philosophy, and an enemy of politics. I believe they are both wrong in their anti-dialectical mission.

There is much to learn from radical philosophy. However, it is the philosophy of a defeated generation. It has returned to a type of grand narrative which combines obsession with the 'explanation of life', the universe, and everything with the 'anxiety of influence' that previous generations of greats, such as Sartre, Foucault, Deleuze, Althusser, Derrida, creates for the epigones. They prefer the lecture hall and the gallery to the street protest and the party. SYRIZA fought and lost an asymmetrical battle, but it is still standing. Ordinary people created a historic opportunity by being well-ahead of theory.

2. The leftist strategy has taken two basic forms in theory, non-dialectical antagonism and immanence. We have a purification of the Marxist idea of contradiction, reduced to an unmediated opposition between the masses and the State. It takes the melodramatic form of an eternal struggle of Good and Evil, and the idea of a radical break. In this

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<sup>13</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness* (Verso, 2016), 52.

<sup>14</sup> Id. 87.

split, we hear echoes of Freud's or Lacan's 'splitting of the ego'. We have either the complete denial of antagonistic contradictions, or else the jubilatory recognition of a hyper-antagonism, of the almost mystical experience of one divides into two.

Second, is the principle of immanence, or reciprocal presupposition between power and resistance. It discovers the latent outline of communism within capitalism. Marx's letter to Ruge shows how the conditions for the new society are already present within the old one. "The reform of consciousness consists *only* in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in awakening it out of its dream about itself, in *explaining* to it the meaning of its own actions." The best proponent of this view today is Negri: "Communism is already alive within the capitalist and/or socialist societies of today, in the form of a secret order dedicated to cooperation in production".<sup>15</sup> The potential for resistance of the multitude already present, without the need for any dialectical mediations or sublations, within the power and command of Empire.

Despite the reservations of radical philosophers, the party form is necessary. And the state cannot be abandoned. The dilemma for or against the state is false. It assumes that the state form cannot be reformed. The left has to be both in and against the state, its task to transform state power, radically changing its functioning, its relationship to its base, as a necessary prerequisite for the radical socio-economic break.

## **B. Theoretical lessons from a radical government**

### **But was the Left in power?**

The Left government lived in contradiction. The most general contradiction between the state and the left took a specific form between Left ideology, and the austerity policies imposed by the creditors. The austerity memorandum signed by Tsipras is the effect and cause of the inherent and unsolvable tension between capital and state on one side and working people and the Left. These tensions extended to the relationship between government and party, and that between the two on one side and the social movements on the other. The party was sidelined, as many of its top cadre moved to government, and the work at the local level, in municipalities, trade unions and civil society associations was downgraded. SYRIZA's victory was built on resistance and activism. After the elections, social mobilization declined, the movements became immobile. The

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<sup>15</sup> *Empire*, 218

election of a government broadly supporting the social movements demands has a calming effect. Voting soothes the street; electoral victory crowns the resistance and sends people home. But the absence of external pressure to keep the government to its promises means that complacency and lack of understanding of popular sentiment crept in.

What does the SYRIZA experience teach us about radical strategy? We discuss the problems of left-wing governance in the second article. But we have to admit that we failed, we will try again, we will fail better. And because we failed better, we are now perhaps on the threshold of success.

# Neutralization of the imagination Structures of bourgeois recontextualization of democratic claims

*Gerasimos Kouzelis*

Let me begin by referring to something current: the far-right insurgency, as we witnessed it, at the American Capitol. I would like to remind us of two dimensions of this incident.

On the one hand, the events that took place there underlined the limits of democracy. Whatever happened, happened within its framework, within the framework of its American version. The neo-fascist potential, the national-populist discourse, the deeply authoritarian mentality and behaviour, the governmental Bonapartism, all developed and manifested themselves within a tolerant democracy. They all fit within democracy and in the absence of resistance and progressive alternatives, democracy even nurtures them. Always, of course, on the brink of the abyss, at the limit of what has been described as “post-democracy”.

The limit called to mind the dominant condition, it brought that condition to the surface: Trump has not changed in recent days, he was the same person before, and he has done this before, representing an extreme authoritarian democracy which exploits parliamentary institutions with characteristic callousness.

On the other hand, let us remember what prevented the possibility of continuing the coup. This also takes place at the limits of democracy, which albeit in crisis, still exists. The decision of two large private companies to ban Trump’s accounts on social media. The new - and otherwise promising - way for public space to exist is not public. A private decision can therefore suspend this condition for the existence of democracy, or even reverse it, thus offering to totalitarian propaganda the field of publicity, a situation, besides, which is not too far removed from what is happening in Greece.

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Therefore, the question I will try to pose - rather than answer - is what discursive configuration of forces is behind such developments. I will attempt to submit two hypotheses.

According to the first, the dynamics we see in the ever-increasing authoritarianism that surrounds us, has to do with a redefinition of the fundamental principles of modernity. It has to do with a redefinition from a position of increased power. The ruling bloc re-appropriates the emblematic declarations of the bourgeois revolution, giving them an extreme counter-revolutionary content. In fact, they are being re-appropriated at a turning point: that is, after the retreat of the democratic social movements that were striving to put in use the subversive critical force of these principles. This is a *reductionist* recontextualization.

Democracy, itself, is defined merely as a shell, as a form of government. Content is limited to a formal treaty on the separation of powers, the procedures of representation, the formal principle of majority, “law and order”. The shrinking of citizens’ participation, of deliberation and of the possibility for popular control are symptomatic of an authoritarian domination. Nonetheless, this very authoritarian version is fully integrated into the definition of a democratic regime, as long as the frictions caused by this closed framework are balanced out.

Respectively, the fundamental principles of a democratic society are shrinking, too. Freedom has of course become a central slogan for the dominant ideology, reduced to the free market. The freedom for which battles are fought, and for which wars are waged, is that of entrepreneurship. Similarly, the free citizen is understood as the one who can independently take initiative without barriers stemming from social regulations. Here, however, there are two dimensions of the modern world that I will dwell on later: the full dominance of discourse that places the economy at the centre of everything and the radical individualization of agents.

Equality has been reduced to the promise of meritocracy, to the provision of opportunities, which are not universally accessible, to a neo-elitism of the excellence of those who affirm themselves in class reproduction. While the social spectrum extremities – namely, the extreme wealthy on the one hand, and the margin of vulnerable groups on the other – are disappearing from the realm of daily visibility, employees in the capitalist centres can fantasize a relative equality of opportunity.

Fraternity, the repressed dimension of the bourgeois revolution, returns as exclusive solidarity. The ethnocentrism organizing the individual perception of reality, assumes, therefore, immediate political dimensions. Our brothers are only those who belong to “us”.

As this last point makes obvious, the criticality of this reductionist recontextualization lies in the possibility it provides to forces hostile to democracy to inactivate it, or even undermine it internally. Inverted enlightenment offers rhetorical tropes and sources of metaphor to the far right.

That is why the far right effortlessly invokes the principle of the (silent) majority, the right to expression, the defence of rights and Western cultural values, individual autonomy, the support of our brothers. That is why equally effortlessly the far right denounces the system, the elites, the bureaucracy which is cut off from the people. That is why it has strongholds in that part of the subaltern classes which, in the context of a shrinking democracy, is indeed, and does feel, excluded, marginalized and - mainly - unrecognized.

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The possibility of authoritarian reframing of democratic claims leads me to my second hypothesis. Authoritarian reason is imposed in the midst of an evolution that reinforces the two basic dimensions of the way the world is “read” or experienced: factuality, that is, economism on the part of the object, and the individual perspective, namely, individualization on the part of the subject.

The first dimension experiences the complete domination of neoliberalism. The daily life of citizens in the states of the capitalist centre is governed, after 1989, by a hegemonic discourse, whose “prince” is the market. This discourse is realistic as it attributes the priority of determination to the economy, which becomes the model and matrix of organization of every social relationship. Capitalism shows its plain, pure form. And this kind of capitalism is neoliberal – clearly neoliberal, as long as nothing stops it. The imposition of this model also applies to the state. Thus, the market appears as a popular system of democratic governance. It gives free people equal opportunities. It rewards effort and risk fairly and meritoriously. It judges decisions and politics. It eliminates unnecessary bureaucracies and the excessive state.

The way young citizens, in particular, reject high taxes, redistribution or even free public services, the way they easily buy into business success stories, is rather telling. What is

also quite telling is the extent to which they consider that the core of politics is financial management, and, in fact, as non-intervention. Governance and not politics. “Down-to-earth politics”. Such is the guarantee of the “automatic” reproduction of capital, without illusions and without passion. Politics becomes evil. Much of the impressively solid hostility to politicians is due to this kind of evaluation.

I will now move on to the other dimension, namely to individualization. The starting point, here too, is located in the production and reproduction processes. There has never been a society as differentiated as the one we live in. Neither have we ever experienced such complex social structures and relationships. Differentiation imposes conditions of isolation to individuals; complexity makes it hard to overcome them. Suffice to remember the modern division of labour, the fragmentation of specialisms, the educational course that never ends, the geometric growth of scientific and professional branches. Suffice it to recall how the landscape of work, communication, culture and leisure evolved with the onslaught of new technologies. Even if these are the very same technologies that guarantee the management of complexity.

It is not just that labour processes are segmented into distinct positions and responsibilities. It is mainly that their connection does not require the direct presence of employees, cooperation and consultation. Nothing could be more characteristic than the current conditions of operation for much of the wage labour and services in conditions of home isolation. What has been partially undermined is the sociability of labour, its collective subject. This, of course, has decisive consequences for the possibilities of workers’ collective organization, collective identity and collective resistance –all of them, dimensions, which are already under attack by neoliberal politics and its regulations. The strongest attack here, of course, is taking place again, in purely economic terms, namely the threat of job loss, of personal debt, of the activation of conditions of social marginalization and impoverishment.

The “independence” to which neoliberalism refers to consists indeed in such an isolation of subjects. They are now called upon not only to construct a self and a biography, but also to treat themselves as a business to which their own individual labour power to be invested belongs. The dominant discourse is addressed to the citizens as naked, individual beings. It deprives them of every other property. Radical individualization is thus a peculiar new humanism.



This dynamic is reinforced by the radical detachment of the members of the dominated classes from traditional roots, localities and community collectives. Thus, the support offered to the individual by these intermediate forms of social organization, the support for their ability to resist, melts away.

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With the collapse of the public sphere, this outcome becomes even more immediate. Because the public sphere is not just a condition for democracy as a place of deliberation. It also offers the possibility of communication and mediated contact – which are completely vital for the subaltern classes after the restriction of direct contact between their members.

Here modern developments have offered a critical alternative: information and communication technologies and, in particular, social media. These reconstruct grids of virtual collectivity while individualization deepens, offering the possibility of being united in isolation (as we do now). Of course, this is coupled with the social and political risk posed by the private businesses, which control these media. The risk became clear, albeit the wrong way round, in the case of the decisive ban of Trump's Facebook and Twitter accounts.

So, are we left with a privately controlled public sphere? Semi-public? Is this not also a step towards the collapse of the conditions that allow for the formation of the citizens' critical faculties? Does it not confirm the weakness of the isolated individual in the face of a solid factuality? In other words, does it not confirm what has been imposed as the political positivism, "the absence of an alternative"?

What is at stake is the possibility of an active imagination. And this is the fundamental question for any critical attitude: the ability of agents to assess the relationships that define them, based on a different possibility, on an "other", which takes shape in their imagination.

We are theoretically and politically called upon to guarantee the existence of this possibility on new terms.



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# On the Actuality of Otto Bauer and Austro-Marxism

*Walter Baier*

**W**hen the conversation comes to revolutionary Marxism in Europe, normally two traditions are mentioned, an Eastern one, oriented to Lenin and Trotsky, and a Western one, originating in Luxemburg and Gramsci.

Too little credit, however, is attributed to the Central European tradition, which is no less sophisticated or rich, than the ones mentioned afore, and whose historically most important attractive has been Austro-Marxism.

Austria's social democracy was founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in an Empire of 12 ethnic communities. Thus, it could not help but being international, providing the incubation space of a theoretical culture, of which many important political figures grew out, who later played important roles in the in the new national states, which emerged from the Empire. E.g., Ignacy Daszyński, later PM of Poland or Ljubomir Smeral, the founder of the CP of Czechia. Austro-Marxism actually constituted the common root and provided a common language to the Marxist tradition in Central Europe.

Ideologically, Austrian Social Democracy tried to cover a middle ground between revolutionary and reformist socialism, dissociating itself, as much from Bernstein's revisionism, as from Third-International dogmatism.

This made it the leader of *Centrism* in Europe's socialist movement, and in 1921 becoming the founder of the International Working Union of Socialist Parties,<sup>1</sup> which aimed at bringing about a reconciliation between the social democratic London International and the Communist International, an effort which failed, as we know.

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1 The International Working Union of Socialist Parties (IWUSP; also known as 2 1/2 International or the Vienna International. It was founded in 1921 at a conference in [Vienna](#) by ten parties, including the [Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany](#) (USPD), the [French Section of the Workers' International](#) (SFIO), the [Independent Labour Party](#) (ILP), the [Social Democratic Party of Switzerland](#) (SPS), the [Social Democratic Party of Austria](#) (SDPÖ), and the [Federation of Romanian Socialist Parties](#). Later, the [Spanish Socialist Workers' Party](#) and the [Maximalist](#) faction of the [Italian Socialist Party](#) joined. In 1923, it dissolved and merged with the Second International to the [Labour and Socialist International](#) (LSI).

Austro-Marxism is inseparably linked with the name of the political leader of the Austrian Social-Democracy after World War I, Otto Bauer. Despite that, in contrast to the Social-Democratic Right and also to Karl Kautsky,<sup>2</sup> Bauer and the Austro-Marxists, with all criticism of the Bolsheviks' dictatorial and terrorist exercise of power, did not dispute the principally socialist character of the October Revolution,<sup>3</sup> the reputation that they had in the Soviet-oriented mainstream of the Communist Left was quite bad. E.g., in the "Dictionary of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy", an extensive and ambitious work published in 1964 in the GDR, you read: Austro-Marxism is "a centrist currant within the Austrian Social democracy, a variant of revisionism of which the departure point was the narrow minded petit-bourgeois interpretation of the national question in the Austro-Hungarian Empire by the social democratic leadership."<sup>4</sup>

Otto Bauer, himself, suggested in a leading article in 1926 published in the *Arbeiterzeitung*, the official organ of the social democratic party, the following characterisation of Austro-Marxism:

"At that time – which is the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – a group of younger scientifically working Austrian comrades was called Austromarxism: Max Adler, Karl Renner, Rudolf Hilferding, Gustav Eckstein, Otto Bauer, Friedrich Adler, and others. What united them was not a particular political inclination, but the specificity of their scientific work .... Were Marx and Engels inspired mainly by Hegel, and had the later generation of Marxists assumed materialism, so the younger 'Austromarxists' came partly from Kant, partly from Mach.

On the other hand, at Austrian universities they have had to deal with the so-called Austrian school of economics. ... And finally, all of them were politically socialised in the old Austria, shaken by nationality struggles, and had to learn to apply the Marxist conception of history to complicated phenomena, which did not allow for superficial application of the Marxist method."<sup>5</sup>

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2 See: Kautsky, Karl (1922). *Die proletarische Revolution und ihr Programm Zweite Auflage*. p. 111 ff. Berlin/ Stuttgart: J.H.W Dietz Nachf. G.m.b.H.

3 Bauer, Otto (1920). *Bolschewismus oder Sozialdemokratie*. p. 69. Vienna: Wiener Volksbuchhandlung.. Adler, Max (1926). *Politische oder soziale Demokratie*. p.89. Berlin: E. Laub'sche Verlangsbuchhandlung G.m.b.H.

4 Klaus, Georg/Buhr, Manfred, Ed. (1972) *Marxistisch-Leninistisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*. p.157. Hamburg: Rowohlt.

5 Bauer, Otto (1927). *Austromarxismus* in: *Arbeiterzeitung*, 3. November 1927, Vienna.

So, a scientific commonality – not a united political movement in the first place, inspired by Kant, the Austrian School of Economics (Carl Menger, Eugen Böhm-Bawerk, Ludwig von Mises) and the experience of the multinational state Austria-Hungary, united these theoreticians.

Of course, there is much more to say. Characteristically, Bauer did not bother to mention in his article the women who contributed to the school, e.g., Käthe Leichter, Marie Jahoda and Helene Bauer—the latter being his wife!

Let me add, that among the inspirations giving life to Austromarxism, also Freud's Psychoanalysis and Hans Kelsen's Pure Theory of Law- School must be mentioned, as well the Second Viennese Classical School of Music (with Schönberg, Berg and Webern),<sup>6</sup> all of them making Vienna 'red', a hot spot of European modernity.

It would be worth a separate lecture to recall the debate of 1924, between Otto Bauer and Hans Kelsen, on the matter of Marxist state theory and democracy.<sup>7</sup> A further detail of interest in this context is that, out of Kelsen's famous seminar in state law, an intellectually compact group of young Social Democratic intellectuals emerged, most of them associated with Austro-Marxism, who joined the KPÖ in 1934. 30 years later, they were forming the nucleus of the current that in the 1960s anticipated a kind of Euro-communism in the KPÖ.<sup>8</sup>

Among the theoretical achievements of this Marxist school, we must emphasize:

- the works on the so called 'national question' by Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, which current significance Eric Hobsbawm<sup>9</sup> has highlighted;
- Rudolf Hilferding's groundbreaking book 'Finance Capital' (Das Finanzkapital), quoted extensively in Lenin's book on imperialism;
- a relevant theory of democratic socialism, which was resumed in the 70s by the

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6 See; Fichna, Wolfgang. Bach, David Josef *Die Vermittlung der Musik der Moderne in der sozialdemokratischen Kulturpolitik*. Schwarz, Werner Michael/ Spitaler, Georg/ Wikidal, Elke Ed. Das Rote Wien 1919 – 1934. . p.348 – 351. Basel: Birkhäuser.

7 Kelsen, Hans (1924). "Marx oder Lasalle. Wandlungen in der politischen Theorie des Marxismus." In: *Hans Kelsen Ausgewählte Aufsätze Herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Norbert Leser* (1967) Verlag der Wiener Volksbuchhandlung, Wien, 1967, S. S. 145. Bauer, Otto (1924). Das Gleichgewicht der Klassenkräfte. P.79 – 98. In: Sandkühler, Hans-Jörg/ de la Verga, Rafael (1970). *Austromarxismus*. Wien: Europa Verlag.

8 Baier, Walter (2019) KPÖ's 'Eurocommunism 'avant la lettre' Unpublished manuscript.

9 Hobsbawm, Eric J (1990). *Nations and nationalism since 1780. Programme, myth, reality*. Cambridge/New York/ Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Euro-Communists;

- last, not least, Otto Bauer's concept "Integral Socialism" coined in 1936, in the face of the advance of fascism, with which he demanded a renewal of socialism through a synthesis of its reformist and revolutionary tendencies.

One must also mention, Karl Polanyi, who in a strict sense did not take part in the Austro-Marxist school, although living and working in Vienna as an émigré after the suppression of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. His famous work, 'The Great Transformation', was published in the USA in 1944.

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Back to the revolutionary years of 1918 and 1919, the multinational empire Austria-Hungary has collapsed, in the German speaking remnant called "German-Austria" the Social democratic party entered into a coalition government with the Conservatives from which they were ousted in 1920. Thus, the only possibility it had at its disposal to materialize its ideas of social reform was in the municipalities, and in particular, in the capital, Vienna.

Red Vienna represented a unique experiment in social, health care, architecture and educational politics, a unique experiment. In particular, the communal Viennese housing projects achieved exemplary importance. Between 1925 and 1934, the City of Vienna had more than 60,000 apartments built.

In 1918/19, the power was lying in the streets, while in the neighbouring countries of Bavaria and Hungary, following the Bolshevik model, Soviet-style republics had been proclaimed. In Austria, as Bauer noted, no other force than the Social democrats was able to consolidate the new state. However, they opted for containing the revolution within the bourgeois frame, as they argued for good and practical reasons, since the fear of being cut off from the food and fuel supply, and even a military intervention by the Entente powers, was real.

However, the change was revolutionary anyway, introducing women's suffrage, banishing the Habsburgs from the country, and confiscating their estates and other assets. And, all this, in combination with an unprecedented program of progressive social re-

forms: the eight-hour-work day, paid leave for workers, introduction of shop stewards and workers councils.

Even a bill written by Otto Bauer, promulgating the socialisation of the big industrial companies was adopted by the National Assembly but never implemented, since it could be undermined by the capitalists and the reactionary state administration, and was finally laid down when the balance of power changed in favour of the conservative forces.

In 1923, Bauer's book "The Austrian Revolution" was published, which is considered one of his key works.<sup>10</sup> In it, he sketches out a threefold revolutionary process: a series of national revolutions in the territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; a bourgeois revolution in Austria and a social revolution, which he was aiming at by means of parliamentary majority and the mobilization of the working class.

A panorama opens up of opposing tendencies, shifting relations of forces, with its antagonists advancing and retreating. State-theory issues appear alongside problems of transformation and of party theory. Here appears the theory of a popular democracy in which the state is based on the equilibrium between two antagonistic class forces. Since this political equilibrium is unstable, it either enters in the restoration of bourgeois class power or in a higher stage of the revolution, which is the power of the working class, exercised in a democratic form and creating the basis of socialism.

Since the latter could not be achieved for reasons which Bauer tries to explain, the period of the equilibrium ends in the ousting of the social democrats from the state power, which they facilitated.

In Bauer's sober stocktaking, the period appears as a transitional phase in the working class's ongoing struggle for power. In defence of his refusal of any attempt of a socialist uprising as demanded by the communists, he argues that only thanks to the social democratic strategy a civil war was avoided, which in his opinion inevitably would have resulted like in Hungary, a military defeat and a White Terror.

During the debate on his socialisation bill, Bauer published a brochure titled "The Road to Socialism", in which he suggested a detailed scheme of a democratic socialisation of

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10 Bauer, Otto (1923). *Die österreichische Revolution*. Wien: Verlag Wiener Volksbuchhandlung.

the economy. We read: “We want democratic socialism, and that means the self-government of the entire people (...) This system of economic self-governance of the people presupposes the active participation, the willing participation of the broad masses of the people. (...) By means of an entire system of democratic organisations, the people are to control economic life along the principles of self-administration. (...) Workers’ councils in workplaces, tenants’ committees in apartment houses, trade unions, consumer associations, agricultural cooperatives, municipal councils, branches of administration are to be established for the individual industries, supervisory councils for the large agrarian properties, agrarian councils for the regional districts, an administrative board for the central bank, the national assembly, as well as the government chosen by her.”<sup>11</sup>

This is to illustrate, that Austro-Marxism aimed not only at a social-reformist practice limited to the municipal level as which it is remembered until today, but also provided for a theory of social transformation and a scheme of concrete measures to propel it.

Its party program of 1926 formulated by Otto Bauer himself, and adopted at the party congress in Linz in 1926, is rightly regarded as ‘Ultima Ratio’ of Austro-Marxism. It connects a glowing commitment to democracy with a premonition of the danger that hovered over the party and the democracy. Social democracy, it stipulates, endeavors to take power in a democratic constitutional way, however, it’s linked with a strong reservation: “If the bourgeoisie opts to oppose the radical social change that will be the task of the state power of the working class by deliberate suppression of economic life, by violent rebellion, by conspiracy with foreign counterrevolutionary powers, then the working class would be forced to resist the bourgeoisie to break with the means of dictatorship.”<sup>12</sup>

We know that these sentences turned out to be empty words or vain illusions.

A contemporary discussion must, in the first place, acknowledge the tragic defeat of Austro-Marxist project in 1934, and more precisely, that it has been terminated bloody by the reactionary forces in the brief civil war.

However, in contrast to Germany, where Fascism could seize power by making use of

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11 Bauer, Otto Ibid. p.129.

12 Linzer Programm Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei Deutschösterreichs (1926) Das Linzer Programm [http://www.otto-bauer.net/linzer\\_programm.pdf](http://www.otto-bauer.net/linzer_programm.pdf).



the means of parliamentary democracy, the development in Austria went via the suspension of parliament, the ban of the Communist Party and was met with the armed resistance of the working class.

Subsequently 1,400 Austrian volunteers went to continue their fight on Spanish soil in the ranks of the International brigades, thus constituting in proportion to the number of the Austrian population, the biggest contingent of combatants from abroad.

Bauer himself drew up a self-critical balance sheet in an exceptional book with the title “Between two World Wars. The Crisis of the World Economy, Democracy and Socialism”, in which he advocated a renewal of the socialist movement through a concept, which he named ‘Integral socialism’ that was to unite the two hostile branches of the labor movement, Socialism and Communism.

The peculiarity of this concept is, that neither it suggests a simple addition of the two – what would have been in tune with the wishes of the politically most progressive sectors of the working class who were highly disillusioned by the advance of Fascisms all over Europe – nor at the more or less friendly, absorption of one part by the other – what most of the leaders of the Communist International had in mind – but sets out the goal of a transformation of both streams.

It is not sufficient, Bauer resumes at the end of his book, “to align opposing political ideologies. Also, it is not enough to superficially mediate and make a compromise between the two. The task, which time itself sets for Socialism, is to overcome and unite the Social Democratic thesis and the Communist anti-thesis in a new and higher synthesis ... to establish an integral Socialism by stepping over the rigid positions taken by both democratic Socialism and of Communism.”<sup>13</sup>

In “Between Two World Wars”, Bauer holds out – by the way, very similar to what Lenin argued in his brochure about imperialism – that the divide in the labour movement cannot be explained primarily in terms of treason or corruption within the parties, but rather by the changing economic and social structure of capitalism, resulting in an indissoluble tension between the revolutionary programmatic goals of the Socialists and the neces-

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13 Bauer, Otto (1936). *Zwischen zwei Weltkriegen? Die Krise der Weltwirtschaft des Sozialismus und der Demokratie*. p. 312. Bratislava: Eugen Prager Verlag.

sities of the day-to-day struggle for a better life, which leads to reformist tactics. Thus, even the cycles of capitalist economy define the relative strength of the two competing tendencies.

It is interesting to note that, here, in tune with Antonio Gramsci and Rosa Luxemburg, Otto Bauer identifies as one of the sources of the divide in the labour movement, the very different experiences, which shaped its development in Western Europe and Eastern Europe, the latter over-determining language, strategy and tactics of the Communist International.

However, Bauer draws from the same observation the opposite conclusion of Lenin. If reformist Socialism was nothing else but the unavoidable ideology of the working class movement at a certain stage of its development, what vice versa also is true for the revolutionary current, then unity cannot be brought about through the defeating of one side by the other.

This leads to a realistic take of the unity he endeavoured: “Integral Socialism cannot do away the opposition between reformism and revolutionary Socialism, a contrast which is rooted in the very existence of the working class, itself. It only can, and it must, bring about a relationship between the two, which is different from hostile opposition. “The change of both of them is the aim we must strive for today, which constitutes the original theoretical achievement of Marxism and also its constant practical task.”<sup>14</sup>

Bauer did not live to witness how ten years later the exact opposite came about: As he had foreseen, Fascism had been defeated by a military alliance of the anti-Fascist powers and by enormous sacrifices on the part of the Soviet peoples. Yet, the development of Communism towards a libertarian and democratic socialism turned out to be as un-realizable under Stalin’s leadership as a development to the Left of the Social Democracies in the West, where under the aegis of the USA, the stage was set for capitalist restoration and the Cold War.

On the contrary, his call for “dialectically overcoming both Communist ... (and) democratic doctrinarism”<sup>15</sup> went unheard in the noise of the engines of the Fordist post-war-cycles and the propaganda slogans of the Cold War.

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14 Ibid. p. 319.

15 Ibid. p. 206.

It is of course impossible to talk about Bauer without making reference to his maybe internationally most acknowledged work “The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy”, all the more as its subject seems to be of high current importance. To the extent that the future of the European Union as a multi- and supranational structure in a world in upheaval is far from certain, to the same extent the national aspect of European history is far from over.

And just as in the interwar period, today, interpretations of the crisis informed by a criticism of capitalism compete with nationalist interpretations.

I would like, here, to highlight two guiding methodological principles in Bauer’s book. Indeed, like the one of all socialists, his departing point was the idea of an objective primacy of social interests and class struggle over national conflicts, as it was programmatically substantiated by Marx and Engels.

But, in decisive particulars he went beyond this. In critique of Rosa Luxemburg who determinedly rejected the participation of the socialists in the struggle for Polish national self-determination – a position with which Bauer agreed for political reasons, however not without qualification – he noted: The investigation of the economic underpinnings “is far from telling everything that a scientific study of the Polish question has to say. Rather, it was necessary also to explore how, by way of the changed conditions of production, the mental character of people, their moods, desires and ideas were changed, for “the politics of every class is not only determined by their *class interests* but also by the class ideology peculiar to them, and which is produced by their social conditions of existence.”<sup>16</sup>

This leads me to the second methodological principle of his analysis.

He writes: “In fact, the centre of my theory of the nation does not lie in the definition of the nation but in the description of that integration process from which the modern nation has arisen. Thus, the nation is no longer a frozen thing for us but a process of becoming, determined in its nature by the conditions under which people struggle to sustain their lives and preserve the species.”<sup>17</sup>

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16 Bauer, Otto (1924). *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die Sozialdemokratie*, p.448. Vienna: Verlag der Wiener Volksbuchhandlung.

17 Ibid. p. XXVI.

This dynamic, I would even say ‘constructivist’ interpretation of the nation, allowed Bauer to understand better than Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, the big antagonists in the debate inside the Socialist International, the contingency of national problems, an insight that provided the analytical basis of the national program of the Austrian Social democracy, adopted at the party congress of Brno in 1899.

Its famous five points are:

- The state has to be reformed into a democratic federal state of nationalities.
- Nationally demarcated self-administrative bodies should be formed, whose legislation and administration are managed by national chambers elected on the basis of general, equal and direct suffrage.
- All the self-governing bodies of one and the same nation together make up a nationally unified association, which takes care of its national concerns in a completely autonomous way.
- The right of national minorities will be guaranteed by a single law passed by the Imperial Parliament.
- Social Democrats recognise no national privilege and therefore reject the demand for a state language; the extent to which an intermediary language is needed will be determined by the Imperial Parliament.<sup>18</sup>

Here is not the occasion to talk extensively on this program.

In fact, this Programme had made the Austrian labour movement into the only relevant political force in Austria with a coherent concept regarding the two most urgent questions of state policy: the constitutional and nationalities questions. Precisely because they called for the adequate “form of coexistence of nations within the given state framework” in the transformation of Austria into a democratic federal state of nationalities, they staked their claim to take over the leadership of this state in a democratic way. In other words: While the Austrian Social Democrats understood the national question as a challenge with which they wanted to demonstrate their capacity for leading the state, for the Bolsheviks it represented an instrument for demolishing the state, which they unconditionally had to combat. In truth, this reflected the fundamental difference in the objective conditions to which Antonio Gramsci pointed to, two decades later in the

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18 Brünner Nationalitätenprogramm der SDAP (1899) [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Br%C3%BCnner\\_Programm](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Br%C3%BCnner_Programm).

Prison Notebooks: between the “East and the West”.

In conclusion, allow me a few remarks on the reception history in the German speaking countries. After 1945, the Austro-Marxist line was not resumed in Austria. The Social Democratic Party, which under the new name Socialist Party had re-emerged, moved to the right.

Otto Bauer, Max Adler and Rudolf Hilferding<sup>19</sup> had died during the war, Friedrich Adler was compromised and could not play any further role in Austrian politics because he had maintained his German-national orientation, even during the Nazi-occupation. The only noteworthy Austro-Marxist who remained a protagonist in Austrian politics is Karl Renner, who, however, rallied with anticommunism as prescribed by the US.

Otto Bauer, however, despite his tragic central role in the inter war period was left to oblivion, also by his own party.

This changed a bit in the wake of the student movement of the 60s. The re-awakened interest mirrored paradoxically in an anthology of classical texts of Austro-Marxism, edited by Hans Jörg Sandkühler and Rafael de la Vega, who denounced it in their preface as “a phenomenon of neo-Marxism within the theoretical conflict between Marxism and revisionism.”<sup>20</sup>

Between 1975 and 1979, on the initiative of Bruno Kreisky, a complete nine-volume edition of the collected writings of Otto Bauer appeared, unfortunately at a price of 65 € per volume.

In 1978 and 1981, the Socialist Youth of Austria hosted conferences on Otto Bauer and Austro-Marxism, which gathered speakers from different parts of Europe, amongst them Lucio Lombardo Radice, Giacomo Marramao, Pietro Ingrao, Detlev Albers and Jean Pierre Chevènement.<sup>21</sup>

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19 Hilferding was murdered in February 1941 in the Gestapo dungeon La Santé in Paris after being arrested by the Vichy policy and handed over to the Gestapo.

20 Sandkühler, Hans-Jörg/de la Vega, Rafael (1970) *Austromarxismismus*. p. 9. Vienna: Europa Verlag.

21 Albers, Detlev/Hindels, Josef/Lombardo Radice, Lucio (1978). *Otto Bauer und der „dritte“ Weg Die Wiederentdeckung des Austromarxismus durch Linksozialisten und Eurokommunisten*. Frankfurt/New New York: Campus Verlag; Albers, Detlev/Cap, Josef/Ingrao Pietro/ Montchane, Didier (1981). *Die Perspektiven der Euro-Linken*. Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag.

The idea of using Bauer and Gramsci as the bridgeheads for a connection of left socialists and Euro-Communists was warmly received by the Italian PC. Bauer's reflections on the fragile equilibrium of class forces in certain historical moments seemed attractive to them. Remember, this was a time of historical compromise and, simultaneously of the traumatic experience of Chile. On the other hand, they hoped through Austria, where Bruno Kreisky served three terms in a row as prime minister, to open the gates to European social democracy, which they considered necessary to secure their project in Europe.

Might Bauer be of interest for today's problems?

This was not the place to treat the conception of the Austro-Marxists in all its detail and contradictions. However, as Josef Hindels, the last intellectual voice of Austro-Marxism, said at one of the conferences organized by the aforementioned young Socialists:

“The renunciation of revolution in 1918/1919 meant for the Austrian Social Democracy - unlike other social-democratic parties in Europe - no renouncement of the socialist objective and therefore, no renouncement of a socialist language and ideology.<sup>22</sup>

In the limited context treated here, and by way of individual examples, the intention was to show how remarkable and rich the intellectual heritage is that Otto Bauer and Austro-Marxism can provide to the Left. For Michael Krätke, Austro-Marxism represents “the most elaborated variant of an open Marxism to date”.<sup>23</sup> If this is true, so not only by virtue of the theorists themselves, but also of the movement in which they participated. After WWI, in contrast to Germany, Czechoslovakia, Italy and France, Austria's social democracy succeeded in averting a split. 80% to 90% of the working-class vote between 1919 and 1932 went to the Social Democratic Party. In membership and number of organizations, the Social Democratic Party of German-Austria<sup>24</sup> was the largest workers' party of its time. Through red Vienna, it materialized its counter-model to the conservative federal state.

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22 Hindels, Josef (1978). *Otto Bauer und die österreichische Arbeiterbewegung*. Albers, Detlev/Hindels, Josef, Lombardo Radice, Lucio *ibid.* p.20.

23 Krätke: “Austromarxismus und Kritische Theorie” (2018) In: Alex Demirovic/Tatjana Freytag. *Handbuch Kritische Theorie*. P. 463. Wiesbaden: Springer Reference Sozialwissenschaften.

24 Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei Deutschösterreichs (SDAPDÖ) (Social Democratic Workers Party of German-Austria) was the name of the party between 1918 and 1934.

The discussion of this heritage can be useful, if we do not expect it to deliver recipes for the solution to today's problems and those of the future. However, it can provide the experiences of a real mass party, which simultaneously operated as a cultural movement, changing the everyday lives of the working classes, while striving for the socialist transformation of society.





# The Strategy of Left Populism: Disavowed Genealogies, Achievements and Limitations

Yannis Stavrakakis

## Introduction

In recent years, especially with reference to the crisis-ridden political developments in Latin America and Southern Europe, ‘left populism’ has been initially praised for (a) channeling the energy of the multitude(s) (the *Indignados* in Spain, *Αγανακτισμένοι* in Greece, the Occupy movement in the US, etc.) and a variety of social movements onto organized political structures (parties like SYRIZA and PODEMOS, presidential candidacies like the one by Bernie Sanders, etc.) able to challenge the *status quo* frontally at the sedimented institutional level (constitutional/liberal democracy), and for (b) achieving important electoral advances that saw left-wing formations enter government in a variety of countries around the world, sometimes – but not always – for many consecutive elections (for example, in Argentina, Bolivia, etc., but also, in Greece and Spain). On the other hand, a few years later, ‘left populism’ is now criticized for the failure to deliver comprehensive and radical social change in many of these cases. Frustrations with the term in office of some of the ensuing governments, and with the electoral setbacks for SYRIZA (2019), left peronism (2015) and MAS (2019) return to opposition, have created a backlash against the strategy of ‘left populism’ within left-wing circles<sup>1</sup> that is often accompanied with calls to return to a (particularist) class-based purity as a preferable strategy for the left.

In this short text, we set to partly clarify what may be at stake in this discussion. In the first section, we will try to show that, although ‘left populism’ is often associated with the theorizations advanced by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and their co-travellers,<sup>2</sup>

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1 See Jager, A. (2019). We Bet the House on Left Populism — and Lost. *Jacobin*, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/11/we-bet-the-house-on-left-populism-and-lost/> (Accessed: 10 January 2021), Sunkara, Bh. (2019). From Socialism to Populism and Back. *Jacobin*, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/11/from-socialism-to-populism-and-back/> (Accessed: 10 January 2021).

2 Laclau, E. (1977). *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, London: NLR Books, (2005) *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso; Mouffe, Ch. (2018). *For a Left Populism*, London: Verso; Ostiguy, P., Panizza, Fr., & Moffitt, B. (eds) (2021). *Populism in Global Perspective: A Performative and Discursive Approach*, New York: Routledge.

a rigorous evaluation of left populism cannot be exclusively limited to an assessment of this particular theoretico-political project and should be debated within a much broader terrain that also encompasses a long tradition going back to Marx himself. This tradition is premised on two principles: (1) A (gradual) break with the logic of necessity and reductionism that has often plagued Marxist orthodoxy; (2) an ensuing understanding of political struggles that highlights the importance of articulating alliances ('chains of equivalences' in Laclau's terminology), in order to create potent collective subjects ('the people' in modern political grammar) able to challenge inequality and advance popular interests. No matter whether one agrees with Laclau & Mouffe or not, a critique of left populism would need to provide feasible alternatives to such principles of intelligibility for the understanding of history and the political, and for democratic political action.

In the absence of such clear and consistent alternatives, what seems more pertinent is to discuss the concrete achievements and limitations of left populism in a more pragmatic fashion. Because obviously, if, in most cases, 'left populism' is not an obstacle or even THE obstacle to radical emancipation(s), it is neither a *panacea* guaranteeing a rosy emancipatory future. This will be briefly discussed in the second section of this paper. Only if the ensuing limitations are registered in a sober and rigorous fashion, beyond any *miraculous* expectations for a, more or less, automatic left-wing mobilization and redemption, can the democratic left seriously debate ways to overcome them.

## 1. Populism and the Left: Back to Basics

Very often 'left populism' is associated with the work produced by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and their collaborators. It is true that for some of the political formations that dominated the field in the left during the last two decades, the work of Laclau has operated as a blueprint or a political manual. This is arguably the case of PODEMOS in Spain.<sup>3</sup> We can also discuss Laclau's and Mouffe's influence in the politics of Latin America (especially his native Argentina). However, this has not been the case in other countries. For example, the idea that SYRIZA's strategy has been inspired by Laclau betrays a rather limited knowledge, with regards to both the internal organization and overall ideological outlook of SYRIZA and the way (Greek) politics operate.

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<sup>3</sup> Kioupiolis, A. (2016). Podemos: The Ambiguous Promises of Left-wing Populism in Contemporary Spain. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 21(2), 103.

In that sense, many of the aforementioned political projects must have developed their strategy on the basis of other intuitions and rationales that may now seem consistent with ‘left populism’, as conceptualized by Laclau and Mouffe but originated somewhere else. But where else? What if they originated in a long political tradition (that gradually discards necessity and embraces contingency), which is not limited to the left, but has historically influenced the development of left-wing strategies premised on political articulation and the relative autonomy of the political, especially in crisis conjunctures. One such example is the short-lived ‘popular front’ strategies that flourished in the 1930s with relative success, considering the circumstances (with the implementation of many social reforms in France and Spain). In the French case, ‘[t]he Popular Front’s election triumph on May 3, 1936 — taking 57 percent of the vote — inspired a wider mood of change’, observes David Broder. It facilitated broader mobilizations culminating in the *Matignon* agreements, which introduced ‘a forty-hour limit on the working week (with no loss of pay), enhanced trade union freedoms, and at least two weeks’ paid vacation for each worker’. As a result, Popular Front experiments had a lasting impact on the imaginary horizon of the left, although they came to an abrupt end with the Spanish Civil War and the continuing economic crisis in France: ‘The Popular Front wasn’t all smiles and sunshine [...] Nonetheless, Blum’s policy had major effects [...] This ray of light would long be remembered’.<sup>4</sup>

So how come the theorizations by Laclau and Mouffe seem consistent with the strategy of left-wing political actors on which they arguably had very little influence? Well, simply because Laclau and Mouffe may have been the ones to systematize, in the most sophisticated way, the intricacies of hegemony and the many levels involved in contemporary political struggle, but they were not the ones that invented their practice or even initiated their theorization in the first place. The slow erosion of the logic of necessity and reductionism, supposedly guaranteeing, in the long run, radical change and the total re-foundation of the social; the dislocation of all fantasies of an automatic, unmediated passage from the economy (as objective class positionality) to politics (as salient identification and majoritarian mobilization), accompany the radical tradition from the start – this is the pre-existing genealogy they, themselves, recount in the first part of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* drawing on Gramsci, Althusser and others.<sup>5</sup> The collapse of *necessity*

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4 Broder, D. (2020). How Socialists Invented the Summer Holiday. *Tribune*. <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/08/how-socialists-invented-the-summer-holiday> (Accessed: 10 January 2021).

5 Laclau, E. & Mouffe, Ch. (2001) [1985]. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso.

allows a thorough registering of *contingency* and protects from fantasies of certainty that disorient strategy; the collapse of *reduction* brings to the fore *articulation* as the foremost mechanism over determining political struggle. *Ergo* strong opposition to the system and real change cannot ensue automatically from an objective class positionality but require political mediation: the creation of alliances between different struggles and sectors in order to construct salient points of identification able to challenge the *status quo*. Within political modernity, even before the Chartists, and up to early American and Russian populism and the Popular Fronts, (a) people-centrism and (b) anti-elitism had already emerged as the nodal points of a variety of radical movements.<sup>6</sup> Thus, populism emerges within Laclau's work as an eminently suitable strategy for the left. But this is not because the Argentine political theorist had achieved a new scientific advance able to replace orthodox Marxist science, claiming a similar epistemic superiority. On the contrary, merely because Laclau reverses the rules of the game and opts (with humility) to register the pre-existing primacy of the political beyond the arrogant and triumphalist certainties of left-wing elitism.

If one is allergic to linguistics, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis (on which Laclau draws), it is perfectly possible to arrive at similar principles, start embracing contingency and historicity, popular politics and even populism, through an alternative trajectory. This was clearly an option for the left many decades before Laclau. What about going back to Marx himself, for example? Paradoxically, it is precisely what the defenders of class-based purity very often fail to do.

Indeed, a genealogy of left populism reveals a lot about the rich – but relatively unknown – choreography between populism and the left, which is often neglected. To start, one needs to register the implication of socialist ideas, and Marx himself, in the first historically recorded populist movement, the Russian *Narodniki*. When this relationship is discussed, what is usually mentioned is Lenin's late dismissal of Russian populism.<sup>7</sup> The 'friends of the people' put forward what, for Lenin, was 'an unscientific type of socialism' that ignored the materialist method and thus, ascribed 'the cause of

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6 What if, already from ancient Athens up until today, antagonisms between the many and the few (the material of populism) constitute a *genus*, of which class struggle is only a *species* revealing some of the economic mechanisms at play? What if the elevation of the latter onto an overarching strategic principle (ultimately disavowing political mediation) was only made possible by 19th century rationalistic and teleological optimism, instituting a left rational choice paradigm that suffers from the same gross simplifications marking similar mainstream arguments?

7 Lenin, V. I. (2017) [1894]. *What the "Friends of the People" Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats*, in Lenin, V. I., *Collected Works*, vol. 1, New York: Verso, 129–332.

exploitation to things lying outside production relations'.<sup>8</sup> Yet, apart from embracing an elitist 'scientific' arrogance (reproducing hierarchical stereotypes), this focus seems to disavow the position of Marx himself towards the later years of his life, and tends to rely on assumptions conditioned by the internal struggles within the Russian revolutionary tradition. It also establishes a scientific-political elitism that cannot be disengaged from the authoritarian fate of the soviet experiment. Today, we have many detailed accounts of the involvement of Marx himself with the populists, which needs to be highlighted and broadly debated; it remains a mystery why, for example, this is not seriously taken into account by all those suggesting a return to class-based, supposedly purist, Marxist politics. Why did Marx arguably follow the opposite direction in his final years?<sup>9</sup>

There are many important insights that a study of Russian populism and Marx's take on it amply demonstrate. First, that populist strategy cannot be reduced to a reformist deviation from some supposed purity, but can inform a vernacular (revolutionary or other, depending on the historical context) politics, which can also be explicitly socialist. Second, that this is something that was known to Marx, who, towards the end of his life, seems to have changed his earlier position, gradually embracing Russian populism. Last but not least, all that was established on a negation of necessity and reductionism. Let us discuss these two points in some detail.

In his groundbreaking edited collection, *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and 'the Peripheries of Capitalism'*,<sup>10</sup> Teodor Shanin initially substantiates the first point. *Narodniki* were an early kind of (revolutionary) populists who were partly inspired by Marx's texts in their fight to overthrow Tsarist authoritarianism. This is evident in their own documents. On the one hand, then, the Social Revolutionary Party of the People's Will (Sotsial no revolyutsionnaya partiya Narodnoi Voli) itself had partly embraced Marx and Marxism, linking populism with socialism. This is how they articulate the two in their 'Programme of the Executive Committee':<sup>11</sup>

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8 Vergara, C. (2020). Populism as Plebeian Politics: Inequality, Domination, and Popular Empowerment. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 28(2), 223.

9 Cinella suggests that the ensuing shift and Marx's interest in the *Narodniki* was motivated by the 'shipwreck' of the First International and Marx's disillusionment with the Paris Commune of 1871 and the prospects of radical revolutionary change in the West (Cinnella, E. (2019). *L'altro Marx*, Roma: Della Porta Editori; Greek translation: Τσινέλλα, Έ. (2019). *Ο άλλος Μαρξ*, Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις των συναδέλφων (page references correspond to the Greek edition), 13, 227, 231, 232), while Eli Pappa observes that, in his work on Russia during this period, Marx does not, even once, mention the proletariat, which was already present in Russian cities (Παππά, Έ. [1990] (2011). *Μύθος και ιδεολογία στη ρωσική επανάσταση: οδοιπορικό από τον ρωσικό αγροτικό λαϊκισμό στον λαϊκισμό του Στάλιν*, Αθήνα: Άγρα, 79), perhaps implying a strategic reconsideration.

10 Shanin, T. (ed.) (1983). *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and 'the Peripheries of Capitalism'*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

11 Reproduced in Shanin, T. 1983, Ibid 207-208.

In our fundamental convictions we are socialists (sotsialisty) and populists (narodniki). We are convinced that only upon a socialist basis can humanity embody freedom, equality and fraternity in its existence, and ensure general material well-being and full, all round personal development - hence progress. We are convinced that only the will of the people can sanction social forms; that the people's development is only stable when it proceeds independently and freely, and when every idea that is to be translated into reality passes first through the consciousness and will of the people. Popular well-being and the popular will - these are our two most sacred and indissolubly linked principles.

On the other hand, Marx himself became especially interested in the Russian question and populism towards the end of his life. In fact, during his last few years, Marx seems to have taken a step 'towards a more complex and more realistic conceptualization of the global heterogeneity of societal forms, dynamics and interdependence'.<sup>12</sup> This is evident in his ultimate dismissal of determinism and his thorough registering of the role of the historical context in political dynamics, two related positions developed in (a) his letter to the Editorial Board of *Otechestvennye Zapiski*<sup>13</sup> and (b) especially in his reply (and their numerous drafts) to the letter by Vera Zasulich.<sup>14</sup> In the latter, for example, he disputes the universal applicability of the Western model in the road to socialism: 'The "historical inevitability" of this course is therefore *expressly* restricted to the *countries of Western Europe*'. This also has repercussions on the way one is to judge the potential role of *obshchina*, the Russian agrarian commune, in socialist development: 'The analysis in *Capital* therefore provides no reasons either for or against the vitality of the Russian commune' 124).<sup>15</sup> In Marcelo Musto's view, Marx suggested that Russia was not obliged to slavishly follow the historical stages typical of England and most of the European West.<sup>16</sup>

This shift of emphasis is far from unrelated to the fact that, during this period, Marx taught himself Russian and got particularly interested in the situation in Russia – espe-

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12 Shanin, T. (1983) Late Marx: Gods and Craftsmen, in Shanin, T. (ed.) 1983, Ibid 6.

13 Marx, K. (1983). Karl Marx: A letter to the Editorial Board of *Otechestvennye Zapiski*. In Shanin (ed.) 1983, Ibid 134-137.

14 It is of much interest that the correspondence between Marx and Zasulich has arguably been the victim of concealment for many years; see, in this respect, Wada, H. (1983). Marx and Revolutionary Russia. In Shanin 1983, Ibid 41; Cinella 2019, Ibid 185, 192, 194.

15 Marx, K. (1983). Karl Marx: The Reply to Zasulich. In Shanin (ed.) 1983, Ibid 124.

16 Musto, M. (2020). *The Last Years of Karl Marx, 1881-1883: An Intellectual Biography*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

cially the potential of the Russian agrarian commune – and the activities of the Russian populists:<sup>17</sup>

The last decade of Marx's life was a distinctive period of his analytical endeavour: a fact recognised, if for different reasons, by a steadily growing number of scholars. Central to it was his involvement with Russian society, both as a source of fundamental data and as a vehicle of analysis and exposition of the problems of a specific type of society, which differed structurally from the 'classical case of capitalism' on which Capital, Volume 1, was based.<sup>18</sup>

The result was a significant shift in his positions. Although his earlier attitude towards the Russian populists – especially his view of Herzen – was utterly negative,<sup>19</sup> 'Marx's thinking, however, began to change once he mastered the Russian language and was able to pursue his Russian studies using primary sources, and especially once he came across the studies of N.G. Chernyshevskii'.<sup>20</sup> Wada and other scholars provide a detailed account of this gradual shift.<sup>21</sup>

Just before his death, Marx thoroughly embraced Russian populism, Cinella concludes.<sup>22</sup> His support for the *Narodniki* and the elaboration of a new theory of history beyond eurocentrism, constitute, in his account, the fundamental features of Marx's intellectual transformation during these final years.<sup>23</sup> Musto downplays the significance of the shift only in the sense that he does not accept that Marx's previous work can be described as determinist in the first place.<sup>24</sup>

Does all that imply that the Russian populists were full-blown Marxists or that Marx himself had become a populist? Of course not! But, no doubt, the aforementioned interaction demonstrates many affinities, a common political sensibility and a very close strategic alliance based on a shared understanding of political struggle within the given historical setting.

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17 Shanin 1983, Ibid 7.

18 Ibid 29.

19 Wada 1983, Ibid, 43; also see Cinella 2019 Ibid, 28-9.

20 Wada 1983, Ibid, 44; also see Cinella 2019 Ibid, 79.

21 See, for example, Παππά 2011, Ibid, 35, 37, 53, 67.

22 Cinella Ibid 221.

23 Cinella Ibid 222.

24 Musto Ibid.

The revolutionary populists of the People's Will accepted goals fundamentally similar to those of the West European socialists and said so. They adopted different analysis and strategies - a 'different and at the same time related reality' of thought and action. Members of the People's Will knew and admired Marx's *Capital* without accepting it as fully relevant to Russia, and said so. Marx has, in fact, agreed with that view and, once again, said so, in no uncertain terms. That does not make Marx a populist or turn members of the People's Will into crypto-Marxists. They were political allies, who supported and influenced each other.<sup>25</sup>

Arguably, there is no inevitability, necessity and reductionism here. Elitist claims of epistemic superiority are nowhere to be found. Only attention to political articulation against a common adversary. People-centrism and anti-elitism. The kernel of the populist logic Laclau was later to further register and develop. If Marx himself was willing to consider such a course, does it make sense to discard it today as some sort of catastrophic deviation from the roots?

Surely such a strategy can never guarantee success. But it seems to lie behind many (relative) 'successes' the left has achieved in the last century and beyond. And what is the alternative? Does anybody seriously believe that by returning to 'necessity' and a class-based reductionism, to left-wing elitism, the chances would be better? Well, for whatever it's worth, late Marx would probably disagree... Obviously, an emphasis on political articulation requires additional effort and, having to operate within an ambivalent terrain that is often overdetermined by the political, institutional and cultural hegemony of capitalism, presents many difficulties for the creation of oppositional identities and mobilizations, let alone for the implementation of left policy. Alas, as Marx observed in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, '[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited. Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living'.<sup>26</sup> Yet, does a *magical* take on the emergence of new radical political (collective) subjectivity through some kind of obscure automatic creationism provide a real alternative? Surely such dreams return to haunt left-wing political imagination (consider aspects of Hardt and Negri's politics of the multitude or certain formulations of post-hegemony<sup>27</sup>), and may sometimes sound

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25 Shanin, T. (1983). Marxism and the Vernacular Revolutionary Traditions. In Shanin 1983, Ibid 268,

26 Marx, K. (1996). *Later Political Writings*, ed. & trans. Terrell Carver, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 32.

27 See, in this respect, Stavrakakis, Y. (2014). Hegemony or Post-hegemony?: Discourse, Representation and the



reassuring in their solipsistic particularism, but do they offer a viable strategic alternative able to influence the broader course of events?

At any rate, if we move beyond such miraculous (messianic) expectations, we seem to be left with some sort of left populist strategy of one sort or the other. Let us then pragmatically discuss some of its achievements and limitations. Because obviously both exist.

## 2. Some Achievements and Potential Limitations

### (a) Some Achievements

Within societies marked by multiple divisions, fragmentations, inequalities and polarizations, populism indicates a discursive practice that aims at creating *links* between excluded and suffering political agents (individuals and groups) in order to empower them in their struggle to redress the said exclusion.<sup>28</sup> In that sense, we have populism when salience is gained by discourses and political projects, which are articulated around ‘the people’ as the central political subject demanding incorporation in the political community, restoring dignity and equality, honoring the liberal democratic constitutional commitment to ‘popular sovereignty’. Hence, so-called *people-centrism* is the first formal criterion for the discursive identification of populism. At the same time, the aforementioned populist agency – which performatively creates a politically potent *people* out of a series of heterogeneous demands, movements and activities, a *multitude* – employs a dichotomic, antagonistic representation of the socio-political field. The latter is divided between Us and Them, the people and the establishment, the 99% and the 1%. This *anti-elitism* constitutes the second formal criterion for a rigorous identification of populism. Not always, but especially in conditions of crisis – and provided this task of representation is supported by both discursive coherence and respect to the symbolic and libidinal divides of a certain political culture and, as a result, manages to energize corporeality and affectivity – this strategy can prove quite successful – at least electorally. We already know that from the 57% the Popular Front led by Leon Bloom managed to achieve in the 1936 French elections and, more recently, from the similar landslide victories by

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Revenge(s) of the Real. In Kioupkiolis, A. & Katsambekis, G. (eds) *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today: The Biopolitics of the Multitude Versus the Hegemony of the People*, Farnham: Ashgate, 111-132.

28 Such a mobilization can never be taken for granted along the lines of a supposedly necessary automatic triggering following an objective economic rationale. The role of symbolic/affective political mediation is important in order to understand why ‘people so often put up with being the victims of their societies and why at other times they become very angry and try with passion and forcefulness to do something about their situation’ (Moore, B. Jr. (1978). *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*, London: The Macmillan Press, xiii).

left populist projects in Latin America (the so-called Pink Tide). More modest results could be observed within (Southern) Europe in the last decade that catapulted to coalition governments peripheral (SYRIZA) or newly founded political actors (PODEMOS) that could never otherwise even fantasized about winning elections.

We can safely then infer that a populist discursive practice can indeed create links between diverse and initially unconnected social demands, thus creating the necessary strategic unification that is crystallized around an often dynamic popular subject, potentially able to put forward social and political change ‘in the name of the people’. We can also infer that, despite temporary setbacks, this strategy still remains operational. In Argentina, for example, where the anti-populist right returned triumphantly to power in 2015, 2019 saw the return of left populism, which is already demonstrating a set of concrete achievements (incl. a new debt relief agreement, the legalization of abortion, etc.). In Bolivia, as well, the downfall of Evo Morales, which was even celebrated by certain left-wing circles, and may have been partly conditioned by his own mistakes, was soon succeeded by a new landslide victory for MAS (2020).

## **(b) Potential Limitations**

Is this enough? Certainly not!

Left electoralism can often be a problem. But when? Arguably when verticalism dominates completely and the victors think that an electoral victory signals the end of political struggle, when in reality it only marks one of its moments, and a very shaky one for that matter.

The theory of ‘left populism’ is very aware of that. It highlights the need for a continuous negotiation between vertical and horizontal political processes. Both seem to be integral to a sustainable democratic populist logic, something that Laclau himself has acknowledged in his latest works:

The horizontal dimension of autonomy will be incapable, left to itself, of bringing about long-term historical change if it is not complemented by the vertical dimension of ‘hegemony’ – that is, a radical transformation of the state. Autonomy left to itself leads, sooner or later, to the exhaustion and the dispersion of the movements of protest. But hegemony not accompanied by mass action at the level of civil society leads to a bureaucracy that will be easily colonized by the corporative power of the forces of the

status quo. To advance both in the directions of autonomy and hegemony is the real challenge to those who aim for a democratic future [...].<sup>29</sup>

This is important because, even in cases where a left populist government manages to achieve many of its goals and stays in power for a series of continuous re-elections, introducing quite considerable changes advancing the socio-economic position and the political incorporation of popular sectors, reversing the downward social mobility of crisis-ridden middle classes and raising the impoverished standards of life of the lower classes (Latin America is full of such examples), two limitations are gradually revealed. Populism can often become a victim of its own success: the satisfaction of previously unsatisfied demands and the difficulties in sustaining a high level of popular engagement while in government produces a horizontal demobilization thwarting further democratization. Second, such demobilization (which may also be due to 'external' difficulties in implementing a radical program) leaves a left-wing government vulnerable to potent anti-populist forces (at the local, national and supra-national level).

At any rate, left populism is not a *panacea* signaling some sort of left-wing *end of history*. On the contrary, it is premised on a schema registering the absence of such guarantees and the fluidity of political antagonism. A relatively successful left populist government would thus require additional tools and resources including some sort of technical expertise, creative spirit as far as institutional design is concerned, and a high degree of political diligence combined with a strong democratic ethos in thwarting anti-populist obstacles without sacrificing the aim of popular empowerment. Populist voluntarism is never enough.

In fact, the inability to somehow effectively deal with such anti-populist obstacles can lead to two diametrically opposite dangers: (a) To a co-optation of any democratic radicalism pertaining to a populist force by succumbing to the established (elitist) values and the pre-existing post-democratic institutions of a society, especially when the institutional environment is hostile and the psycho-social patterns of production and consumption remain unchallenged; (b) To a resistance to be co-opted, taking the form of increased authoritarian rule. What is lost in both cases is the ultimate commitment of left populism to democratic popular sovereignty.<sup>30</sup>

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29 Laclau, E. (2014). *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, London: Verso, 9.

30 For a more comprehensive analysis of such limitations with reference to concrete examples, see Stavrakakis,

But wait a minute, we have already accepted that populist mobilization is usually premised on a call to restore ‘popular sovereignty’ through means like universal suffrage. Doesn’t that mean that left populism is already undermined by its acceptance of the pre-existing ‘rules of the game’ (liberal democracy)? This is a legitimate question and needs to be explored in detail. Let us offer some brief reflections in bringing this text to a close:

1. First of all, ‘popular sovereignty’ and universal suffrage were not introduced in the first place without sustained struggles from a variety of movements and parties on the left (from the Chartists, the Labour movement and the suffragettes to the Civil Rights movement, and beyond). Are we willing to credit them to the Establishment? Liberal democratic frameworks already incorporate a paradoxical blend of distinct liberal and plebeian/democratic traditions resulting from the crystallization of past political struggles. Besides, are not the same principles of equivalential articulation and mobilization applicable to political practices outside a strictly defined electoral setting?
2. Second, in the establishment of strong oppositional identifications and in the legitimation of popular/populist mobilizations, the pre-existing moral economies and constitutional frameworks play a significant role, both facilitating and channeling them in particular directions. Such operations cannot take place in a socio-political vacuum, nor can we see them unfold in an automatic manner. We already know that from the important work of E. P. Thompson, and his criticism of the ‘spasmodic’ view of plebeian insurrections in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

To overturn the simplistic ‘spasmodic’ view, Thompson highlighted the idea that some ‘legitimizing notion’ must have allowed and facilitated such crowd behaviour. A certain symbolic framing must have intervened, making possible such action by providing some meaning able to attract and inspire. This legitimizing notion operated on the basis of ‘the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community. On occasion this popular consensus was endorsed by some measure of license afforded by the authorities. More

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Y. (2020). The (Discursive) Limits of (Left) Populism. *Journal of Language and Politics*, advance online publication, <https://benjamins.com/catalog/jlp.20047.sta> (Accessed: 10 January 2021).

commonly, the consensus was so strong that it overrode motives of fear or deference'.<sup>31</sup> Without being directly political, this 'moral economy' involved political characteristics to the extent that it energised clearly formed and passionately invested demands and principles that were even partly shared by the authorities of the time on the basis of a paternalist rationale that made the latter, to some extent, 'prisoners of the people'.<sup>32</sup>

Political modernity destabilized traditional moral economies regulating the relationship between the governing and the governed. The economy has been re-framed in a very different technocratic light, and politics is now regulated by explicit, and legally sanctioned, 'social contracts'. But the activities of plebeian sectors never ceased to the extent that our societies have remained marked by inequalities that never stopped triggering grievances, social movements and political mobilization. Due to the Revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and to some other mobilizations – in the UK, the proto-populist activities of the Chartists are, once more, of much interest – contemporary struggles against injustice, inequality and political marginalization can acquire legitimation not only through referring to some implicit, customary hegemonic pact like the one described by Thompson, but by invoking the constitutional principle of 'popular sovereignty'. Whenever the social contract is seen by popular sectors to be breached, whenever inequality and marginalization occur in a way that is believed to be unfettered, calls to redress the situation emerge claiming the need to restore 'popular sovereignty': to honour the destabilized social contract by introducing change.

This desire still inspires demonstrations, mobilizations and even the creation of movements and parties that attempt to conquer power in order to restore representation and re-balance power relations and their socio-economic framing. Much has changed, but the symbolic and cultural materials that mediate economic and social distress, the discursive conditioning of popular demands and populist mobilizations, remain, more or less, the same. Only now, the 'legitimizing notion' required is much more clear, explicit and present in our constitutional and political vocabulary. Likewise, similar are the limitations of populism, which are usually set by their historical and socio-cultural embeddedness; most often they constitute a call to honour 'promises' given in the past to create the liberal democratic consensus; although the emergence of more radical

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31 Thompson, E. P. (1971). *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*. *Past and Present*, (50), 78.

32 Ibid 79.

hybrids cannot be excluded *a priori* – especially when the establishment against which plebeian sectors fight assumes a raw authoritarian or explicitly anti-democratic form.

## Conclusion

In this brief paper, we have tried to clarify some of the issues at stake in the ongoing discussion around ‘left populism’. In the first section, we have attempted to demonstrate that, albeit ‘left populism’ is often associated with the so-called Essex School, a rigorous evaluation of the left populist strategic option should not be limited to an assessment of this particular theoretico-political orientation. On the contrary, it refers to a long genealogy going back to Marx himself. In this sense, a consistent critique of left populism would need to provide feasible alternatives to an understanding of history and politics that highlights a passage from reduction to articulation. In the absence of such consistent alternatives, it may be preferable to pragmatically debate the historical achievements and limitations of left populism as a political strategy navigating within an often-hostile environment, capitalizing on some of the opportunities it offers due to the sedimentation of past struggles in order to chart an admittedly difficult, bumpy, uncertain but often rewarding political course.

# New Municipalism as a Counter Hegemonic Project for Radicalizing Democracy

*Alexandros Kioupkiolis*

## Introduction

**T**oday, as more than half of the world's human population are urban dwellers, cities and citizens have gained an increasing salience. In effect, cities have become chief command points in the global economy under the present neoliberal hegemony. They are central locations for finance, specialized services and the production of innovations.<sup>1</sup> As global economic forces and processes of financialization, rentier capitalism, economies of dispossession and predatory practices have conquered urban spaces and the housing market, cities across the globe have also become sites of political experiment and subjects of 'insurgent citizenship' against urbanizing capital.<sup>2</sup> The rise of insurgent and self-organized citizens in central squares in Cairo, Madrid, Barcelona, Athens, New York, Istanbul and many other cities in 2011-2013 bears witness to the political potentials of urbanism.

In terms of their possibilities for empowering democratic agency, cities can enfranchise citizens to participate politically in local urban communities, while city administrations can liaise with one another on a global scale. Cities represent a level of government, which is sufficiently local to allow for civic participation and to demand efficiency in problem-solving, while international city networks can work out cooperative solutions to global challenges. Climate change, for instance, can be effectively addressed in cities as 80% of carbon emissions are produced in urban sites. Indeed, cities have committed themselves to meeting the climate goals of the Paris Agreement, wielding a new form of global power.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Barber, B. R. (2013). *If Mayors Ruled the World. Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 55, 66, Glaeser, E. L. (2012). *Triumph of the City. How Urban Spaces Make Us Human*. London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 40.

2 Harvey, D. (2013). *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. London & New York: Verso, 129-130, 139-140.

3 Katz, B. & J. Nowak (2017). *The New Localism. How Cities Can Thrive in the Age of Populism*. Washington: The Brookings Institution, 35.

In this context, contemporary municipalism has emerged as a global drift and network, encompassing several cities in at least 19 countries in different continents. The present contribution will linger specifically with Spain, and particularly with the prominent case of Barcelona, where the citizen platform *Barcelona en Comú* has been governing the city since 2015 (to-date, 2021), led by Ada Colau. The wave of municipalist platforms and administrations, which swept Spain in 2014-2015 stands out internationally as a signal instance of the global, new municipalist movement, along with the Kurdish democratic confederalism. ‘Fearless cities’ or ‘cities of change’ have imagined themselves as a creative, democratic, agonistic and solidary response to our critical circumstances of steep inequalities, elite rule, reinvigorated patriarchy, aggravating social expulsions, climate change and civilization crisis.<sup>4</sup>

## Municipal confluences in Spain

In the last decades, Spanish cities were converted into a motor of neoliberal ‘growth’, which was engineered by the construction and real estate industries, the privatization of services and private-public partnerships. As a result, the crisis of this development model since 2007, notably the ‘housing bubble,’ depleted their fiscal resources. Combined with austerity and the ‘free market’ policies of the national government, which were also forced on local administrations, the economic slump plunged cities deeply into debt. At the same time, citizens were disaffected with the national institutional system, which proved corrupt and unresponsive to their needs. The two ruling parties -the social democratic PSOE and the right-wing PP- suffered massive losses of voters, and the crisis of political institutions set in.<sup>5</sup>

Starting to rise in 2014 across different cities and localities in Spain, political municipalism walked in the footsteps of the 15M [‘Indignados’] movement to confront these latest assaults on freedom and democracy in Spain, reclaiming the city as the heartland of citizens’ democracy. New municipalism aspired to overcome fear, social fragmentation, collective impotence, privatization, the hollowing-out of democracy, neoliberal austerity and xenophobia, by constructing more social, feminist and sustainable cities. By weav-

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4 Colau, A. (2018). Epílogo-Convertir el miedo en esperanza. In *Ciudades Sin Miedo. Guía del movimiento municipalista global*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 193-196, Roth, L., Monterde, A. & A. C. López (2019). Introducción. In Roth, L., Monterde, A. & A. C. López (Eds.), *Ciudades Democráticas. La Revuelta Municipalista en el Ciclo post-15M*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 14.

5 Observatorio Metropolitano (2014). *La apuesta municipalista. La democracia empieza por lo cercano*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 96-109, 121-141.



ing relations of mutual support in everyday life, on the level of the city, through ‘proximity’ and ‘from below,’ the ‘cities of change’ could recover and reinvigorate democracy. They would garner power both inside and outside the institutions, while countering the reactions of ethnic and religious closure.<sup>6</sup>

Engaging with city institutions was meant to be a component of a broader strategic approach to social innovation with two planks, the electoral-institutional and the organizational-movement. The movement aspired to refigure the ‘forms of doing politics,’ to recuperate the city and its institutions, and to transform them through the power of the people in order to put them in the service of the common good. Local institutions should be rebuilt to become less hierarchical, more transparent and accountable, ruled by the collective decision-making of citizens. Civic participation should expand by including all citizens and by affording real opportunities for ‘presencial’, or digital participation in quality decision-making. Collective decision-making should proceed on equal terms and should be flexibly adapted to the different availability of persons. The objective was to ‘hack’ and to remodel the governing infrastructures of the city so as to open their gates to the ‘common people’ and, thereby, to ‘common’ the city.<sup>7</sup>

The project of recovering citizens’ democracy is wedded to the broader libertarian objective to attain freedom from domination in its various guises –class, gender, ethnic and species. To this end, new municipalism speaks for a twin struggle on the streets and the institutions, in home and the workplace, through resistance and transformative politics.<sup>8</sup>

The alternative politics of insurgent municipalism in Spain started out from a certain diagnosis of the political conjecture after the 15M movement, which appeared on stage on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2011, and set up encampments on central squares. 15M exacerbated the legitimation crisis of the ruling regime. It also diffused another democratic

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6 Martínez, I. (2018). La trinchera de la proximidad. In *Ciudades Sin Miedo. Guía del movimiento municipalista global*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 23, Colau 2018, Ibid. 194.

7 Roth, L., Lander, B. & G. Pin (2018). Democracia radical en el Ayuntamiento. In *Ciudades Sin Miedo. Guía del movimiento municipalista global*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 114-116, Ubasart- González, G. (2018). Apuestas Municipalists: Un Salto de Escala. In Güell, P.I, Partí I Puig, S., Cortina-Oriol, M. & A. Sribman Mittelman A. (Eds.), *Nuevos movimientos sociales. De la calle a los ayuntamientos*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 70.

8 Herrero, Y. (2018). Prólogo-Vivimos un momento excepcional en la historia. In *Ciudades Sin Miedo. Guía del movimiento municipalista global*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 5-7, Pisarello, G. & Comisión Internacional de Barcelona en Comú (2018). Introducción. In *Ciudades Sin Miedo. Guía del movimiento municipalista global*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial.

culture of popular participation, horizontalism and collective co-decision. But the movement failed to reshuffle the decks of power and to instigate ‘regime change.’ Dominant institutions remained largely exclusionary and impervious to demands for popular sovereignty, a more equitable distribution of wealth and the protection of welfare rights and political liberties. Hence a turn from mobilizations to ‘the electoral,’ which took a municipalist inflection in 2014-2015. The aim of the electoral turn was to reach out to all citizens affected by the crisis, to ‘win the city’ and to translate the politics vindicated by civic spaces and activism into electoral majorities and local institutional policies.<sup>9</sup>

In their swerve towards other patterns of political mobilization and (local) institutions from 2014 onwards, municipalist candidacies clung to the spirit of ‘real democracy’ of the 2011 civic insurgencies. Both internally, in their own political agencies, and ‘externally,’ in the institutions they wished to reconstruct, they were keen on ‘doing politics in another way’: open assemblies, collective intelligence, horizontal and participatory decision-making by citizens, a distinct technopolitical infrastructure that shores up civic engagement, collective leadership, democracy in networks, open-source instruments and logics, consensus-seeking, ethical politics, the proliferation of the commons through a ‘municipalism of the common good,’ transparent administration, and the feminization of politics, which pursues gender parity, relations of care and attention to power structures. All these components yield a common breeding ground of diverse municipal platforms in Spain since 2015, bespeaking their common 15M political DNA. At the core of their vision sits a radical pragmatism, which is bent on concrete action, detailed feasible plans and tangible results in everyday life. This radical pragmatism prioritizes ‘learning by doing’ and ‘collective learning’ over any abstract theory of change.<sup>10</sup>

Plunging into the organizational core of municipalist politics in Spain from 2014 to date, this is located in the ‘municipalist platform’ or ‘confluence.’ Several formations of this kind were put together in 2014-2015 to contest the May 2015 local elections in several municipalities across Spain. Later on, they were implicated in administration, as coalition or minority governments in five of the largest cities in Spain -Madrid, Barcelona,

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9 Kois, J.L.F.C., Morán, N. & F. Prats (2018). *Ciudades en Movimiento*. Foro de Transiciones, 14-15, Forti, S., & G. Russo Spena (2019). *Ada Colau, La Ciudad en Común*. Barcelona: Icaria, 21-22, 29.

10 Forné, L., Micciarelli, G., Fresnillo, I. (2018). Bienes Comunes. In *Ciudades Sin Miedo. Guía del movimiento municipalista global*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 141-145, Pérez, L. (2018). Feminizar la política a través del municipalismo. In *Ciudades Sin Miedo. Guía del movimiento municipalista global*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 33-37.

Madrid, Valencia, Zaragoza and A Coruña.<sup>11</sup>

Confluences were alliances between converging political projects of parties, movements, civic groups and non-organized citizens. They sought to become something beyond the sum of their parts, while respecting the identity of each member. They were grounded in common objectives and endeavored to fashion a political environment where people without prior political engagement can feel at ease. They were designed, thus, as new instruments of social articulation and political intervention that could bring together those already organized, and people beginning or willing to mobilize. Crucially, persons participated on an individual basis, not as representatives of their particular projects, and they could maintain a 'double militancy.' Yet, shared commitments, expressed in a commonly agreed 'code of ethics,' should take precedence over the distinct practices and policies of constituent members. And a strong accent was placed on the inclusion of people who were not activists or party members and did not have previous experience in political action.<sup>12</sup>

In practice, municipalist initiatives negotiated a delicate balancing act between assuming leadership and implementing a transparent, collective and participatory process in decision-making and action. Hence, trade-offs between horizontality and leadership, impurity, generosity towards other participants, organizational flexibility and a practical mindset intent on concrete outcomes gave the predominant tenor to the organizational logics of new municipalist politics. More specifically, at the beginning, leadership was assumed by a group of citizens and activists, which took the initiative to band together an electoral platform and to lay down the pillars of a political program, which would be further worked out through the open participation of other citizens. They also appointed a 'pilot group' to set the process in motion and to work for the democratization of the organization, once this had been consolidated. Then, the platform was presented at a public event and it became 'open source.' People in the city were invited to join the process of further building the platform and of elaborating a text of principles and commitments.<sup>13</sup>

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11 Monterde, A. (2019). De la Emergencia Municipalista a la Ciudad Democrática. In Roth, L., Monterde, A. & A. C. López (Eds.), *Ciudades Democráticas. La Revuelta Municipalista en el Ciclo post-15M*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 29-34.

12 Junqué, M., Tepp, C., Ramas, P. (2018). Organizando una plataforma municipalista: estructura y confluencia. In *Ciudades Sin Miedo. Guía del movimiento municipalista global*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 72-73, Kois, Morán & Prats 2018, Ibid. 14-15.

13 Baird, K. S., Delso, C., Zechner, M. (2018). Cómo crear una candidatura municipalista participative. In *Ciudades Sin Miedo. Guía del movimiento municipalista global*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 47-51, Junqué, Tepp & Ramas,

Accordingly, a collective initiative led by a particular group was opened up to a praxis of *commoning the municipalist project* through collective participation and collaboration. People who shared the main terms and objectives of the project were called upon to co-construct its contents and its further development. The municipalist initiative took to the streets and the squares to reach out to the broader body of city residents, beyond movement activists and political parties. They spoke a plain, everyday language, relating to local cultures and employing art and memes to make politics more joyful in its communication with the body of citizens at large. Collaborative and participatory mechanisms were put in place in order to collectively draw up an electoral program, which would constitute a citizens' mandate, and to select the candidates in ways which would reflect the diversity of the movement. Moreover, from the outset the members of the municipalist platform collectively authored a code of ethics, which would define the conduct of elected and appointed members of the platform, ensuring accountability, constant engagement with citizens, financial transparency, limited salaries and privileges.<sup>14</sup>

The evolution of the first municipal confluences in 2015 thus followed a methodology of 'five points:' the search for wide social support (through the collection of signatures, etc.); a collaborative elaboration of the electoral program; open primaries for the selection of candidates; the adoption of a code of ethics, which limits the privileges of elected representatives; and a campaign which was largely based on crowdfunding and did not accept funding from banks.

This municipalism sponsored 'citizens' leadership,' that is, the rise of new faces who enjoy ample support among the members of the platform and contribute to its development in different capacities (as public spokespersons, technicians, leaders of the communication group, etc.) In its own structure, the municipalist confluence was committed to internal democracy, transparency and the facilitation of political participation by all citizens. It was administered by a coordinating body, which consisted of representatives of all groups and spaces of the platform. The 'coordinadora' contained no strong single-person posts (e.g., of a 'general secretary'). Its members usually rotated on a regular basis and it was subject to the highest authority, the whole community of the

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Ibid. 72-74, Barcelona en Comú (2016). *How to Win Back the City en Comú: Guide to Building a Citizen Municipal Platform*. Barcelona, 5.

14 Baird, Delso & Zechner 2018, Ibid. 49-51, Barcelona en Comú 2016, Ibid., 5.

platform's members. Furthermore, it reached strategic decisions about the platform or the city administration by holding binding consultations with all the members.<sup>15</sup>

To lift civic participation, the organizational model was place-based, anchoring the organization in localities, neighborhood assemblies and everyday life. Multiple spaces and modalities of participation and decision-making were introduced, both 'presencial' and digital, so that more people could get involved as they can and wish, maximizing inclusion and participation. All decisions should be the outgrowth of collective debate, collaboration and work in networks. General decisions were voted by all members through simple procedures. Finally, when the platform elected council members or entered the city government, both the institutional space (of the mayor, councillors, etc.) and the municipal platform should be kept in place, collaborating, co-deciding and reflecting on municipal policies. Enhanced civic participation in decision-making for the city should be the main objective in policymaking and campaigns. Elected representatives were bound by the 'code of ethics,' which curtailed mandates and salaries, enforcing transparency.<sup>16</sup>

Crucially, the municipalist platform was supposed to operate as an autonomous political organization with its proper political project. It was not conceived by its initiators as a simple electoral list. Its presence in city halls through elected representatives –mayors and city councillors- should be coupled with the ongoing activity of an autonomous political agency, which interacts with social movements, neighborhoods and citizens beyond the city administration itself. Hence, the municipal platform aspired to act as a space of encounter and intercourse between citizens, movements and institutions that re-educates their subjectivity and their ways of doing politics with a view to making citizens the political protagonists of democracy.<sup>17</sup>

## Drawing a first balance

No doubt, despite its aspirations and enthusiasm, new municipalism was faced with daunting challenges and limitations from the outset. Beyond the 'taking' of local gov-

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15 Martínez, A. C. & A. de Diego Baciero (2019). Municipalismo democrático: las organizaciones municipalistas. In Roth, L., Monterde, A. & A. C. López (Eds.), *Ciudades Democráticas. La Revuelta Municipalista en el Ciclo post-15M*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 247.

16 Junqué, Tepp & Ramas 2018, *Ibid.* 72-75.

17 Roth, L. (2019). Democracia y municipalismo. In Roth, L., Monterde, A. & A. C. López (Eds.), *Ciudades Democráticas. La Revuelta Municipalista en el Ciclo post-15M*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 61-63.

ernment and a better style of administration, a radical realignment of local power relations and sustained struggle with potent oligarchies would be required to dislodge vested economic interests and corrupt elites at the municipal level. A major reform of the *national* institutional order, which in recent years abridged the political competences of municipalities and curtailed their resources, would also be in order. City governments control only 13% of the national state budget, while state legislation, since 2013 (the ‘Montoro Law’), has prohibited the use of surpluses for social purposes.<sup>18</sup>

In 2019, four years after the first electoral victories of the new alter-municipalism in local elections and the end of the first term of municipalist governments, the balance was mixed and ambiguous, in terms of its transformative effects. The fields in which new policy initiatives unfolded in several ‘cities of change’ included: democratic empowerment, civic participation and control over the public administration; redistributive policies and increased social expenditure; reinforcement of social services and public care, particularly for vulnerable persons; gender equality; improvement of the quality of city life in districts and neighborhoods; a new model of urbanism beyond speculation, gentrification and touristification; sustainable, ecological and resilient cities; new urban economies focused around social and solidarity economies, circularity, proximity and healthy alimentary systems; new urban cultures and narratives; municipalist networks that intend to scale up and scale out municipalist politics on the regional, the national and the international level.<sup>19</sup>

Outcomes are variable and diverge from city to city. Important breakthroughs have been accomplished on the core items of the municipalist agenda –citizens’ democracy and decentralization. Local forums and digital platforms for collective participation in policymaking were put in place in Madrid and Barcelona, among other cities.<sup>20</sup> In the social economy, more specifically, the strong sponsorship of the SSE by the administration of Barcelona en Comú raised its visibility and effectively doubled the number of cooperatives established per year.<sup>21</sup> Regarding policies of space, the ‘right to housing’ has also been at the epicenter of the municipalist agenda in several cities, includ-

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18 Kois, Morán & Prats 2018, Ibid. 50-51.

19 Ibid. 140-183.

20 Barandiaran, X. E. (2019). Techopolítica, municipalismo y radicalización democrática. In Roth, L., Monterde, A. & A. C. López (Eds.), *Ciudades Democráticas. La Revuelta Municipalista en el Ciclo post-15M*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 196.

21 Kois, Morán & Prats 2018, Ibid. 218-219.

ing Zaragoza and Barcelona, where Ada Colau and other members of the confluence were famously militants of the anti-eviction PAH movement. Despite concerted efforts, budgetary constraints and the limited competences of city government did not allow it to adequately tend to existing needs and to prevent further rises in rents and house prices.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, municipalism in government had a strong feminist inflection. Barcelona en Comú placed at the core of its policies a robust and integral feminist agenda, which was co-produced by women's collectives and municipal departments and revolved around four axis, which traverse all aspects of city government and life: institutional change through a review of budgets, contracts, subsidies, etc., from a perspective of gender equality; economy for life and organization of time regarding employment, care, feminization of poverty; inhabitable and inclusive neighborhoods, sustaining security, mobility and ecology; and city rights, furthering gender equality in participation, culture, health, measures against male violence.<sup>23</sup> The municipalist administration also inaugurated a municipal Department of Feminisms and LGTBI, as well as a Center of LGTBI resources.

Finally, new municipalist initiatives came to grips with the question of scale and systemic, global interconnections by converging in global and regional networks of 'fearless cities.'<sup>24</sup>

But these democratizing initiatives and counter-hegemonic politics have come up against institutional, bureaucratic and party-political barriers, while collective deliberation and participation have been often scant and poor. Critics point out the relative lack of deliberative spaces and mechanisms through which participatory processes with civic associations can reach binding decisions. Digital politics tend to also reproduce inequalities based on class, age, education and geographical location. Furthermore, sound financial management decreased cities' indebtedment and permitted considerable rises in social expenditure (e.g., up to 24% in the first year of Ahora Madrid's term, and 22.2% in the next year). But the austerity laws of the central state impeded the further

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22 Ibid. 196-197.

23 Ibid. 162-163, 204-205.

24 Bertran, L. (2019). El trabajo en red del nuevo municipalismo. In Roth, L., Monterde, A. & A.C. López (Eds.), *Ciudades Democráticas. La Revuelta Municipalista en el Ciclo post-15M*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial.

expansion of redistributive social policies, uncovering the limits of municipal autonomy. The same holds largely true for the policies of ‘cities of refuge,’ which attended to immigrants and refugees, seeking to offer hospitality, security and housing.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, inhabiting the institutions brought on the typical institutional inertia and bureaucratization of the ‘new politics.’ In addition to the legal and institutional bounds on the political power of municipalities in Spain, bureaucratic procedures, technical and political complexities, the forced compromises of minority or coalition governments, resistance by elites, an administrative staff which was not aligned with the municipalist projects, the daily agenda of city administration in conjunction with their administrative inexperience absorbed the energies of municipalist actors in city government. Municipal organizations were weakened, thus, and municipalist members of the administration lost contact with social movements, the neighborhoods and the streets. A feeling of exhaustion and isolation set in, exacerbated by the constant attacks by elite forces and mainstream media.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, after 2015 and an apparent ‘stabilization’ or even ‘recovery’ of the Spanish economy, the cycle of protest has suffered a relative paralysis, depriving thus the municipalist formations of a source of power and impulse. The will to rupture and change the institutions often gave way to political moderation, ‘good management,’ ‘governmentalism’ and a conservative interpretation of the 15M political orientation, which gave up on the contestation of neoliberal and post-democratic regimes.<sup>27</sup>

In general, the transformative power and the will of municipalist politics to oppose the status quo hinge largely on the effective organization and activity of the municipalist platforms, which launch the project of change. These will decline to the point of death under three, at least, circumstances, as recent lessons from Spanish municipalism indicate. First, if the elected representatives of the platform, who command the main decision-making power in city administration and enjoy the greatest public prominence, arrogate all decisive and communicative power to themselves rather than remaining

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25 Kois, Morán & Prats 2018, Ibid. 140-149, 156-157, 185-186.

26 Monterde 2019, Ibid., 45-47., Fundación de los comunes (Ed.) (2018). *La crisis sigue. Elementos para un nuevo ciclo político*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 38-40.

27 García, J. M. (2018). La Ola 15M: De La Protesta A Las Instituciones. In Güell, P.I, Partí I Puig, S., Cortina-Oriol, M. & A. Sribman Mittelman (Eds.), *Nuevos movimientos sociales. De la calle a los ayuntamientos*. Barcelona: Icaria editorial, 125, Rubio-Pueyo, V. (2017). *Municipalism in Spain. From Barcelona to Madrid, and Beyond*. New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 19.



organically connected with the municipalist community and social movements. Second, if the municipalist formation does not maintain strong linkages and living circuits of interaction with democratic movements, associations and ordinary citizens in the city, drawing sustenance from their demands, their proposals, their energies, their critiques and their dreams. To effect change, municipalism must be profoundly social and focus on social movements and civil society.<sup>28</sup>

Third, if an autonomous and expansive operation of the platform, territorially grounded in neighborhood assemblies and sectorial groups, is not sustained over time. When this independent organizational life and the territorial roots are lacking, the municipalist project is bound to lose control over its elected representatives. The reassertion of hierarchies, centralization, bureaucratization and conservatism follow suit.<sup>29</sup> Herein lies a key organizational challenge for municipalist alter-politics. It can fruitfully respond by cementing organizational bonds between institutional spaces, the platforms themselves and social movements, and by investing in network collaboration, the exchange of knowledge and mutual reinforcement among municipalist schemes.

Five years after their upsurge, it now appears that in order to turn municipal formations into more powerful vehicles of counter-hegemonic organization for commoning democracy, their radical popular and counter-hegemonic aspects should be enhanced. More emphasis should be placed on figuring antagonistic new visions, which can consolidate new popular identities, steering them away from neoliberal imaginaries. Scaling out and scaling up on the regional, national, continental and global plane is also a vital condition for powerful counter-hegemonic contention in a complex world. The internal life of the platform should be nourished and fortified, as a dynamic political scheme, which is autonomous from the city administration and can really direct its policies. The institutional devices to hold municipal officers accountable and directly responsible to the municipal organization and citizens, should be adequately mobilized and amplified. Finally, the real implication of ordinary citizens in fundamental decision-making and the monitoring of policy execution, both in the platform and in city administration, should be broadened and deepened. This is the foundation of a 'common' democracy, whereby power flows from below.

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28 García López, E. (2019). Interview in Madrid with the author, 28/1/2019.

29 The case of Madrid is telling in this respect; see Carmona, P. (2019). Entrevista, Madrid en Pie-Balance. In *El Salto*. Retrieved from <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/ayuntamiento-de-madrid/pablo-carmona-entrevista-madrid-en-pie-balance-cuatro-anos#comentarios>, accessed 5/11/2019.



**THE PANDEMIC AND THE GLOBAL  
LOCKDOWN: TECHNOLOGIES,  
BIOPOLITICS, CLIMATE CRISIS**





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# Viral Solidarity

*Adam Gearey*

“[W]e cannot resist the conclusion that multitudes of our fellow-creatures, *hundreds of our immediate neighbours*, are annually destroyed for want of the most evident precautions.” Dr. P. H. Holland, Report of Commission of Inquiry into the State of Large Towns and Populous Districts. First Report, 1844, cited in Engels (1892, 107).

Within the socialist tradition there is a thinking of something we might call viral solidarity.

Viral solidarity is a peculiar expression; at once, both a realisation and a transformation of familiar themes. The term solidarity can be traced to the *Encyclopédie* of 1765. Whilst we have not got time to reconstruct the etymology of the word, the Proto-Indo-European root suggests that – at least in some primordial sense – the term relates more generally, to what is ‘undivided’ – and thus, to what is, in certain senses, shared.

Arguably, then, by viral solidarity, we mean that the virus is a threat to human substance in its generality. We cannot untangle all the resonances of the term ‘human substance’ – but - as a crude working reference point, substance can be thought of as the ‘in and for itself’ - perfectly explained by Leonard Cohen: tangled up matter and ghost.<sup>1</sup>

To develop the working part of this admittedly broad argument, I want to refer to a key text. I originally thought I would use Richard Titmuss’ *The Gift Relationship* - but- accident took me to Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class in England*; a text that allows me to make my argument more crisply. Indeed, Engels’ analysis of our condition is directly relevant to our present predicament. But we must leave to one side the etymologies of the word condition. The Proto-Indo-European root suggests that all saying is a showing – or - more precisely - a showing of something to those with whom one is with; which, takes us back to sharing, perhaps.

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Cohen, *The Window*, Recent Songs, Columbia, 1979

So, what Engels calls “the physico-chemical establishment of the...phenomena of life” - or - the common susceptibility to disease and suffering is an essential element of the human condition.<sup>2</sup>

I am not arguing that Engels, or Marx, had any understanding of the virus as such—they didn’t. My argument is that we can find an imaginary of the problem posed by viral disease, in general, and the exacerbation of viral disease by capitalism, in particular.

The thesis, then, most simply: what militates against a response to viral infection, to the common vulnerability of our shared human substance, is the condition of class.

To this end, we need to bear in mind two meanings of the word condition; two meanings bound up together: the human condition, and the condition of class; or social division as an ongoing and immanent effect of a mode of economic social production, and reproduction on the human condition.

What could be shared is already divided.

So, Engels’ text constantly works between the two senses of the word condition.

To start with “the physico-chemical establishment of the...phenomena of life”.

Engels grasps the fundamental problem: we are radically vulnerable. Radical vulnerability is as definitional as any other theme that might be taken to constitute our humanity, such as language or the use of tools (themes to which we can only make passing reference).

We are a corrosion “within.”<sup>3</sup>

Our radical open-ness to disease is always subject to social differentiation: to class. What does this mean? Condition, as class, is a grid imposed over being by industrial production: “[t]he manufacturer is Capital, the operative Labour” – the fundamental di-

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2 Engels, F. (1940). *The Dialectics of Nature*. New York: International Publishers, 22.

3 Engels, F. (1892). *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 276.

vision between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.<sup>4</sup> The social terms of the condition, then, are those ongoing traumas that are marked out on the body itself - moral and physical health - and divisions that remain unto death.

After all, “the poor are dumped into the earth like infected cattle.”<sup>5</sup>

Engels’ understanding of class as condition is fundamentally a study of the erasure of what should be shared. Malthus’ theory of population provides a justification for a law that deals with those who are multiple - who are, etymologically - proletarians. Those whose only power is the ability to breed are condemned to “poverty, misery, distress” and disease. This is “the lot” or “eternal destiny” for those who “exist in too great numbers.” For Malthus, the poor do not have a “right to live.”<sup>6</sup>

The law of over-population condemns the poor to live in concentrated poverty. The preface lays this out:

“The repeated visitations of cholera, typhus, smallpox and other epidemics have shown the British bourgeois the urgent necessity of sanitation in his towns and cities, if he wishes to save himself and family from falling victims to such diseases.”<sup>7</sup>

*The Condition* is very much a book about boundaries and zones - those that separate and conceal ways of being - and the diseases that move effortlessly across these barriers. As much as the working class may be herded into the slums of the industrial centres, as much as the reality of industrial work and the troublesome nature of the condition of people may be ignored or contained, something leaks out. Something contaminates the bourgeoisie. Something moves; endlessly.

Class, in this sense, cannot ultimately save anyone from the common corrosion.

This, of course, requires a very particular way of thinking. It may be that even Engels, himself, was not quite sure how he could engage with solidarity against disease; not least the scale of the argument involved.

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4 Engels 1892, *Ibid* 277.

5 *Ibid*, 291.

6 *Ibid*, 285.

7 *Ibid*, viii.

Indeed, we may need to read backwards the themes from *The Dialectics of Nature* into *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. In the later text, the mechanism of viral and bacterial infection is glimpsed at the level of the “flux”, or biological becoming. “The flux” describes the complexities of differentiation taking place over vast tracts of time: infinite divisions and multiplications produce human beings from single cell life forms.<sup>8</sup> Engels’ fundamental insight is that “the flux” adapts us to viral infection. Human beings do not stand in dominance over nature. Our advanced state carries with it something dark and unpleasant; like the debris on the sullen river Irk that snakes through the slums of Manchester. The human being, this ‘paragon of animals’, is its own decay—“prey to disease.”<sup>9</sup>

Reading *The Dialectics of Nature* alongside *The Condition of the Working Class* suggests that these works are books of notes that frequently point out failure of the author’s own understanding, the inadequacies of philosophical and scientific language available, and the need to think in a different way. Engels is probing the influences of natural and social systems on each other—those moments when frames and zones come into contact. The anonymous, self-differentiating, pulsating mass of being—with all its potentialities and immanent ruin—solidifies into a particular historical moment.

Manchester is the name for this conjuncture: a biologic-chemical and socio-political way of being. Manchester is a slum; a mood, an atmosphere; a dread. The maps inserted in *The Condition* plot the coordinates of this inner and outer condition, rather like those of Michel Butor’s *L’Emploi du Temps* – that other great evocation of the horrors of Manchester. Manchester is an anti-Combray - not so much a cathedral that inspires wonder at its grand design, but a labyrinth of slums in which you lose yourself.

Manchester concentrates the de-naturing of human nature. Human beings are reduced to the status of the living dead—victims to diseases that are at once preventable, yet epidemic, in the squalor of the city:

“If one roams the streets a little in the early morning, when the multitudes are on their way to their work, one is amazed at the number of persons who look wholly or half-consumptive.... these pale, lank, narrow- chested, hollow-eyed ghosts, whom one passes

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8 Engels, 1940, Ibid 12.

9 Engels, 1892, Ibid 98.



at every step, these languid, flabby faces, incapable of the slightest energetic expression....”<sup>10</sup>

Engels’ text opens up arguments that, whilst developed in *Capital*, still offer a unique perspective on a way of thinking whose dynamic has perhaps yet to be properly realised. The virus, after all, has some uncanny resemblances to capital. Both exist only to multiply - to accumulate their own deathly order.

Engels poses to himself a question:

“What is to become of those destitute millions?”<sup>11</sup>

They are consumed by an inherent infirmity exacerbated by slum life.

It “is high time... for the English middle-class to make some concessions to the working-men who no longer plead but threaten; for in a short time, it may be too late.”<sup>12</sup>

If concessions are not made, the bourgeoisie, too, will be consumed. Despite the separations of class, the bourgeoisie are of the same substance as workers and paupers; they will develop the same “sore spots”- the same sickness; no one is free from “anxiety.”<sup>13</sup>

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10 Ibid 98. It is worth noting in passing the echoes between *The Condition of the Working Class* and W.G Sebald’s story ‘Max Ferber’ in *The Emigrants*. Sebald’s narrator – a wanderer like Engels- is lost in the “aimlessness and futility” of Manchester. See Sebald, W.G. (1993). *The Emigrants*. London: Harvill Press, 156. The silence and the depopulation of the post war city and its “restless shadowy figures”, contrasts with Engels’ accounts of the faceless crowds of industrial workers (Sebald, *ibid*, 158). It would be interesting to speculate as to the precise location of “the bare terrain...like a glacis around the heart of the city” that Sebald describes (Sebald, *ibid*, 158). The address of the Arosa, where the narrator stays, is given as “a narrow alleyway” off “Great Bridgewater St” (Sebald, *ibid*, 151). Sebald - or his narrator - was thus close to the site of ‘little Ireland’ (he could perhaps have walked down Whitworth St., past where the Hacienda would be). ‘Little Ireland’ was one of the most notorious slums documented by Engels- lying off Oxford Road, between the station and the River Medlock. It is not unlikely that Engels’ partner, Mary Burns, might have lived in this same area of the city; although the *Salford Star* suggests it was more likely that Burns and Engels met- or “copped off” together – in Weaste, where Ermen and Engels’ mill was located. Mary Burns was a working-class Irish woman. There is some evidence that Burns worked in the Ermen and Engels mill. She certainly acted as Engels’ guide to the working-class parts of the city. She is not mentioned in *The Condition* – but without her help, it is unlikely that Engels would have been able to conduct the research that he did. Burns and Engels lived together in a ‘fee union’ until Burns’ death in 1863. In a letter written on the Burns’ death, Eleanor Marx described her in a letter to Karl Kautsky, as “very pretty, witty” and “altogether charming”. Eleanor Marx also pointed out that Burns “in later years drank to excess”- the fate of many Mancunians, pretty, witty and otherwise. See, *The Salford Star*, Issue 6, 2007.

11 Engels, *Ibid*, 17.

12 *Ibid* 17.

13 *Ibid* 18

What is coming – with “mathematical or mechanical demonstration” – is the dialectic of disease.

The French revolution, and the revolutions of 1794, will have been “child’s play”<sup>14</sup> compared to the devastation that disease will bring.

Without solidarity against the virus, we all go down together.

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14 Ibid 18

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# Pandemic Borders: States, Bats and Biosecurity

*Paul Guillibert*

## Introduction

In December 2019, the wet market in Wuhan became the center of an infectious disease of zoonotic origin, quickly named Covid-19 (for Coronavirus Disease 2019). While the first cases probably appeared in Italy and France in November 2019, it was in China that the new disease turned into an epidemic. Within a few weeks, dozens of cases of “atypical pneumonia” appear in this city of 13 million inhabitants in central China. On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Chinese authorities established a quarantine in an area of 50 million inhabitants, but many people have already returned home for the Chinese New Year, contributing to the spread of the virus first within the country and then very quickly, in the rest of the world. The speed of spread of this virus, which is less lethal than the first SRAS, is however, taking hold of nation-states and most global health organizations, which are advocating a rapid and complete closure of national borders, leading to the near-total interruption of air traffic in May 2020. With Covid-19, the strengthening of borders thus appeared as a major element of capitalist governmentality in times of health crisis.

This article, therefore, takes as its starting point what could be called the “biopolitical paradox” of Sars-CoV-2 : on the one hand, the virus is a formidable border-crosser, jumping over species barriers and spreading through all the means of circulation of globalized capitalism; on the other hand, the response, more or less coordinated by global health institutions but immediately adopted by all sovereign states, has been the strengthening of national borders, including in geographical areas such as the European Union, where the circulation of European citizens is guaranteed by international treaties. The biopolitical paradox is thus, as follows: the global fluidity of the Covid-19, in terms of crossing borders (biological, national, epistemic), has called for territorial responses typical of sovereign States, the strengthening of national borders. At the edge of late capitalism, global disasters call for national responses. Biosecurity governmentality

involves the “fortification” of nation-states in the words of Zetkin Collective<sup>1</sup> or the constitution of “walled states” in the words of Wendy Brown.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I would like to show that the health governance of Covid-19 bears witness to the expansion and deepening of a new “border regime”, typical of disaster capitalism. It is structured by dynamics linked to three different types of borders: 1) Reinforcement of biopolitical borders between nations; 2) Erasing of biological borders between natural ecosystems and industrial worlds; 3) Recomposition of epistemic borders between science and politics.

## **Strengthening Biopolitical Borders Between Nations**

In his 1978 course, *Security, Territory, Population*,<sup>3</sup> Foucault distinguishes three modes of treatment for diseases that testify to three forms of human government. Although all three are at work in the treatment of Covid-19, it can be hypothesized that they also coincide with the emergence of a new “border regime” that structures the deployment of biosecurity capitalism.

### **Governing the disease**

In a famous passage,<sup>4</sup> Foucault distinguishes between the treatment of leprosy in the Middle Ages, the treatment of plague in the early modern era and the inoculation of smallpox in the industrial era. According to him, the treatment of leprosy in the Middle Ages was characterized by the exclusion of sick people from the common territory. Under the regime of sovereignty, the treatment of the disease consisted in the permanent exclusion of a population. Power is therefore exercised, first of all, over a territory. The treatment of the plague at the beginning of modern times is characterized by quarantine

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1 Zetkin Collective (2020). *Fascisme fossile. L'extrême droite, l'énergie, le climat*. 289. Paris: La Fabrique.

2 Brown, W. (2017). *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. New York, Cambridge (Mass.): Zone Books.

3 Foucault, M. (2007), *Security, territory, population lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*. Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

4 Foucault (2007), *Ibid* 23.

(of the ship, the city or the region). In the disciplinary regime, there is thus, a grid of social space that imposes itself on the multiplicity of elements that must be controlled by prioritizing them.

“These plague regulations involve literally imposing a partitioning grid on the regions and town struck by plague, with regulations indicating when people can go out, how, at what times, what they must do at home, what type of food they must have, prohibiting certain types of contact, requiring them to present themselves to inspectors, and to open their homes to inspectors. We can say that is a disciplinary type of system.”<sup>5</sup>

One cannot but be struck by the similarities between this Foucaultian description of the disciplinary treatment of the plague and the early periods of containment that marked the health policies of most countries, marked by two major decisions: a ban on movement and a ban on gathering. The last public health regime described by Foucault is that of smallpox, which proceeds by inoculation of the virus. It is therefore a calculation of the risk on a global population, thought in demographic terms. It is a matter of calculating the probability of risk and the statistical effects on the general population. This is what Foucault calls bio-power, i.e., “the set of mechanisms through which the basis biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy”.<sup>6</sup> What is especially striking with the Covid-19 pandemic is that the three regimes of power - sovereignty over territory, discipline over bodies and the biological security of the population - are combined to different degrees and on different scales. But the security power regime is to “try to plan a milieu in terms of events or series of events”.<sup>7</sup> What I would like to show is that this state power over the milieu - the only biopolitical mode of government in the strict sense - is only made possible by the establishment of a new “border regime”.<sup>8</sup> Biopolitical power over the milieu is exercised through capitalist control over margins.

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5 Ibid 24.

6 Ibid 16.

7 Ibid 22.

8 Genova, N. de (2016). "The "Crisis" of the European Border Regime: Towards a Marxist Theory of Borders". In *International Socialism*, n° 150, 31-54.

## New “Border Regime”

The milieu is the space that is composed of a set of natural data (rivers, swamps, hills) and a set of artificial data (agglomeration of individuals, houses, etc.). “The milieu is a certain number of combined, overall effects bearing on all who live in it”.<sup>9</sup> I argue that this control of the milieu was made possible by a certain “border regime”.

Indeed, borders appeared in the sanitary crisis provoked by the Covid-19 as a regulating element of the environment: political limits of sovereign space, they make it possible to interrupt the circulation of a pathogenic agent with mass effects between distinct bodies. National borders have been a device for limiting the risk to life through the control of an environment that is both natural (viruses) and artificial (a set of social spaces to be controlled - markets, airports, highways, ports, etc.). Environmental planning through the control of nation-state borders therefore, appeared to be one of the first means of limiting the pandemic. Biopolitical governmentality was nourished by this “new border regime”, characteristic of disaster capitalism.

The term “new border regime” refers to the idea presented by *Border Studies* researcher, Reece Jones, that “the existence of the border itself produces the violence that surrounds it. The border creates the economic and jurisdictional discontinuities that have come to be seen as its hallmarks, providing an impetus movement of people, goods, drugs, weapons and money across it”.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the border is not the expression of a sovereign power that controls a set of flows and circulation that pre-exists it, but it produces circulations and configures the nature of power itself. The construction of walls, barriers and camps regulating the movement of people now appears to be a “central function of state power”<sup>11</sup> in capitalist countries. As Reece Jones puts it about the global migration regime of the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century:

“As the movement of people threatens their ability to control resources and populations, states around the world have responded by hardening borders and violently enforcing their authority. The hardening of borders represents a rearticulation and expansion, not a retreat, of state power.”<sup>12</sup>

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9 Foucault (2007), Ibid 23.

10 Jones, R. (2017). *Violent Borders. Refugees and the right to move*. 5. Londres, New York: Verso.

11 Ibid 48.

12 Ibid 68.

I would like to support the following hypothesis: the circulation of the virus is the effect of the ecological crisis produced by disaster capitalism, but at the same time constitutes a threat to the further accumulation of capital; it was in order to regain biopolitical control over resources and populations that sovereign states extended and strengthened the new border regime during the health crisis.

Indeed, in the countries of the North, we are witnessing a “proliferation of borders”.<sup>13</sup> In Europe, they are increasingly violent. Militarized, they are monitored by technological devices, drones, satellite images, etc. In Hungary, the United States, Israel and Pakistan, walls and detention camps are being built. The European Union’s agreements with the Mediterranean countries organize the extraterritorialization of places of control and deprivation of liberty, to the countries of departure or transit. The border is therefore no longer the limit that separates sovereign nations and colonial lands. It spreads to all places where the control of identities and the appropriation of resources impose it. Border violence is a way of exercising territorial power that is no longer confined to the limits of the sovereign space but crosses it from one side to the other and is exported beyond it. The border is therefore no longer a demarcation line but a space of conquest where power is exercised through the domination of a foreign “nature”.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, the ecological vocabulary of American colonization can be instructive.

By distinguishing between “border” and “frontier”, American settlers developed two concepts of the border. Border is the outer limit of political territory that defines the absolute limits of national sovereignty. The border designates the wilderness to be conquered, this virgin nature occupied by barbarian peoples.<sup>15</sup> The frontier, as a space of conquest, is the place of a confrontation with the human and non-human savage. Yet, it is precisely because natural ecosystems have been transformed into a space of conquest (in Frontier) that sovereign states have deemed it necessary to reaffirm the centrality of national political borders during the health crisis.

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13 Mezzadra, S., Brett, N. (2013). *Border as method, or, The multiplication of labor*. 1. Durham, London: Duke University Press.

14 Mbembe, A. (2000). "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa". In *Public Culture*, 12, 259-284.

15 Cronon, W. (2016). "Revisiter la frontière disparue : l'héritage de Frederick Jackson Turner". In *Nature et récits. Essais d'histoire environnementale*. Paris: Éditions Dehors. Turner F. (1996). *The Frontier in American History*. New York: Dover publications.

## Erasing Biological Boundaries Between Natural Ecosystems and Industrial Worlds

In this section, I will try to show that the strengthening of national borders is the effect of a blurring of biological boundaries between natural ecosystems and industrial worlds. The colonization of nature leads to the nationalization of politics. Indeed, the destruction of wild animal habitats is the main cause in this health crisis. Zoonoses, or “species jumping”, are multiplying due to deforestation and the destruction of tropical forest ecosystems.

### ***Zoonotic Spillover***

Covid-19 is a zoonotic disease, that is, a disease of animal origin or the transmission of a pathogen across species boundaries. The epidemiological frontier of living organisms is “overwhelmed” to pass from a species naturally carrying the virus (host species or “reservoir”), to an intermediate species and finally to the contamination of the human species. This process is known under different names: “zoonotic spillover”, “species jump”, “cross-species transmission”. All these concepts testify to the capacity of coronaviruses to spread, to their power of action and to cross borders. Coronaviruses are particularly effective in this respect. As Andreas Malm notes in *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century*, they take their name from the appearance of the molecule: “a greyish ball with dozens of red spikes, looking somewhat like a royal crown or corona in Latin – a ubiquitous image in the spring of 2020, crowning it the organism, if not person, of the year. With the spikes working like hooks, the virus can drive itself into other cells and hold on to them”.<sup>16</sup>

Coronaviruses evolve more rapidly than most living organisms since their genetic information is not encoded in DNA but in RNA, a molecule that can mutate at high speed. Moreover, Sars CoV-2 has an enormous advantage: it can be transferred from one host to another before the first symptoms are detected in the patient (unlike SARS and MERS, for example). As Malm asks, why did the virus escape from its reservoir species via an enhancer species to continue its life in humans?

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<sup>16</sup> Malm, A. (2020). *Corona, climate, chronic emergency war communism in the twenty-first century*. 53. London: Verso.



Bats are the main virological reservoir of biodiversity. There are more than 1200 species of bats in the world, it is one of the oldest orders of mammals (65 million years old). It is an unparalleled vector of pathogens. They are constantly infested and very rarely affected. They have a unique tolerance to viruses. Studies hypothesize that they have developed a remarkable immune system because of their ability to fly.<sup>17</sup> To stay in the air, they must deploy considerable amounts of energy, bringing their basic metabolism to such intensities that their temperature can reach 40°C for hours at a time. They, therefore, have a strong capacity to produce fevers that eliminate the viruses that are harmful to them. The common hypothesis is that they are vectors of pathogens that cannot harm their constitution, but which can be very dangerous for other species.<sup>18</sup> The ultimate cause of the pandemic must therefore, be sought on the side of deforestation, which threatens the natural habitat of a certain number of species.

### ***“The World Name is Forest”***

Viruses driven by the destruction of the ecosystems of their host species have “two possibilities: disappear or take the plunge”.<sup>19</sup> In *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic* (2012), David Quammen compares this dispersal effect to the demolition of a chemical warehouse: “When the trees fall and the native animals are slaughtered, the native germs fly like dust’ from under the bulldozers”.<sup>20</sup> Deforestation erases the epidemiological boundaries between natural ecosystems and industrial worlds, and thus weakens species barriers, favoring the spread of viruses. Yet these deforestations are the effect of an extractivist capitalism that intends to transform all natural wealth into commodities for the accumulation of value: they have greatly accelerated between 2001 and 2011, particularly in Southeast Asia and Latin America, where large industrial companies are exploiting beef, soy, palm oil and wood encroach on the natural habitat of endangered species. For example, 70% of Malaysia’s agricultural land is devoted to palm oil production. The stress caused by deforestation seems to crack the normally very strong defences of bats and cause “viral excretion pulses”,<sup>21</sup>

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17 Ibid 59-60.

18 Keck, F (2020). *Avian Reservoirs Virus Hunters & Birdwatchers in Chinese Sentinels Posts*. 56. Durham, London: Duke University Press. Malm (2020), Ibid 52.

19 Ibid 51.

20 Quammen, D. (2012). *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*. 38. New York: W.W. Norton.

21 Malm (2020), Ibid 62.

episodes where viruses are released massively on accidental hosts, which may well be humans, as bats deprived of their former habitats seek shelter and food in barns, gardens, villages and, in this case, plantations. As Rob Wallace shows, the destruction of natural ecosystems and the concentration of animals in factory farming is leading to an increased circulation of viruses.<sup>22</sup>

Disaster capitalism, thus, has a special relationship to biological and national borders: on the one hand, it destroys “the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community”<sup>23</sup> by deforestation, i.e., by the extractive appropriation of non-human worlds; on the other hand, the response he proposes to the health consequences of the collapse of biodiversity is the extension of the border regime: prohibition of movement and gatherings, closure of borders, deportation and confinement of migrants. It strengthens political borders to limit the disastrous effects of the destruction of ecosystem barriers. But the political management of the pandemic also imposes a recomposition of the epistemological boundaries between science and politics.

## **Recomposition of epistemic boundaries between science and politics**

Researchers in epidemiology in Southeast Asia, very aware of the risk of this geographical area in the emergence of zoonotic diseases, use animals as “pandemic sentinels”. In this section, we will see that the use of non-humans in the detection of pandemics is part of a biosecurity regime. In *Avian Reservoirs. Virus Hunters and Birdwatchers in Chinese Sentinel Posts* (2020), Frédéric Keck defines biosecurity as the “control of the proliferation of biological material circulating around the globe”.<sup>24</sup> This new paradigm of global health recomposes the epistemic boundaries between science and politics.

### ***The “Sentinels of Pandemics”***

In 2009, on a chicken farm in the new territories of Hong Kong, farmer Wang Yichuan discovered two hundred dead “sentinel chickens” on his farm.

“In Chinese, *shaobingji* literally means “whistling soldier chicken”. A sentinel is

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22 Wallace, R. (2020). *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of Covid-19*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

23 Leopold, A. (2000). *Almanach d'un comté des sables ; suivi de Quelques croquis*. 283. Paris: Flammarion.

24 Keck (2020), Ibid 60.

a soldier who sends signals from the advanced posts of the battlefield. These hundred “sentinel chickens” that had died in Wang Yichuan’s farm had purposefully not been vaccinated for h5n1. Their deaths thus meant that the farm had been infected by an avian influenza virus that was transmissible to humans. Here, chickens appear as allies to humans in the war against flu viruses, because they are the first to die on the frontline. The word sentinel captures well the mix of agriculture, public health, and military concerns that constitute biosecurity measures and that can be also perceived in expressions such as Voluntary Surrender Scheme and model farm.”<sup>25</sup>

It is therefore a theory of “cell signaling” inspired by work in immunology: the organism builds a flexible boundary between itself and others. The sentinel thus, makes it possible to send early warning signals from the borders of the organism, the farm or the territory, signals that are analyzed by micro-biologists in high-security laboratories. If properly and quickly interpreted, these signals allow the organism, farmer or government to respond quickly and effectively. Biosecurity according to Keck is a technique of “preparation” for health crises that relies on monitoring living organisms and detecting early warning signals. It is therefore distinct from “prevention” (systematic slaughter) and “precaution” (vaccination). Biosecurity, in so far as it uses humans and non-humans to prevent epidemiological risks through a mix of agricultural techniques, public health measures and military concerns, changes the relationship between science and policy.

## **Global Health and National Politics**

As Frédéric Keck notes again in *Avian Reservoirs*, it seems that global health is traversed by multiple contradictions: first, a contradiction between scientific organizations and political institutions; second, a political contradiction within the scientific institutions themselves.

The first tension stems from the discrepancy between the work of sequencing the virus and publishing the results by the scientific authorities in Wuhan and the failure of the political authorities to take the whistleblowers into account. The city of Wuhan is indeed equipped with a research laboratory on biosafety level 4 viruses (BSL-4 or P4), the highest, a laboratory funded by the Chinese Academy of Sciences that handles the most dangerous viruses such as H5N1 or SARS. It is in this laboratory of 600 researchers that the virus was sequenced at the beginning of January 2020 and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid 87.

that a resemblance with SARS in bats was found. According to Frédéric Keck, the “international experts unanimously recognized the reactivity and transparency of their Chinese colleagues”.<sup>26</sup> But at the same time, the sacrifice of whistleblowers, such as the 34-year-old Chinese doctor Li Wenliang, who died on February 6, 2020 after being one of the first to announce the cluster, with no other reaction from the political authorities than an attempt to regain control of public opinion, thanks to a neo-Maoist discourse on the sacrifice of “barefoot doctors”. This initial tension thus testifies to what could be called, following Nicos Poulantzas, the “condensation of a balance of power”,<sup>27</sup> “the inscription of conflictuality in the institutional framework of the State”:<sup>28</sup> here Public scientific institutions are quick to publish results that the state ideological apparatus seeks to conceal or reinterpret.

The second political contradiction within scientific institutions itself derives from the emergence of a global health field:

“Such a term encompasses the multiple initiatives to reorganize public health beyond the level of nation-states’ populations and to reach individuals in the specific diseases that affect them. Covering a wide assemblage of actors, from biomedical experts to development agencies including philanthropic foundations, it is split between the anticipation and control of emerging infectious diseases, oriented toward security in the North, and the compassion and care for any victim of disease, oriented toward humanitarian action in the South”.<sup>29</sup>

The “One World, One Health” program thus brings together international organizations (World Health Organisation, Food and Agriculture Organisation, World Organisation for Animal Health) that have shared their information systems and connected their surveillance networks to cover all aspects of the health of animals, humans and their environment. There are, nevertheless, two opposing rationalities: the first is biosecurity - the control of the proliferation of biological material circulating around the globe; the other is biodiversity: the inventory and conservation of the different forms of life that inhabit the planet.

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26 Ibid 200.

27 Poulantzas N. (2013). *L'État, le pouvoir, le socialisme*. 183. Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires.

28 Ibid 188.

29 Keck (2000), Ibid 200.

## **Conclusion: Pandemic Politics**

In the face of the ecological and health effects of disaster capitalism, it appears decisive to politicize the pandemic and health issues. This obviously involves the self-organization of solidarity in times of precariousness, but it also requires the creation of organizations capable of influencing the forms of health governance by intervening in the methods of prevention or preparation for pandemics, and in the practices of medical experimentation and pharmaceutical production. Politicizing the pandemic thus implies acting simultaneously on the capitalist causes of the ecological disaster and on the sanitary effects of public health policies.



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# Against the Expert

*Todd McGowan*

**R**ight-wing populism is organized around enjoyment. Populist leaders supply people with the agent responsible for their failure to enjoy as much as others do. But they do more than this. They enable followers to enjoy through their hatred of the figure responsible for their failure to enjoy. By following the populist leader, we see behind the curtain and recognize who is really running the capitalist show and thereby cheating us out of our enjoyment. This paranoia relieves us of the burden of our freedom by both giving us someone to follow (the populist leader) and providing a figure who is really in charge (the target of our paranoid suspicions). Populist paranoia targets the expert because experts present a fundamental obstacle to unhindered enjoyment. The expert is necessarily a killjoy.<sup>1</sup>

Populist leaders do not rule on the basis of their expertise. They are populists to the extent that they are not experts and express disdain for expertise. It is this absence of expertise that enables people to view them as a site for identification, as one of us rather than as a member of the ruling class. It is what constitutes these leaders as populists rather than as typical politicians. As nonexperts, populist leaders are in the situation of the people themselves rather than intellectually superior to them. As nonexperts, they do not belong to the oppressive apparatus that has taken the people's enjoyment from them, even when they inhabit the seat of power in capitalist society.

One of the strangest facets of Donald Trump's reign was his insistence on opposing his own government. While in office, Trump inveighed against the government as if he were an outsider. No matter what ruling position the populist leader obtains, this leader cannot psychically enter into the ruling apparatus. To do so would be to associate oneself with expertise and to abandon the populist mantle.

It is easy to understand why paranoia targets immigrants and other figures of the outsider as the barrier to the subject's enjoyment.<sup>2</sup> The outsider who doesn't belong

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<sup>1</sup> Populism does not only target experts for detracting from the possibility of enjoyment. It also sees leftist political struggle as a threat to enjoyment. For a discussion of the feminist as a killjoy, see Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Populist paranoia about the outsider is evident in every manifestation of right-wing populism. This is why Hitler

threatens all belonging and exposes the nonbelonging of the subject itself. But the paranoia surrounding the figure of the expert is more difficult to unpack. Experts not only belong to the social order, but they help to keep it running efficiently. When one thinks about it, it seems as if we should applaud their work rather than being suspicious of them for depriving us of our enjoyment. But the populist leader makes clear exactly what the problem with the expert is.

When it comes to the most revelatory populist leader theoretically, Donald Trump perhaps surpasses even Adolf Hitler precisely because he targets expertise even more than Hitler did. Both leaders excel in conceptualizing figures of obscene enjoyment out of those who represent no danger at all: Jews, communists, male homosexuals, and the disabled for Hitler; immigrants, victims of police killings, environmentalists, and university professors for Trump. Trump's concern for the illicit enjoyment of immigrants is easy to understand. This is the traditional fare of the populist paranoiac. But the attack on university professors is more revelatory. Trump's decision to attack expertise is central to his popularity and to his revelatory significance.

The opposition between Donald Trump and his pandemic advisor Anthony Fauci highlights the contrast between the populist leader and the expert. Even though Fauci worked for Trump's administration, the two constantly critiqued the proposals of each other, often bluntly. Trump staked out his position on the side of the people by opposing himself to Fauci's expertise. At one point during the struggle to control the pandemic, Trump told a group of reporters, "People are tired of hearing Fauci and all these idiots."<sup>3</sup> Fauci's idiocy, according to Trump's thinking, stems from his distance from the people, his attempt to dampen the people's enjoyment.

For his part, Fauci undertook a vigorous campaign on behalf of mask wearing. Fauci nonetheless claimed that social distancing and masks would promote public health, which he took as an unequivocal good. For Trump, however, social distancing and masks were barriers to enjoyment—the enjoyment of parties, of going out to restaurants, and of seeing friends. Trump set himself up as an opponent of the expert and the good in the name of the unrestrained enjoyment that capitalism promises. By taking this position, he

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insists in *Mein Kampf* that "*the Jew today is the great agitator for the complete destruction of Germany.*" Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 623.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Trump, qtd. in "'Fauci's a Disaster': Trump Attacks Health Officials in Fiery Campaign Call," *Politico* (19 October 2020): <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/10/19/fauci-trump-wearing-mask-weakness-430114>.



evinced his populism.

Trump's disdain for experts derives from his disdain for any limitation on enjoyment. The limits that the expert insists on become, in his telling, unnecessary constraints on our capacity for enjoyment. The lifestyle that they demand leaves us bereft of the enjoyment that makes life worth living. Trump demands that people enjoy in the face of the expert's warnings. His call for enjoyment comes at the expense of the individual and societal good.

Experts are the champions of the good. No matter what their particular expertise, to be an expert is to identify and promulgate the good. They tell us how to organize society to have the good life, what to eat to have a good body, what to learn to develop a good mind, and how to allocate our resources to have a good planet. As champions of the good, experts of whatever stripe extol the good as the expense of enjoyment. This even applies to enjoyment experts: the life coach tells us how to arrange our existence so that we can maximize our enjoyment, thereby turning enjoyment into a good. The good demands restraint—wearing a mask—so that we can conserve it and not use it up. Enjoyment operates through being used up. Enjoyment is the excess that we experience beyond what is useful for our survival and prospering: we enjoy through the sacrifice of the useful for the sake of the excessive.

The good is susceptible to a calculus. We can always figure what specific decisions and practices are necessary to arrive at it. Utilitarian philosophers turn the calculus about the good into their field of expertise. They calculate the distribution of pleasure and suffering in order to come up with the proper decision in every social situation. But every expert, even those most opposed to utilitarianism, proffers some calculation about the good. One advocates a carbon tax in order to save the environment while punishing those who consume the most, while another calls for veganism in order to protect the good of all species. Experts calculate in order to arrive at the optimal good.

The chief characteristic of the good is that we have not yet attained it. The good functions as an ideal that we strive to realize through certain activities. Historically, thinkers have imagined what it might take to realize the good. This is what Plato theorizes in *The Republic*, what Augustine imagines in *City of God*, and what Charlotte Perkins Gilman narrativizes in *Herland*. In each case, the good society requires a rupture with how things

are currently going in the world. Plato demands that we live according to ideal forms; Augustine advises the installation of God's law; and Gilman envisions the elimination of men. Through a drastic change in social organization, these three experts show us a path to the good life.

Neither Plato nor Augustine nor Charlotte Perkins Gilman designed capitalist society. Capitalism is not organized around the good. What distinguishes capitalism from all hitherto existing societies is the organizing role that enjoyment plays in it. Premodern societies tend to strive toward an impossible good that they never realize, while capitalist society strives toward an impossible enjoyment that it never reaches. Premodern societies isolate the excess of enjoyment in rituals kept distinct from social reproduction. In capitalist modernity, enjoyment invades the process of the society reproducing itself. Capitalist subjects keep the economic system running by sacrificing the good for the sake of their enjoyment, which is a situation that Plato could not even imagine.

The good continues to exist in capitalism solely to serve as a barrier to our enjoyment. We need this barrier because direct access to enjoyment suffocates it. Enjoyment survives only through its inaccessibility, an inaccessibility formed through the good. In his *Seminar VII* devoted to the ethics of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan traces the relationship between the good and enjoyment. He sees the adherence to the good as a way to keep oneself from the trauma of enjoyment. He states that "the good [is] summed up in the notion that it keeps us a long way from our *jouissance*."<sup>4</sup> Here, the good serves as a protection from enjoyment, just as the expert tries to stop us from destroying the world by offering good advice.

But as the seminar goes forward, it becomes clear that the good can also serve as the vehicle for enjoyment. The good doesn't lead directly to enjoyment. Instead, it gives us something to sacrifice in order to enjoy. Lacan even goes so far as to say that this is the function of the good. He claims, "There is no other good than that which may serve to pay the price for access to desire."<sup>5</sup> Here, Lacan suggests that the good is, in effect, a tool for structuring our enjoyment. We erect the good as an obstacle that we can subsequently sacrifice in order to enjoy. This is what the role that the expert plays

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1992), 185.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 321.

in capitalist society.

The capitalist system is structured around the promise of enjoyment. But the enjoyment that capitalism promises is not equal to what it delivers. This failure of enjoyment is what keeps capitalist society going and what keeps people invested in it. Capitalism consists of a constant betrayal of the promise that defines it. If it didn't betray this promise and deprive subjects of the enjoyment that it promises, it would lose its adherents. One fully satisfied with a commodity does not buy the next commodity.

Capitalist subjects exist to the extent that they remain convinced of their dissatisfaction that the accumulation of the next commodity might rectify. In other words, the capitalist subject must believe firmly in its own castration while investing itself in the possibility of overcoming this castration through the next commodity purchased. In other words, this subject must avow its own castration while disavowing the Other's. That's the capitalist schema.

But capitalist society requires an explanation for its failure to keep its promise of unlimited enjoyment. Every commodity disappoints, but the trick is to convince subjects that commodities as such are not inherently disappointing. In order to avoid blaming the commodity for its own failure, capitalist subjects blame the expert. Populist leaders help them down this path. By insisting on the good in lieu of the promise of enjoyment, the expert plays the role of the villain responsible for the commodity's failure. If I'm not enjoying as much as promised, the expert must be to blame. The expert takes the fall for the failure of the commodity to produce a perfect enjoyment. The populist points out the fall guy.

Although the expert advocates restraining enjoyment for the sake of the good, the populist points out—rightly—the expert's hypocrisy. Unlike most other subjects within capitalist society, experts are able to do what they enjoy. While most capitalist subjects toil in unrewarding occupations like dentistry or retail sales, experts love what they do. For instance, the utilitarian philosopher who calculates how much we can give to charity from our income to produce a good society—how much enjoyment we need to sacrifice for the sake of the good—enjoys advocating for the good. Nowhere is the expert's enjoyment more evident than in the case of Peter Singer, the quintessential expert. As a utilitarian ethicist, Singer engages in multiple calculations about enjoyment. He

calls for restricting our enjoyment of meat so that animals can have a better existence. He argues for saving resources spent on the severely disabled in order to use those resources on persons capable of a good life. The excess that we spend on treating those whose situation is hopeless, Singer contends, is a wastefulness that comes at the expense of the good. In every situation, for Singer, the good trumps the wastefulness of enjoyment.

In the name of the good, Singer calls on all middle and upper class people to restrict their consumption so that they can give to relief organizations. By limiting their own enjoyment, they can promote the good of others and help to create a better society. Singer gives the example of forgoing new clothes for the sake of famine relief. He writes, “When we buy new clothes not to keep ourselves warm but to look ‘well-dressed’ we are not providing for any important need. We would not be sacrificing anything significant if we were to continue to wear our old clothes and give the money to famine relief.”<sup>6</sup> As this example shows, if we restrain our enjoyment just a little bit by curbing our consumption, we can do a lot of good in the world. Rather than advocating ways to help people enjoy more heartily, Singer insists on the necessity of restricting their enjoyment in order to promote the good.

Singer inveighs against enjoyment for the sake of the good, and yet he himself lives a life replete with enjoyment. Of course, Singer is not openly hypocritical. He gives away a considerable amount of his earnings to charity. But he does not restrict his own enjoyment with this giving. Rather than having a job that condemns him to at least forty hours of mindless labor per week, Singer, like all experts, has a career that he enjoys. Like any proselytizer, he even enjoys telling people that they should restrict their enjoyment. He earns a salary for engaging in philosophical speculation and for having stimulating discussions with colleagues and students. Despite sacrificing a hearty amount of his income, Singer never sacrifices the enjoyment that accompanies his position as an expert. This would require him ceasing to be an expert. When one looks at how experts actually live, in contrast with the paranoid subjects who critique them, it is difficult not to believe that the paranoiacs have a point. Even when they don’t live in opulence—Singer is clearly not a hypocrite—they enjoy their expertise.

It is also clear that Singer enjoys reproving society for its excesses of enjoyment. Like

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1.3 (1972): 235.

evangelical ministers enjoying the sins that they condemn, Singer can get off on meat through his repudiation of it. And as he describes the excesses of the billionaires who purchase lengthy yachts instead of helping the hungry, Singer is able to enjoy the yacht even more than its miserable owner. Singer and his fellow experts may sacrifice their tithe to the proper charities, but they don't appear to be sacrificing their enjoyment along with their money, which is why they make an easy target for the populist leader who rails against the expert.

But whether or not experts really enjoy, they are important for the position that they occupy, not for what they actually do. Simply by advocating for the good and cautioning against an excess of enjoyment, experts play the role of the villain in capitalist society, a villain that tells us we cannot keep eating meat, using racist slurs, telling sexist jokes, and driving SUVs. In short, we can't have any fun anymore. All the forms of obscene enjoyment that capitalism drives us toward become forbidden under the expert's regime of the good. This regime attempts to curb the excesses of capitalist society, to give us capitalism without the flurry of enjoyment that generates mass destruction. But this excess is precisely what keeps subjects invested in capitalism. The expert's alternative of an enjoyment-free capitalism holds an appeal only for those who can find an enjoyment in their work—that is, only for the experts themselves. Unlike the people he chastises, Peter Singer can easily give up his excess income because he lives a life replete with the expert's enjoyment that most capitalist subjects cannot access.

Both the expert and the populist would have us believe that they hold the keys to enjoyment. The expert counsels restraint, while the populist leader argues for an unqualified enjoying. The expert champions the attainment of the good through limiting ourselves, while the populist leader calls for enjoyment without limits. Neither recognizes that enjoyment derives from our self-limitation because both are deceived by the promise of plenitude.

When the paranoid populist sets up the expert advocating the good as responsible for the failure of the commodity to deliver on its promise of unlimited enjoyment, this represents an abandonment of freedom. In the populist's formulation, the expert takes the burden of freedom away from the subject. Attributing this power to the expert gives subjectivity an authority that controls everything from behind the scenes. An investment in the expert, like the investment in a commodity, represents a betrayal of subjectivity.

The expert becomes culpable for the subject's lack, giving the subject an excuse for its failure to enjoy without restraint.

The good that the expert champions is always a ruse, but it is a ruse that the populist leader requires. Right-wing populism enjoys through the expert's restrictions on enjoyment, through the defiance of what is good. Paranoia requires experts who limit the unlimited enjoyment that the paranoiac believes in. This enjoyment exists only insofar as it is lost, which is why the expert plays a crucial role for paranoid subjectivity. The expert attempting to bring about the good bears the responsibility for every failure to enjoy. This is the picture that populism paints in order to pave the way toward fascism.

# Dialectic of the Covid-19 Crisis

*Konstantinos Kavoulakos*

The question whether we can understand the global crisis triggered by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic as a dialectical process is not only of theoretical interest; a positive answer to it represents a condition of the possibility of seeing the crisis as an opportunity for radical social change and acting accordingly. However, despite the obvious fact that the crisis raises the classic question of the nature-society antithesis, in current public discourse one-sided, non-dialectical approaches to the pandemic dominate. Hence, one of the two poles of the opposition is downgraded or even eliminated. Indeed, this holds for both the dominant and a good part of the critical discourse on the pandemic.

The usual dominant discourse insists, as can be expected, on the medical aspects of the crisis, isolating them as much as possible from its social dimensions or considering the latter as external to the essence of the issue at stake. On this view, the problem consists in the natural threat originating from the random occurrence of a new dangerous pathogen. The solution to the problem is, as usual, the control of the pathogen by means of organized technoscience. Hence, we are experiencing a new episode in the eternal struggle between nature and society, darkness and light, irrationality and rationality. The official use of metaphors, such as “invisible enemy”, “war of a peculiar type” or, simply, “war against the virus”, etc., implies the narrative of unilinear progress: As so many times before, light will finally prevail as human rational power will defeat the dark forces of nature that threaten civilization.<sup>1</sup>

This abstract juxtaposition of nature and society corresponds to the phantom of an abstract humanity or, at least, an international community, which unites to fight off the threat. Only narrow-minded leftists can possibly continue to grumble, insisting on secondary system failures in crisis management or discovering class biased elements in

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<sup>1</sup> It seems that, in this respect, things have not significantly changed since Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse published their famous works: Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Ed. by G. Schmid Noerr, trans. by E. Jephcott. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press; Horkheimer, M. (2004). *Eclipse of Reason*. London, New York: Verso; Marcuse, H. (2002). *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Introd. by D. Kellner. London, New York: Routledge.

the implemented health and social policies, while ignoring the large picture of the struggle and imminent triumph of technoscience. A similar, even if more irrational, attitude also characterizes the blinded ultra-rights, who include the pandemic in the scenario of a global Jewish conspiracy.

Vis-à-vis this dominant narrative a critical discourse has been articulated, which also does not avoid one-sidedness. Besides, although intensively discussed, the problem of the dialectic between nature and society has never ceased to beset leftist thought.<sup>2</sup> Already in Marx's time, left-wing thinking focused on its privileged field of social-historical analysis and always felt uncomfortable when the issue of a "hard" natural fact was raised, fearing that the latter could be hypostatized as something supra-historical, not subjected to social change. Hence, left-wing thinking has an immanent tendency towards social constructivism, a tendency which meets a wider intellectual current of questioning naturalism, fairly widespread within the humanities and social sciences today. In its most extreme version, this trend lets the natural fact disappear beneath the endless layers of its interpretations and social constructions – it would only be satisfied with its total absorption into them. It may seem paradox, but, even if, in a more sophisticated and interesting way, in its extreme consequences, constructivism practically leads to the same basic view also shared by ultra-right conspiracy theorists: The virus and the pandemic are nothing but a construction that is convenient for the system.

The seeming opposition of the aforementioned approaches cannot cover up their deeper affinity. Negating nature through its assimilation into society and history is nothing but an intellectualist variation of its negation through rational domestication and technological control. Both approaches remain equally abstract. However, they retain a core of truth, which must be incorporated into the adequate, concrete form of a dynamically developing totality.<sup>3</sup> Here we can only locate some general points of such a theoretical reconstruction:

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2 See Alfred Schmidt's classic study: Schmidt, A. (1993). *Der Begriff der Natur in der Lehre von Marx*. Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt. For a more contemporary analysis in view of current ecological problems, see Saito, K. (2017). *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism. Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

3 General theoretical guidelines of such a reconstruction can be drawn in reference to Feenberg, A. (2014). *The Philosophy of Praxis. Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School*. Chapter three ("Metacritique of the Concept of Nature"). London, New York: Verso; Feenberg, A. (1999), "Dialektischer Konstruktivismus: Zur Aktualität von Lukács' Konzept der transformierenden Praxis". *Lukács 1998/99. Jahrbuch der Internationalen Georg-Lukács-Gesellschaft*, 3: 52-63. Specifically in view of the problems of a contemporary theory of technology, see Feenberg, A. (2020). "Critical Constructivism: An Exposition and Defence". *Logos. A Journal of Modern Society & Culture*, 19(2). In <http://logosjournal.com/2020/critical-constructivism-an-exposition-and-defense/> (Accessed 10 December 2020).



## I. Between the Natural and the Artificial

A virus is a natural organism, as is man, too. However, a virus that changes its host immediately ceases to be merely natural. Indeed, in the last few decades there has been a growing tendency towards the mutation of pathogens encountered in wild animals, in such a way as to contaminate men and spread among them. This tendency is caused by the overexploitation of the land and the shrinking of the territories, in which wild animals normally lived at a certain distance from human civilization. As a result, immediate contact between humans and animals becomes more frequent. This fact facilitates the mutation of the pathogens and the subsequent contamination of humans.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the transmission of such microorganisms to humans is as natural as the greenhouse effect or global warming. Then, SARS-CoV-2 neither represents nature's revenge for humanity's sins, nor some contingent incident, one of those that take place from time to time; the epidemic risk brought about by the occurrence of new pathogens is rather something our own technologically advanced but environmentally disastrous civilization systematically induces. Although society has not created the virus, it certainly favored the conditions for its transmission into the social reign. Be that as it may, its occurrence introduced a new element of negativity in social life, which triggered a series of social reactions.

## II. Three Models of Coping with the Crisis

Not only the virus's allegedly "sudden" or "random" occurrence, but also the further unfolding of its speedy global spread bears the seal of contemporary globalized capitalism. This similarly applies, of course, to the particular episodes and the perplexities of the efforts to tackle the crisis. Abstracting from local differences, one can schematically distinguish three basic models of coping with the health crisis, which crystallized very early on last spring.

The first is the extremely neoliberal model, which relies upon the idea of a swift, spontaneous development of "herd immunity". The argument supporting it, is as cynical as neoliberalism with its social Darwinism: If we let the pandemic develop without intervening, we will naturally have a good number of excessive deaths, mainly among the elder-

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Guillibert discusses this issue in terms of the "crossing borders" transmission of a pathogen between species. See his contribution in this volume.

ly, who are not productive and burden the social security system, and will, after all, die anyway in the near future. In this way the immunity of the remaining population will be “built”, and they will continue their productive activities without negative consequences for the economy, which obviously represents the alpha and omega of human life. This “strategy” broke down expediently, precisely because of its candid cynicism. In the UK, Boris Johnson was forced to reconsider it as early as the first wave of the pandemic, while the recent political change in the US would probably not have eventuated if it were not preceded by Donald Trump’s disastrous pandemic policy.

The second model is the one of social or statist liberalism, which combines respect for the sacred rule of multinational corporations and financial markets with state interventions for the rational/technocratic control of society over its crises. This is the German/European model, which has to pay a price, namely the adoption of non-neoliberal policies such as the buying of debts by the Central European Bank and the massive state intervention to rescue sectors of the capitalist economy harshly hit by consecutive quarantine measures. Of course, there is also an important consolation for the ruling classes, namely the temporary character of such measures that aim to stabilize the system, and the parallel use of the crisis as an “opportunity” to accelerate the process of “necessary reforms” in a neoliberal direction. A series of controls over the population, techniques of fragmentation, atomization, surveillance and flexibilization of productive and consumerist activities, which are implemented on this occasion, will leave a deep imprint on the future regulation of social relations long after the end of the pandemic. Nevertheless, even if in a distorted and inherently contradictory way, the dominant discourse is forced to propagandize the value of human life and its collective defense.

The third model of coping with the pandemic lies outside the framework of Western liberal-democratic social and political culture. It is the model of the Far East, which relies upon the central manipulation of information, intensive police and technological bio-political control over the population, central measures for avoiding the breakdown of the social and economic infrastructures and immediate mobilization of technoscience for the production of medicines and vaccines. Although reliable information is lacking, it is possible that this model temporarily shows the highest effectiveness in mitigating the immediate negative consequences of the crisis.

The inner contradictions of these three models can easily be discerned. In the first model, it is its frank cynicism that seems to meet a visible limit when the value of life is at

stake, even if this concerns mostly the lives of the elderly. The second model attempts to square the circle, namely, to take quarantine measures while retaining individual liberties and the highest possible functioning of capitalist market economy. It is no surprise that none of these goals is achieved without significant losses and defeats. Finally, the problem with the last model is the suffocating, authoritarian control of the population in a global environment that relies upon communication and exchange.

### **III. The Possibility of a New Form of Consciousness**

In an ecologically destabilized global capitalism, a natural event causes a crisis and a long series of attempts to confront it. Of course, it is no surprise that in this oppressive and exploitative social system, the social confrontation with crisis is simultaneously an attempt to restore the separations and the relevant hierarchies of a social world, the order of which has been consistently shaky during recent decades. Even if the ascertainment that the coronavirus crisis must be analyzed in the framework of the multifaceted crisis of global capitalism seems too general or abstract, it is, however, true. The question is whether this crisis hides opportunities for a change in the social consciousness and practices of the people.

A strong tendency that can be clearly discerned today is the one that leads to atomization, isolation, the crippling of collective initiatives, the uncomplaining acceptance of disciplinary measures, the unconditional recognition of scientific authority, the submission to the dominant system of power relations and the postponement of protest against any wrongs and injustices. This tendency lies in the essence of a health crisis: After all, a threat to one's life and death itself always remain strong factors of radical atomization. However, isolation is not the only dimension of our paradox situation. The first, ancient and well-tried, probably inevitable reaction of our societies was, and will continue for some time to be, the imposition of more or less strict quarantine measures. The self-evident egoistic motive to avoid risking one's life seems to render quarantine restrictions acceptable only for a short period of time. In the medium term, this trend weakens swiftly. The recent experience of fatigue with the health measures is characteristic, particularly the relative incautiousness of the younger sectors of the population, who felt less threatened by the disease. To maintain discipline the authorities had to employ strong doses of moral preaching about the need for the protection of the elderly by the younger. In fact, we have been asked to isolate ourselves in our homes, not in order to

save our own skin, but to save the more threatened older generation and to prevent the collapse of the health care system with its disastrous social repercussions.

In a society in which individual egoism prevails as a legitimate motive in all fields of everyday life, this peculiar altruism and the “cooperation” between generations represents an element of discordance. And yet, epidemiologists and officials, who produce the dominant ideological discourse in these times, found themselves obliged to daily propagandize the need for mutual understanding and cooperative action to handle the acute situation in the health systems. Politicians who secretly continue to undermine the public character of the health system are forced to applaud the “heroes in the blue scrubs” and to praise the preparedness of the same public hospitals they previously found wanting. Particularly in periphery countries, such as Greece, they are obliged to manipulate the data on the virus spread and the performance of the health system, to sing the praises of international cooperation for the production of new vaccines and medicines, etc. Finally, they are forced to take state measures to support the collapsing economies.

In the face of the pandemic disaster, politicians are pressured to occasionally implement state interventionist policies, which correspond to a developed consciousness of the need to collectively confront natural and social risks. It seems that, at least for a period of time, state intervention must substitute for the market’s invisible hand. Of course, nothing guarantees that at the end of the danger we will be unable to return to neoliberal normality. It is more likely that this is exactly what will happen. And still, the elements of another consciousness, indeed connected with intensive practical experiences, are immediately present.

Parallel to the epos of modern science we follow daily in the media, there is the experience of the acute contradiction between, on the one hand, the statistical estimation of health risks and social-economic costs by the “experts” and, on the other hand, our individual experience with the consequences of the crisis. Such individual experiences, at a time when people, jobs and businesses are being lost everywhere, dissolve the formalist overlay of the dominant discourse and open up the possibility of a new form of consciousness beyond abstract categories. It is questionable whether the usual moralization suffices to close the cracks. For example, in Greece, the right-wing government is attempting to cover its incompetency by putting the blame for its failures on the

people through continuous invocation of their “individual responsibility”. In this abstract form, this is obviously an absurd and hypocritical motto, since there is no social ethic that does not culminate in individual responsibility for its application. The true question is then, what is the concrete ethical and political content of the values we need to responsibly stand up for? This is a political question in the strongest sense of the word.

Apart from a process of becoming aware of the social and economic dimensions of the SARS-CoV-2 crisis, the possibility of a new orientation regarding the relation between society and nature has also been opened up. All indications point to a mitigation of the crisis and, possibly, its temporal end through the mass vaccination of the global population – not without conflicts and contradictions, of course, due to the great inequalities between the nations of the international community. Even if the vaccines have been produced by competing multinational pharmaceutical corporations in the wider context of the power game between major players in international politics, isn't it clear that these products are the outcome of a mass mobilization of humanity's collective intellect? And also: What else can the goal of the “eradication” of the virus be, other than our accelerated adaptation to it through an artificial bringing about of herd immunity? The suspicion arises that we may not be truly at “war”, as leaders and the mass media continually repeat, but in a process of understanding and adapting to a dynamically changing world, an essential part of which consists in ourselves and our societies. In addition to this, in the next period of time an intensified discussion can be expected on the positive environmental impact of the first significant “anthropopause”, i.e., the drastic deceleration of catastrophic human interventions into nature, imposed by the SARS-CoV-2 crisis. Exiting this unprecedented crisis must not leave our mechanistic-exploitative views about nature untouched.



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# Precarity in the Era of the Anthropocene

## Notes on the end of capitalism

*Vasilis Tsianos & Dimitris Parsanoglou*

In his analysis of the Anthropocene and capitalism, Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us that the issue of climate change does not concern only the laws of capitalist accumulation or only the crisis of global neoliberalism<sup>1</sup>. The subject of this text is the crisis of a specific capitalist model of accumulation – which is characterized as *fossil capitalism*, according to Andreas Malm’s impressive analysis<sup>2</sup> – and its consequences on the multiple facets of the world of labor in the specific circumstances of climate change, that is, on the attempt to limit or at least try to limit, the increase in the Earth’s temperature to those dangerous 2 degrees Celsius that we must not exceed.

Let us make a few introductory remarks: First, the climate change has nothing to do with the classic environmental crisis of the 1980s or with the classic political ecology that we know. The climate change has to do – as we have been discussing in social sciences and in the studies of Sciences and Technology these last years<sup>3</sup> – with a very specific model of capitalist accumulation and of its political regulation, neoliberalism, which is based on a globalized **Matrix** of capitalist dominance, which is called *extractivism*.<sup>4</sup> We owe the term, “extractivist capitalism”, to the stunning work of Naomi Klein,<sup>5</sup> inspired by the analyses of the Fracking phenomenon. Extractivism tries to connect the analysis of the climate change, soil economy, and the consequent relations of production at the global level. In essence, it tries to ponder the real limits of the transition from the existing capitalism, the existing neoliberal fossil capitalism, to a post-capitalism, which will have a symbiotic and not parasitic relation with its positive externalities, and will be *green*. At any rate, it will not be the familiar capitalism of the neoliberal *fossil capitalism*. A capitalism that is based on a perception of soil and raw materials, which are characterized by the category of *cheap land*, of cheap nature, whose limits we never need to accept

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1 Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2014), *Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories*, Critical Inquiry 41, P. 1-23.

2 Malm, Andreas (2016), *Fossil Capital. The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, Verso.

3 Papadopoulos, Dimitris (2018), *Experimental Practice. Technoscience, Alterontologies and more-than-social Movements*, Duke.

4 Mezzadra, Sandro, Neilson, Brett (2019), *The Politics of Operations. Excavating contemporary Capitalism*, Duke.

5 Klein, Naomi (2019), *On Fire. The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal*, New York.

as real, because for the capitalism of positive externalities, they simply are the preconditions for its extended planetary dominance. The outputs of this capitalism - such as water, underground streams, oil, and raw materials - are taken for granted and are not considered readily convertible to value or to values that can obtain a dynamic only within the capitalist logic. This capitalism has now reached the limits of its growth, even for the global post-neoliberal elites.

According to a series of studies of the International Network of Critical Extractivism – a network of social scientists, biologists, paleontologists, and geologists – if we wish to prevent climate change in the capitalist Anthropocene and win this battle against climate change – in relation to the 2 degrees C of increase in temperature – we must accept that 80% of raw materials worldwide that we can use, must not be used. We are not referring to the usual appeals for self-restraint in consumer behavior, but to *raw materials*. We must simply stop global capitalism's access to this 80% of *raw materials*, which must not be exploited by a perpetual extractivism.

The logic of extractivism is exactly that the dominant form of accumulation and reproduction of capitalist relations at the global level has to do with the present circumstances, where even a part of the world elites is willing to invest in the end, or in the radical deconstruction, of fossil capitalism, in the end of uncontrollable access to *raw materials* at the global level. But what does that mean for the Left? We may prove able to solve the problem of climate change. However, this will not necessarily happen on the basis of a left, post-liberal, post-capitalist hegemony, which for us is always connected with the multiple facets of the world of labor and commons.

Therefore, the first part of our contribution is about a perception, an understanding of the phenomenon of Extractivism as a crisis of the neoliberal management of accumulated capital. Our viewpoint is that as we are living under the burden of climate change in the Anthropocene, we are also living the end of neoliberal hegemony, regarding the composition of its elites: the hegemonic bourgeois elites worldwide are now abandoning the tight neoliberal “corset” of ideological hegemony in favor of a green new deal, which is registered under the hegemony of the most powerful lobbies of the green global capital, though. The special relationship between the Anthropocene and neoliberal hegemony is stunningly clear: whereas CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the beginning of industrial fossil capitalism are estimated at 1578 gigatons (Gt), more than half of them (820 Gt) have occurred since just 1989<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, of course, we see and experience

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6 Wallace-Wells, David (2019), *Die unbewohnbare Erde. Leben nach der Überwärmung*, Berlin.



the resistances of the world of fossil capitalism, in connection with illiberal forms of capitalist management regarding accumulation systems, such as in Russia, in Trump's USA, and in the Venezuelan crisis.

Maristella Svampa<sup>7</sup> uses the term *reprimarization* in order to comprehend the crisis of Extractivism under conditions of left hegemony in Latin America. In order to comprehend the defeat of the left objective at the level of relations of production, though, she actually notes that a key reason for the loss of left hegemony in Venezuela was the absolute connection between the mechanisms of accumulation and the regulation of a supposedly post-capitalist society, as Venezuelan society wanted to be, yet totally dependent on the logic of Extractivism and on the unlimited access to the *raw materials* of oil. This phenomenon can also be observed in Russia and Brazil, two countries whose social transformation is totally dependent on the logic of extraction. The upcoming green hegemony tries to find an answer to this dependence, under the paradigm we would name “symbiotic green capitalism”, a capitalism that will no longer be linked to extractivism and its unrestricted access to raw materials and their thoughtless and wasteful exploitation, that will be based on a huge policy of state investments in green technology, and that will close the issue of neoliberal hegemony at the level of political representation.

What do all these mean for the Left, though? In their latest study “Assembly” (2017), Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, in their effort to explain the present context, stated an interesting dictum that could be summed up in the following phrase: if we wish to understand the crisis of extractivism today, we must look at its relation to the global finance capital. We need to follow the money to understand and analyze the crisis of the *Extractivist model*. But if we wish to understand the horizon of resistances – and this is the aim of our contribution – within and beyond the climate change, within and beyond the neoliberal hegemony, we will have to be able to chart the multiple facets of the subjectivity of the world of labor, according to Antonio Negri. In simpler terms, his answer is the planetary space of precarity and its Commons.

Talking about the present and the future of fossil capitalism, we are in fact talking about the end of the neoliberal hegemony over labor statuses as we knew them and as we are experiencing them. Not necessarily of capitalism but, in any case, of neoliberal capitalism, of *fossil capitalism*. We should point out that any discussion about the state and

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<sup>7</sup> Svampa, Maristella (2015), *Commodities, Consensus. Neoextractivism and Enclosure of the Commons in Latin America*, in: *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 114.1, P. 65-82.

the resistances to it must bear in mind the logic of Nicos Poulantzas, who teaches that a discussion about the state, whether it is neoliberal or post-Extractivist or anything else, ought to fit in the competitive dipole between capitalist accumulation and the resistances of labor that this accumulation constantly causes. Let us also remember another of his fundamental principles, in relation to his critique of the State per se, that the horizon of capitalist accumulation is the way that the reproduction of the social relations of the economy, of the *economic*, limits or renegotiates the violence of the market, in the name of the defense of society in general. In the context of climate change, though, the objective of the defense of society in general suddenly assumes another relevance, another face, the face of the defense of the interests of the Earth and, sui generis, of the species itself.

Charting the practical utopias beyond capitalism, American sociologist Eric Wright in his important work offers us a very interesting assumption about the end of the neoliberal state and economy by setting the potentials and strategies of post-capitalist social policies, and policies in general, in a dual dynamic of the global context. On the one hand, climate change constitutes a real systemic challenge. It is not just another ideological phenomenon, and it concerns the hard core of the capitalist accumulation, being at the limits of its own growth and therefore, of its dominance within the existing coal-oil capitalism. This challenge is, and will be, tackled with a necessity of gigantic investments in alternative forms of energy and new technologies that promote the reemergence of the State, not only as a regulator of the relations between the market and the production of social goods, but also as a leading factor in production. However, this is exactly the point where the green planetary re-foundation of capitalist production entails a globalization of precarity through a gigantic elimination of jobs in the car industry and in the fossil capital, in general. One might feel that we are reliving the time of Roosevelt and the New Deal, but at the level of a green capitalist hegemony. We also owe a lot to the research of the economist Marianna Mazzucato<sup>8</sup>, who verified empirically what we always knew politically: the tendency that Eric Wright refers to<sup>9</sup>. Her position is radical, since she claims that in the USA, Great Britain, France, and Germany, the State never retreated from its regulatory presence in the markets, despite the neoliberal fairy tales, but it just shifted the burden of the cost of productive reconstruction at the expense of the world of labor. The State was based on the deregulation of social policies and, of course, on the deregulation of the policies that organize unpaid work, care work and gendered

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8 Mazzucato, M. (2013), *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Myths in Risk and Innovation*, London, Anthem Press.

9 Wright, E.O. (2010), *Envisioning Real Utopias*, London, Verso.

work. On the other hand, this very reemergence of the strategic nature of post-fossil capitalism, in order to secure accumulation in the Anthropocene, is accompanied by the challenge of managing the impacts of this productive reconstruction. Here comes the question again: what do all these mean for the Left and labor? What does a green, radical reconstruction mean under the hegemony of the green capital? According to Wright's analysis, this means intensification and total impoverishment of the world of labor at planetary level. This is the price that the world of labor will have to pay in light of the coming hegemony, the green authoritarian hegemony, not of the markets anymore, but of a state interventionism, of a New Green Deal.

## The Wondrous World of Precarity

First of all, we are talking about precarity and not precarious work because – as we will argue later on – precarity as a social condition goes beyond the narrow limits of the space-time of work. Let us put it another way: for the precarious worker, the practices, the struggles, and the states of exploitation generated within working life go far beyond the narrow limits of work, and touch multiple – if not all – aspects of the subject's social condition. Or, to put it yet another way: the work experience ceases to be a separate fragment of lived time, either as a daily parenthesis or as the hub of the space-time-social continuum of the working person's daily life. On the contrary, the work experience is interlaced – in fact, confused – with the other aspects of life in an inseparable and porous mixture, in a subalternity that stems from the diffusion of practices of social self-control and optimization. To put it a different way and to be clear from the start, we do not consider precarious work as a deviation from the Fordist rule. Conversely, we feel that if we approach work historically from a sociological – both theoretical and empirical – point of view, we will find that regulated, typical - in short, "Fordist" – work is rather the exception, whereas the atypical forms of work are the norm<sup>10</sup>. To be honest between us, what renders precarity a tool of critical appraisal of the transformations and changes that have arisen, and arise, in the post-Fordist regimes of regulation of work relationships and conditions, is its implicit negative charge. In contrast to other concepts descriptive of the post-Fordist condition - we are mostly referring to *flexibility* – that evidently have a positive, or even dynamic, meaning, precarity at a first – and often at a last – glance encapsulates the negative aspects of the same phenomenon that flexibility describes.

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10 Neilson, B. and Rossiter, N. (2008), *Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception, Theory, Culture & Society, special issue on Precarity and Cultural Work*, Vol. 25, No 7-8, pp. 51-72.

From the emergence of the first cracks in the Fordist edifice – or, for others, in the Fordist consensus – work, both for its importance and for its significance, was at the heart of a perpetual, but constantly changing, polemic. With the rise of neoliberalism, mainly in the sense of the institutionalization of insecurity in the context of an ever-expanding dominance of the market, which is specified nationally and transnationally through the general deregulation of labor laws and the welfare state,<sup>11</sup> there is a series of shifts noticed both in the market and in the nature of labor. The first shift is the increase in, and the expansion of, atypical work relationships; atypical, both in the sense of atypical forms of work (informal, moonlighting, undeclared, etc.), and in the sense of forms of work that lie outside the Fordist regulatory framework (the plethora of flexible forms of employment). In the 1990s, atypical forms of work were already gaining ground in almost all the OECD countries: in the mid-1990s, they took up 37% of total work in the UK, 30% in France. Almost 40% in Italy, more than 40% in the Netherlands, almost 50% in Japan and Australia.<sup>12</sup>

## **From Fordist “paradise” to neoliberal “terror”: or maybe not?**

First of all, the simple question raised here is: what new does precarity bring to the world of live work and the social policies that go along? Starting with the simplest things, we must point out that precarization does not necessarily mean impoverishment of workers. On the other hand, it goes beyond the simple ascertainment of deterioration in class relations against labor<sup>13</sup>. Without keeping quiet about the special exploitation regimes it encompasses, we should say that precarization constitutes a deep transformation with precarious characteristics and outcomes. However, to see what the “hell” -or “terror”, in Giroux’ terms<sup>14</sup> we have descended into is, we need to reconsider the “paradise” we left behind. If one attempts a genealogy of labor during the short history of the existing capitalism, one will find that the capitalist project, like all grand projects, never managed to fulfill its explicit and implicit declarations. In the history of labor, a first crack in the capitalist narrative is the very class composition of society on the basis of the relations

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11 Κουζής, Γ. (επιμ.) (2005), *Πολιτική απασχόλησης. Πεδίο σύζευξης της οικονομικής και της κοινωνικής πολιτικής*, Αθήνα, Gutenberg – Γώργος & Κώστας Δάρδανος.

12 Carnoy, M. and Castells, M. (2001), Globalization, the knowledge society, and the Network State: Poulantzas at the millennium, *Global networks: a journal of transnational affairs*, Vol. 1, No 1, pp. 1-18.

13 to: Trimikliniotis, N, Parsanoglou, D. and Tsianos, V.S. (2016), *Mobile Commons and/in Precarious Spaces: Mapping Migrant Struggles and Social Resistance*, *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 42, No 7-8, pp.1035-1049.

14 Giroux, H. A. (2005), *The Terror of Neoliberalism: Rethinking the Significance of Cultural Politics*, *College Literature*, Vol. 32, No 1, pp. 1-19.

of production. The issue here is not only the oft-forgotten constant that historically the working class evaded full proletarianization and mostly related its reproduction only *partly* to its work,<sup>15</sup> but, even more so, it is that work itself and the relations stemming from it were much less typical than what we often believe. In other words, if one wanted to describe the typical form of work in every historical phase of development, one would probably need to swim in an ocean of atypical forms without a theoretical lifebuoy. To put it very simply: what we discuss so passionately (either in fear and abhorrence or in rage and hope), is not but the historical horizon, the specific lifespan of neoliberalism. In this context, by studying precarity as a simple reflection of the deregulation of the labor market, one cannot resolve the theoretical problems raised by the historical development of the relations of production, and – as a social subject, now – cannot overcome the political and organizational problems stemming from the renegotiation of the terms of composition and reproduction of live work. *Precarity resets the terms of composition and reproduction of live work only within neoliberal hegemony, but simultaneously within the crisis of dystopian neoliberalism in the Anthropocene.* At this point, we cannot but follow the reasoning and proposals of all those who have sought and given prominence to the complexity and multiplicity of the various forms of the social composition of live work. As pointed out by Gibson-Graham,<sup>16</sup> “the work that material prosperity is based on is performed in many different contexts and is remunerated in many different ways (...). The most dominant form of labor on a global scale is the *unpaid* work produced within the household, the family, and the neighborhood or the wider community”. Apart from unpaid work, though, which has been highlighted by the feminist critique for decades and enriched by post-colonial studies, and from which one may escape by placing it in an intermediate/indirect sphere of extraction of surplus value, paid work also seems to present serious difficulties of definition. The reason for this is not only that wage labor assumes various forms, depending on the power of the various social groups that negotiate the structure of work relationships. For instance, wage labor is performed by high executives and other employees that possess remarkable bargaining power mainly through their trade union (this rings a bell!), as well as by an increasing number of wage earners who lack protection or/and have no other way than individual bargaining. However, another part of live work is the one that does not fall into the usual picture of wage labor, and of the worker who does not possess any means of production, but sells his/her labor force for a price that will allow him/her and their dependents to make a living. These historically significant forms of paid labor are different from the typical capitalist wage labor.

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15 Immanuel Wallerstein (1983): *Historical Capitalism*, Verso, London.

16 Gibson-Graham, J. K. (2006), *A postcapitalist politics*, Minneapolis / London, University of Minnesota Press.

LABOR	COMPENSATION
<p>UNPAID</p> <p>Housework</p> <p>Family care</p> <p>Neighborhood work</p> <p>Volunteer</p> <p>Self-provisioning labor</p> <p>Slave labor</p>	<p>Nonmonetary</p> <p>Nonmonetary</p> <p>Nonmonetary</p> <p>Nonmonetary</p> <p>Food and other goods</p> <p>Food and lodging</p>
<p>WAGE LABOR</p> <p>Salaried</p> <p>Unionized</p> <p>Nonunionized</p> <p>Part time</p> <p>Temporary</p> <p>Seasonal</p> <p>Familial</p>	<p>Negotiated salary + benefits</p> <p>Protected wage + benefits</p> <p>Unprotected</p> <p>Un/Protected wage</p> <p>Unprotected</p> <p>Unprotected</p> <p>Personally set wage</p>
<p>ALTERNATIVE PAID</p> <p>Self-employed</p> <p>Cooperative</p> <p>Indentured</p> <p>Reciprocal labor</p> <p>In-kind</p> <p>Work for welfare</p>	<p>Living expenses + savings</p> <p>Cooperative wage + share</p> <p>Food, lodging, and stipend</p> <p>Reciprocated labor</p> <p>In-kind payment</p> <p>Dole payment</p>

Gibson-Graham (2006: 63)

We do not invoke all these alternative forms of labor that relativize the importance of the position of the typical wage work relationship in the global economy only as a sort of historical restoration of the honor of all those who do not register clearly in the files and records of the historical-social subject called *working class*. The critique of “capitalocentrism” and “capitalonormativity”, apart from being theoretically and empirically correct – since it does not hesitate to contend against the identification of Economy with Capitalism and the synecdochical convenience of the dipole “precapitalist-capitalist”, where whatever constitutes an alternative to the capitalist dominance cannot, but, be seen as a vestige of traditional precapitalist structures, highlighting the openness, multiplicity and diversity of economic relations and identities – is also potentially emancipatory since it raises again the issue of liberation from the chains of the relations of production and exchange in the real present, and not in a remote and unknown future.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Gibson-Graham, J. K., Resnick, S. A. and Wolff, R. D. (2000), “Introduction: Class in a Poststructuralist Frame”, in Gibson-Graham, J. K., Resnick, S. A. and Wolff, R. D. (eds.), *Class and its others*, Minneapolis / London, University of Minnesota Press, pp. 1-22.

This is the political ecology of the Commons.

In this context of revenge of the multiplicity and diversity of real work relationships against the Fordist or capitalist regularity, there is a number of political effects. As put forth by the aforementioned authors (Gibson-Graham 2006: 65), first, there is an expansion of the access to economic identities that fall outside the limited scope of valorized identities, such as employer, employee, and entrepreneur. Moreover, attention is drawn to the different degrees of freedom that workers have to negotiate the amount they receive as a payment and their working conditions, without neglect or concealment of the structural limitations, or of the inequality in the relations between capital and labor. On the other hand, of course, precarity is linked to the reinforcement of existing exploitation regimes and the emergence of new ones, which urge a radical theoretical, but also political, renegotiation of the terms of the unfolding struggles around labor. First of all, we must reexamine the prevalent form of class policies, which, since the Fordist parenthesis, has been haunting the past and the present of social conflict within the capitalist mode of production, but also the capitalist mode of social and physical presence of the subjects in the form “social state”. In other words, we must put it bluntly that the picture that we have of social conflict as a dispute-negotiation-compromise, etc., between employees, employers and (perhaps, somewhere more, somewhere less) the state constitutes an elliptical space-time parenthesis that is now fading dangerously, both in the countries of post-memorandum regulations of work relationships and in the developed world of neoliberalism, in general. The internal control relationship that in the Fordist historical compromise linked the subject to labor, social, and civil rights, delegitimizing the worlds of non-labor, both in value and in discipline, has forever broken down<sup>18</sup>. The painful *condition humana* of the “precariat”, the metropolitan multitude of precarity, is its rightful discredit. However, it is precisely this discredit that generalizes not only a regime of controlled impoverishment, but also a regulatory gap. Because what is not representable, not countable, inconceivable, is also uncontrollable. The labor struggles of precarious workers usually take place outside the workplace, redefining and diffusing the bounds of labor, space and time (not like communicating vessels) in the whole of society. Precarity raises the issue of the extended reproduction of the labor force in more general terms, far beyond the social wage in the context of a Fordist, or even neoliberal regulation, e.g. the accommodation movements in Israel, the demands of the “intermittents” in France, home workers internationally, the post-feminist biosyndicalists “Precarias a la deriva” (Precarious Women Workers) in Madrid and Malaga, the Chain-

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18 Papadopoulos, D., Stephenson, N. and Tsianos, V. (2008), *Escape Routes, Control and subversion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London, Pluto Press.

workers in Milan and Venice, the “Intermittents du spectacle” (Occasional workers in entertainment) in Paris and Strasburg, etc.

Until recently, the expression “I have no time” brought to mind a reproach against any form of apolitical anchoritism. It was an emblematic phrase for non-ideologized forms of non-participation. But through Paolo Virno<sup>19</sup>, we know that the disposition of the multitude interacts with the inevitable opportunism of freelancers. In the phrase “I have no time”, we read an explosive ambiguity that could become political: it expresses the embodied experience of precarious work from a capitalist perspective. The accumulation of capital today does not simply focus on the exploitation of the labor force in the present time<sup>20</sup>. The general precarity of work is linked to an accumulation regime that exploits the labor force of lifelong freelancers, in a way that they have to activate reserves from their future (which is not, and will never be, protected) in their working present. This primarily concerns health issues, family planning, and unprotected extra work. We all know what it means to overload your credit card in order to complete the project for which you have not been paid yet. However, “I have no time”, on the other side of the subjectivity of precarious work, also means the objective limit of the, in advance robbery of live work, something like the phrases “I have no change” or “I’m not paying”<sup>21</sup>. “I have no time”, though, is paradoxically also the death rattle of climatic dystopia in the Anthropocene, ground zero of the apocalyptic encounter of the in advance robbery of live work with the planetary bounds of extractivism in the Capitalocene. In the stunning study “The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibilities of Life in Capitalist Ruins” by Anna Tsing<sup>22</sup>, one can see the other face of extractivism, and indeed from the viewpoint of the transnational geography of precarity and commons. Matsutake is the name of a mushroom species that first appeared in the ruins of Hiroshima after the atomic catastrophe. Today, though, Matsutake is an emblematic experiment of a transnationally networked and collectively organized peer-to-peer market of marginalized and precarious work in the ruins of industrial capitalism.

Let us return, though, to the assumption about the present and the future of Erik Wright’s post-capitalist politics: the reemergence of the state’s leading role and of the New Green

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19 Paolo Virno (2004): *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, Semiotext(e), MIT Press, Cambridge US.

20 Tsianos, V. S. and Papadopoulos, D. (2015), DIWY! Precarity in Embodied Capitalism, in A. Dimitrakaki and K. Lloyd (eds.), *Economy. Art, Production and the Subject in the 21st Century*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, pp. 112-134.

21 Tsianos, V. and Kuster, B. (2011), *Experiences Without Me, or, the Uncanny Grin of Precarity*, in G. Raunig, G. Ray and U. Wuggenig (eds.), *Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the ‘Creative Industries’*, London, May Fly Books, pp. 91-100.

22 Tsing, Anna (2015) “The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibilities of Life in Capitalist Ruins“, Princeton University Press



Deal with the globalization of the challenge of precarity, i.e., its structural exclusion, creates a privileged space of politicization and hybridization of the reproduction mechanisms, i.e., the politics of symbiogenesis against the politics of the market<sup>23,24</sup>. Once it was the gender division of private and public space, industrialized production and home “activity”, native and alien labor that structured the experienced forms of extended reproduction of the relations of production and of the forms of social policies that stemmed from them. Now, in conditions of precarious work and life, these divisions are diffused in the whole body of society, turning it into a huge laboratory of mixed forms of labor and non-labor, into a shooting range for alternative, experimental, resilient and precarious planetary forms of justice and resistance, for the great disobedience that will come back.

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23 Tsianos, V. S. (2016), *After Real Democracy: On the Sociology of ‘Social Non-Movements’ and Assemblies*, in A. Oberprantacher and A. Siclodi (eds.), *Subjectivation in Political Theory and Contemporary Practices*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 219-236.

24 Tsianos, V., Papadopoulos, D. and Stephenson, N. (2012), *This is class war from above and they are winning it. What is to be done?* Escape routes Symposium, *Rethinking Marxism. A journal of economics, Culture & society*, Vol. 24, No 3, pp. 448-457.



# **NEGATIVITY IN HISTORY AND LEFT POLITICS: SEPARATIONS, UNIVERSALS, UTOPIAS**





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# Dark times, the psychoanalytic concept of negativity and the opening of possibilities

Tania Vosniadou

**W**hen we talk about dark times, we usually associate this with a predominance of destructiveness, of violence that is expressed, either directly or indirectly, and spreads throughout the human scale. We live in an age where destructiveness is becoming more and more pronounced and culminates in the destruction of the environment and the devastation of the most vulnerable social groups.

For my part, I will try to think of destructiveness in the context of psychoanalytic theory. Not, however, the one that is exclusively limited to clinical practice, but the one that, including Freud himself, attempted to make it part of a theory of the human, in general, that is, of a social theory.

My guide in this research will be, first of all, Nathalie Zaltzman, a French Jewish psychoanalyst (1933-2009) who worked in the fertile mid-20th century, inspired by Freud, Lacan, Piera Aulagnier and other psychoanalysts, but also by socio-political thinkers such as Maurice Blansot, Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt and others.

Zaltzman's work is based on her clinical practice, but her concern is always how to go beyond the individual and think about the human condition, subverting some notions of psychoanalytic theory that had been used in a univocal way that left no room for further processing.

One of these concepts, on which Z worked extensively, is the famous death drive. Death drive in psychoanalytic theory is the opening that Freud made in his theory in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) to comprehend those psychopathological organizations that do not belong exclusively to the dipole pleasure-displeasure. Freud attributed to this drive a tendency of psychic life to return to the inorganic state, and, with many reservations on his part as well as strong reactions from the psychoanalytic community, established it as an autonomous principle, distinct from aggression and its consequent destructiveness, as a principle with endogenous character and special economic substance. I emphasize that Freud's death drive is different from the aggressive drive as

a will for power, as a will to dominate, which is intertwined with the pleasure principle and the love drive, and which is partly orientated to the outside world while another part of it turns aggression intrapsychically. The characteristics of the action of the death drive, according to Freud, are the tendency towards destructiveness, the reduction of mental tension to zero, and the compulsion to repeat. It is important to keep in mind that the love drives tend towards union, multiplication and reproduction, while the death drives tend towards separation, differentiation, and dissolution. In modern psychoanalytic practice the intrapsychic action of death drives has been understood as constantly intertwined with the love drives in a process of mixing and de-mixing, connecting and disconnecting, in ways more complex than in the Freudian model.

The action of the death drives is depicted in psychoanalytic theory with the term negative or negativity, a concept different from Hegelian negativity, although not necessarily unrelated to it. If negativity in Hegel signals a radical break-up of the ego in order to think for itself, in psychoanalytic theory this break-up exists equally radically as the beginning of the psychic organ, first between the unconscious and conscious parts of it as well as its complex entanglement of love and death drives. Unconscious negativity lies to a large extent in the denial of recognition of difference, of separation, of death, of any concept of limitation. Thus, the famous psychoanalytic therapy (the Cure) lies largely in the recognition of this denial and the inclusion of limitation based on the reality principle. My presentation will be divided into three parts: In the first, I will mainly refer to Zaltzman's work. In the second, I will try to pose some questions about the possibilities given to us to explore what we could draw from negativity and the primary mental process in general, in the times we live in today. And in the third, I will try to make some connections between psychoanalytic theory and some philosophical views and more specifically, the work of Jean-Luc Nancy in his book entitled *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative* (2002).

My concern is to show through this search some different ways of understanding certain concepts that have been given to us in order to illuminate phenomena of mental and social life that seem to lead to dead ends.

In her last book with the title *The Spirit of Evil*, published in French in 2007 and in Greek (Το πνεύμα του κακού) in 2018, Nathalie Zaltzman attempts a survey of her many years of creative and highly subversive work on the human psyche. It begins with an important distinction between the terms civilization and culture that are often used indiscriminately. She starts from Freud's emblematic work *Civilization and its Discontents* of 1929 and

without questioning the excellent analysis made of the negative effects of the cultural process in order to transform what Freud calls “the make up of the human soul”, she wonders whether Freud would have reached the same conclusions if he had then used the concept he introduced in 1933 with the term work of culture.<sup>1</sup> With this term that Freud uses to describe both the processes of taming the needs of the individual and the cultural ideals and delusions, as well as the inner dynamics of the work of culture, the author identifies the work of culture as a process of intrapsychic and transindividual processing of life experience that transforms the individual development, and at the same time, the evolution of the human collective.

Zaltzman distinguishes the cultural process as a process aimed at preserving the collective, with or without care for individual interests. Societies and civilization ensure their existence through the enforcement of prohibitions and commandments, while acting at the same time, at best, as guardians and regulators of these prohibitions. Repression, at least according to Freud in his earlier writings, is their outcome and ally. Prohibitions also shape the formation of parts of the Ego and to a great extent of the Superego. But the psychoanalytic process that has as its main goal to become Ego where Id was, is a complex process whose aim is to extend the Ego over the unfamiliar areas of the Id.

This extension, says Z, which takes place at the level of culture, is always infringing in character, as it is always achieved “in violation of the prohibitions of thinking, destroying delusions, subverting the organization of the reference points that one considered as vital up until that moment”.<sup>2</sup> Civilization, on the other hand, transmits by preserving – or, at least, it attempts to do so. It is intertwined with the civilized sexual morality and also, with the nervous disease. It depends on the resignation from the drives to which Freud assigns so much cultural value. A psychoanalysis may consist of transforming the most unique elements of an unconscious idiom into a language understood by the collective, but at the same time, being open to fragmentations, disconnections, deconstruction of certainties and delusions, psychoanalysis and the work of culture that attempts, does not harmonize with civilization and is not dear to it, says Zaltzman.

Through the precepts of ethics, which are transferred to the individual psyche through the Superego, civilization creates structures and ideals that may be effective, but as history has shown, cannot withstand the return of a psychological truth that they cannot

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1 Freud, S. (1979). *The Dissection of the Psychical Personality*, Lecture 31. In *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. 88. Pelican Books.

2 Zaltzman, N. (2018). *Το πνεύμα του κακού*. 54. Νησιδες.

transform, to the degree that they deny it. Zaltzman, thus, undertakes the task to investigate how the work of culture deals with the mental dimension of evil.

I do not have the time to refer in detail to the excellent analysis that Zaltzman makes in her investigation. I will use only those elements of it that are necessary for the purposes of this presentation. Z, drawing from William Golding's novel *The Lord of the Flies* (1954), shows that the creation of a totem can occur in the present, in conditions that do not differ historically from those of 20th-century totalitarianisms established from within, or as a consequence to outside dictates and against their will, from the most civilized societies of the western world. The novel, according to Zaltzman, eloquently demonstrates the progressive spread of a collective, of a cultural regression, which transforms a group of well-educated children of good society who have been shipwrecked on an island, in a mob of undifferentiated individuals, driven by the desire to kill and the enjoyment of murder. The children are divided into two groups, one of which attempts to live and survive through reason and all the conquests of civilization it holds, such as law and order, while the other promotes impulsive action and murder, and it ultimately prevails. According to Zaltzman, what we have here is a regression to primitive mental activity which, however, does not have the characteristics of a primary horde, as here the unique will of a father is absent. When a culture disintegrates due to a powerful blow from within or outside, it does not simply return to barbarism. It establishes a new social organization: a horde but without a father, a totemic tribe but without taboos, the activation of hatred but without ambivalence. It is a regression either on the individual or on the collective level that does not reconstitute an earlier organization, but establishes a social neo-formation or a neurotic or a psychotic organization in individuals. This regression can also be understood not only in terms of hominization, which reflects the evolution of sexual libido, but also in terms of humanization - a less used concept - which reflects the evolution of narcissistic libido/ ego libido.

If we consider the novel *The Lord of the Flies* (Ο άρχοντας των μυγών, 2016)<sup>3</sup> as the narrative of a cultural regression, it becomes obvious that the emergence of the barbarities of the 20<sup>th</sup>, but also of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is characterized by a manifestation of unbridled impulsive satisfactions, but mainly by a regression of individual and collective egos. The Individual narcissistic libido then tends to become undifferentiated in favour of a collective narcissistic spread, which Freud invokes as the “common substance” of mass psychology.

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3 Golding, W. (2016). *Ο άρχοντας των μυγών*. Αθήνα: Καστανιώτης.



This new organization that emerges from this double regression results in the emergence of an unprecedented collective form of identification, Zaltzman argues, which is accountable for organizing a type of society also unprecedented. And this form is a demonic form where “the spirit of evil appears in its first positivity, in its equivalence with death and murder, and not in relation to a (supposedly primary) benevolent ancestral deity.”<sup>4</sup> This notion of a primordial demonic element, unable to be transformed by the work of culture is what Zaltzman investigates and questions, examining it in the light of the collective within the individual, in the light of the notion of the human, in the light of the notion of progress and ultimately, in the light of the conquests of the human spirit, which has not, in the end, differentiated its relation to evil. She also examines it in the light of the concept of crimes against humanity, which first appeared as a legal concept in 1945, but which, while embracing all of humanity as enduring evil, it calls criminal acts inhumane, as if those who cause them do not belong to humans. And finally, she examines evil in its positive contribution, “in its function as a stimulus to thought, as a source of inspiration, as a trigger for the function of culture.”<sup>5</sup> To conclude that the work of culture has not progressed beyond the oedipal evolution but is based on prohibitions, repression, and a sanctification of the contents of the resulting consciousness. But it has been shown that it has failed to make sense of what is always redundant as a hybrid form of evil which, as it is never named in its cosmic dimensions, perhaps as meaninglessness or as chaos, manages to penetrate even among the most refined secondary processes. In the end, Zaltzman concludes, “the work of culture is this deep inner knowledge. It is not enough for individuals to know it one by one. It also needs humanity, the one that cleanses itself by sanctifying itself, to achieve the deep inner dimension of evil within itself”.<sup>6</sup>

I would now like to move on to the second part of my presentation, on the importance of the primary psychic process, which, according to psychoanalytic theory, needs to be repressed and give its place to the secondary psychic process, which has incorporated the prohibitions, boundaries, and positions of individuals in the social reality in which they live.

Zaltzman, by claiming that the work of culture has not gone beyond oedipal evolution, means that culture and civilization are still bound by the prohibitions imposed by civilization and by the idealization of the social forms and structures that emerge through

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4 Zaltzman 2018, *Ibid* 72.

5 *Ibid* 144.

6 *Ibid* 165.

these prohibitions. These formations are embodied within the social institutions that define the form of social groups, the positions of races, genders, ages, classes, and so on/etc., and the moral values that determine their function. At the intrapsychic level, at least according to theory, these positions are formed, as I have already mentioned, with the passage to language and the solution of the oedipal complex.

The question I would like to ask is the following: What are the implications for the constitution of these positions in the times we live in? - and I am referring mainly to what we call modernity and late modernity - where important social institutions as handed down to us - and here, I will refer to the institution of the family - are shaken or even subverted? What then, are the processes that govern psychic function, if these positions are changed in ways that are ostensibly without rules, without the certainties promised by the oedipal narrative?

In an intergenerational survey I conducted in the 1990s,<sup>7</sup> investigating the identifications of bourgeois women in post-war Greece, during which time positions and gender relations began to change rapidly, I had the opportunity to observe an interesting development in the identificatory processes of those women. This development highlights, amongst others, a transition from the fragile certainty of gender identity to the flexible uncertainty of conflicting and contradictory identifications. This transition transpires in the course of generations through a continuous interaction of reality and fantasy, and takes place mainly in the context of the primary process. To the extent that, due to social changes, parental figures cease to be self-evident and necessary models of identifications, secondary identifications remain pending and unresolved. In this case, imagination undertakes to interpret and shape what at the institutional level begins to be challenged and shaken, such as the hierarchical settlement of gender difference and the values, positions and roles that result from it. Good and evil, right and wrong are inevitably alternated and redefined through identificatory processes. The identification positions that emerge, then, do not vertically separate neither right and wrong, neither good and evil, neither the superior nor the inferior. On the contrary, these positions become interchangeable within the subjects, while - and with the full cost of uncertainty - they lead to the negotiation of various identificatory versions. In this process, ambivalent conflicts become dominant. In the psychoanalytic literature, female ambivalence plays a mostly negative role, as it is viewed from the perspective of gender polarization and is

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<sup>7</sup> Vosniadou, T. (2009). *From Demanding Emancipation to Negotiating Autonomy*. In *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, (7), 40 - 47.; Βοσνιάδου, Τ. (2012). Χαρτογραφώντας μια γενεαλογία: η περίπτωση μιας κλινικής κοινωνικής έρευνας εκ των υστέρων. *Στο Εκ των Υστέρων*, Πλέθρον (23), 137 - 150.

the emotional foundation that keeps women constantly oscillating between their desire and compliance with their inferiority. In my work, on the other hand, I have seen ambivalence as the emotional foundation that helps women negotiate their desire between self-regulation and assertiveness. In this case, the processing of ambivalence, unconscious at first, becomes the main axis of processing complexity and difference and gradually brings women face to face with their love and their hatred, with the demands and prohibitions, as well as their often-subversive desires. Through enduring confusion, conflicts and losses, they gradually learn to become autonomous as subjects, becoming authentic subjects in-process, as Julia Kristeva would say.

I gave you a small example of how we could think and differentiate concepts that mostly have negative connotations. In the case of psychoanalytic theory, concepts such as ambivalence or the primary process need to be renegotiated if we are to bring the negativity that defines them to the foreground, and see how we can use them in the context of the work of culture.

Another example is the anarchist drive of Z. In her 1979 homonymous article, Z attempts to explore the contradictions and paradoxes of the death drives as they appear in her clinical work in certain cases of people that she calls borderline. By this term, Z means those cases in which the psychic dimension of survival, the urgent need of some people to demonstrate that they live by exposing themselves to death, exceeds respect of biological reality. In these cases, we cannot talk about the function of love drives that are connected to desire. Here, we are faced with a problematic of need in which there cannot be separation nor the process of mourning. The subject is trapped in the realm of need from which they try to break free, either by breaking alienating bonds with the other, cutting pieces of their own flesh, sacrificing whole pieces of their psyche, sabotaging their creativity, performance and skills, resorting to substances, deadly relationships and behaviours.

And yet, these manifestations of the death drive are not always morbid. Sometimes they become necessary in order for individuals or groups to disconnect from dead-end or highly oppressive libidinal bonds or conditions in which deadly regimes, or deadly living or/and environmental conditions prevail. Then, according to Z, following the steps of death, “attributing to the death drives the forms of psychic life that suit them, ceasing to reduce them to the negative of libidinal, sexual and narcissistic drives, we acquire ways of opening up the therapeutic dead ends”.<sup>8</sup> Borderline experience occurs whenever ev-

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<sup>8</sup> Zaltzman, N. (2019). *Η αναρχική ενόρμηση*. 118. Αθήνα: Εστία.

ery notion of established identity collapses. The anarchist drive seeks to open up a life solution when a critical situation is closing in on a person and condemns them to death. As the Greek psychoanalyst G. Stefanatos eloquently puts it: “Misfits, marginalized, homeless, nomads, psychopaths, people with self-destructive behaviour, people constantly at risk, anorexics, bulimics, substance-dependent people, with deadly behaviours or relationships are those that hide the pain of their existence behind a multifaceted, self-destructive outer shell”.<sup>9</sup> The courtship with death that leads some of them, however, to become great explorers or pioneering scientists and artists, or the indifference for real death are risky “anarchist” protests, loud demands for survival. Their motto seems to be detachment from destructiveness based on its power.

At this point, I would like to share a question with you: How many people today are forced to resort to lifestyles in which the anarchist drive prevails, in environments where the dominion of violence and coercion or indifference offers no other escape? Or, again, as I pointed out in my previous example, when institutions and systems of thought collapse, leaving people and societies vulnerable, exposed to internal negativity and external violence. Would we perhaps need to make some distinctions regarding the destructiveness or the violence we often talk about indiscriminately? Should we perhaps distinguish the violence that comes from the tendencies of domination and enforcement from the violence that results from uprisings and assertions led perhaps by the anarchist drive? Perhaps, as Z claims, wouldn't it be necessary first to achieve the lifting of the denial of death and of the evil connected with it in our thought?

And this brings me to the last part of this presentation. It is becoming increasingly obvious that in the era we live in, individuals and societies and, of course, in different degrees, we are all faced with our vulnerability and the psychic pain that comes along. This pain is an affect, which carries along intense feelings of hatred and envy that break from repression. The rupture of the notion of a homogeneous identity, orchestrated in part by globalized capitalism, which exploits it to its advantage, brings about the confusion of desire and need, and pushes individuals into immediate reactions and discharges.

In the psychoanalytic context, what emerges in the last decades is the necessity, but also the process of an opening in the clinical field, in which the classical discrimination between analyst and analysand, in terms of authority, gives space to a place where two subjects meet, taking as a main and basic consideration the vulnerability of both. In those borderline cases, language is not always sufficient for any integration, we are,

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<sup>9</sup> Zaltzman 2019, *Ibid* 31.

rather, faced with realms beyond speech or reason, or any concept of collective reality. It is definitely a very difficult, complex and controversial investigation. However, these issues do not only concern the psychoanalytic community. Reading Jean-Luc Nancy's book *The Restlessness of the Negative* (2002), I found that he also writes about the need to open up a space in our thinking about the common, or of being together, which he calls pre-political. The moment, he claims, the authority reveals what it hides, i.e., a proto-political gap that is nothing more than our mere exposure to the other, the poverty of the content of this gap becomes apparent. It becomes obvious that this is an absolute opening to the other, beyond the relations of power, a space that it is presupposed for them to exist, as well. This poverty does not pose any challenge, it does not cause any desire. Having nothing to offer, it only offers itself. It is the only resistance to any appropriation and consequently, to any violence or authority. This place is not yet the other. It is the minimum opening where the other will come or will not come.

I have tried to identify some possibilities that could perhaps serve as examples in order to think differently about the negativity that defines our time. I am of the opinion that a Left, that stands by what it represents today, should be able to deconstruct mythological constructions, even when they are part of its own flesh. After all, it is a product of the times we live in. It has to deal with, and work through, the certainties that plague our time on multiple levels, as well as their fragility and reveal the deep uncertainty that characterizes, more and more, the human experience. It should give space to the vulnerable wherever they come from. First of all, it should recognize its own ideological obsessions and prejudices and indeed, as Zaltzman would say, the "evil" within it. I believe that there can be no "moral privilege" of the left if it is not able to reflect on these matters through its participation in social events, both within its structures and institutional frameworks but mainly, in every local or international movement process. The word domination is problematic in my opinion, in the context of today's thinking of the Left. What is urgent is that it will think and act in such a way as to allow the opening of places where others may or may not come, as Nancy would say.

We encounter each other in secret. This encounter takes place as a "just between-us".<sup>10</sup>

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10 Nancy, J-L. (2002). *Hegel, The Restlessness of the Negative*.79. University of Minnesota Press. "So beats the passage of sense: as the interval of time, between us, in the fleeting and rhythmic awakening of a discrete recognition of existence."



# Im-possible temporalities: Left theory in critical times

*Athena Athanasiou*

## I. Brushing history against the grain

In this text, I would like to think through the temporality of left theory in the midst of what Walter Benjamin called the “critical state of the present”. I would like to ask what it means for left theory to think through, and politically engage, the present in critical times. In other words: my concern is how the embodied situatedness that emerges from contemporalities of ongoing crises maps out trails of criticality through which alternative imaginaries are potentially put forward to trouble the givenness of the present. In order to address this incalculability that haunts the critical possibility of left theory, I attend to the question how the contingencies of weariness and injustice are taken up as situated knowledges of courage, critical responsiveness, and political worldmaking in multiform geographies and temporalities that underwrite the global present.

The “im-possible” in my title seeks to convey the aporia between the impossible and the absolutely necessary. I invoke left theory and politics as arts of the im-possible (where the *im-* does not denote just negative, but rather the possible-impossible dialectics). In arguing for a redefinition of the possible that runs counter to the infamous cornerstone of *Realpolitik*-attributed to Chancellor Otto von Bismarck-that “politics is the art of the possible,” I propose that instead of treating the interminable question of the capacity to act in terms of “possible vs. impossible” we address the irreducible modality of “im-possibility” as one that requires “a new thinking of the possible.”<sup>1</sup> The figure of the “to-come”, for Jacques Derrida, signals the register of the event as the unanticipated, unhomely coming of the other. “If all that arises is what is already possible, and so capable of being anticipated and expected,” he writes, “that is not an event. The event is possible only coming from the impossible.”<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the *im*-possible does not

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1 Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 91.

2 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006) p. 74.

simply denote the opposite of the possible, but rather “introduces into the possible.”<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the border figure of the to-come involves a mode of becoming that calls into being an urgency for justice. It is marked by a here and now that cannot wait. As a way of taking a critical stand in the present, the yet-to-come might become an occasion for reflecting on what it means to resist (in) the present, in the here and now, during increasingly precarious times, amid a sense of normalized injustice, all the while enacting resistant practices of critically attending to the historical present as organized by racial capitalism, border securitization, and market accumulation.

As Janet Roitman writes so aptly: “Crisis is an omnipresent sign in almost all forms of narrative today; it is mobilized as the defining category of our contemporary situation.” Considering how the term “crisis” becomes a “pervasive qualifier of contemporary historical conditions”, Roitman reminds us that this term is “ultimately a signifier for contingency” and thus might operate as a register for an awareness that “the world could be otherwise”.<sup>4</sup>

This perspective of “times of crisis” prompts us to attend to the relevance of epistemologies of criticality –as both crisis and critique- in relation to power/knowledge underpinning the interlocking politics of time and politics of location. It prompts us to consider how the temporal normativity of late capitalism, as it is paradigmatically manifested in the self-managed realism of austerity metrics and market pressures, creates an imperative for its subjects to commit themselves to a future of privatized, self-possessed, and deregulated individuality. Taking “crisis” as a signifier of contingency would require asking how the critical potential of crisis as criticality might offer an opportunity to reconfigure bodily, affective, fantasmatic, and political possibility beyond the temporal normativity of late capitalism. What possibilities for a reframing of the living present might then be recuperated from current and ongoing to struggles for social justice? These questions echo Walter Benjamin’s conception of a “now-time”, dialectically loaded with revolutionary potential drawn on remembering and reclaiming an oppressed or effaced past in the present.<sup>5</sup> They also involve tracing this potential in the radical re-articulation of the present as an indeterminable resource for collective

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3 Ibid., p. 90.

4 Janet Roitman, “Crisis”, in *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*. <https://www.politicalconcepts.org/roitman-crisis/>

5 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History. In *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn, 253–264 (New York: Harcourt, Bracs & World, 1968).



resistance to—and an agonistic alteration of—ongoing conditions of white supremacy, occupation, precarization, sexism, and neoliberal economic and political destitution.

The radical re-articulation of the living present as a site of catastrophe and a resource for transformative potential demands an account of time, which “brushes history against the grain” (Benjamin’s thesis 7). Benjamin’s concept of now-time [*Jetztzeit*] or present moment, a term first used in “The Work of Art” and then in “The Concept of History”, indicates a non-linear, non-sequential articulation of “now” and “then”. It is not to be reduced to a mere present era, but it rather denotes time detached from the sovereign empty time and energized with possibility. It opens up to the future in ways that correspond to Benjamin’s account of the angel of history, which poses the backward-looking perspective of criticality as a way of addressing past injustices and acknowledging their victims. In Benjamin’s reading of Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus” in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1936), the angel of history is going into the future facing backward. Let’s recall thesis 9:

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (15).

The angel of history in Benjamin’s poetics of history-making indicates a movement with no direction and no anticipation, a movement that does not allow us to see or to know where we are going. We are propelled by the storm of time into the future with our faces turned toward the oppressed past, while debris is piling up at our feet. For Benjamin this backward turning around is about rearranging history through defending a history of the victims and the defeated. It has to do with acknowledging how the temporal space of history resides in its non-actualized and missed possibilities.

Benjamin seeks to dislodge the present from its linear and homogeneous continuity

to the future. To redeem and re-present the potency of the suppressed past and its non-actualized possibilities arising in ruins, it is necessary to break with the victorious march of homogeneous time; it is necessary to put a brake on the runaway train of a history saturated with ruling class injustices and accumulating oppression. He writes: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency break” (Thesis 17a). This activating of the emergency break is a revolutionary activity. And it is only from this messianic moment that dialectical hope and potential can emerge. “Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.” Benjamin’s concern to struggle against fascism is intimately connected with a commitment to “bring the present into a critical state.”<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida’s “messianicity without messianism” resonates with Benjamin’s thought in this. He writes: “Anything but Utopian, messianicity mandates that we interrupt the ordinary course of things, time and history here-now; it is inseparable from an affirmation of otherness and justice.”<sup>7</sup>

## II. Troubling the banality of the present

It has become commonplace for mainstream analysts of the neoliberal and neoconservative right to argue that any attempt to change our present social milieu of injustice and inequality is utopian, and by “utopian” they mean naïve, impractical, impossible. On the other hand, the notion of utopia, as it has been historically imbricated in colonialist, imperialist, and nationalist projects, is often posited in essentialist terms, as a means of attaining all-encompassing ideals of a “true,” “newly-founded,” and “well-ordered” society. In response to this conundrum, I would like to argue for a rethinking of the ambiguities of utopia, defined not as an achieved or achievable essence that “takes place” under conditions of power-free timelessness, but rather as an ongoing resistance to the foreclosures of present temporality; in other words, as a contingent figure of critical performativity instead of a prescribed enterprise of essentialist unity. The question, then, becomes in what ways could left critical epistemologies induce

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6 Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, Konvoluts N15,2 and N7a, pp. 481 and 471.

7 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 248-9.

radical democratic possibilities for equality and justice, despite and against the authoritarian neoliberal doctrine “there is no alternative”, and its transformation into a normalizing paradigm of governance and self-governance that constitutes the dominant present as the only possibility. To phrase it differently, in what ways might left critical epistemologies induce and engage antifascist, anticapitalist and radical democratic potentialities for “our times” despite, and against, the power apparatuses that organize the present and future? At the heart of this inquiry lies a critical engagement with impossible possibilities in a present marked and constrained by neoliberal authoritarianism, racialized migrant dispossession, securitarian governmentality, and the persistent growth and crystallization of neofascist, racist, and sexist discourses and practices.

And thus, the “critical state of the present” becomes an occasion for reconsidering the genealogies of Marxist critical theory—in all their theoretical, historical, and geopolitical plurality—through a broader perspective that encompasses the poststructuralist and deconstructionist counter-traditions of the 1980s and 1990s, which have mobilized radical epistemologies of critique pursued in the domains of left cultural criticism such as critical race theory, feminist and queer theories, postcolonial/decolonial studies, theories of performativity, and new Marxisms. These left political epistemologies have not been particularly welcome in the canon of conventional Marxism. They have typically faced accusations about dividing the left and promoting “weak” politics. I suggest, however, that, drawing inspiration from the genealogy of immanent negativity, poststructuralist critical theories—in the intersecting modalities of feminist, postcolonial, and queer of color critique—embraced the aporias of subjectivation, contingency, and trouble as crucial means for theorizing potentially subversive possibilities and bringing about radical change in the contemporary world. Their configuration of critical possibility that is not reducible to self-transparent subjectivity, moral universalism, and temporally-fixed actualization is a performative way to put forward what Michel Foucault, apropos of his own critique of reason, called an “art of living counter to all forms of fascism, whether already present or impending.”<sup>8</sup>

Amidst the world-changing COVID-19 pandemic, the present order of things is defined by late capitalist biopolitics and bioeconomics, giving rise to formations of power which determine which lives matter and which do not, in terms of the intersecting powers of class, race, gender, and access to public healthcare. What Mbembe calls “the universal

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8 Michel Foucault, “Preface” to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), xv.

right to breath” emerges as a fundamental, unquantifiable and non-appropriable right to existence: one that is to be conceived beyond its biological aspect and instead as held in-common; and one that was already threatened before the pandemic, through various forces of oppression in the long history of racial capitalism (2020). We need to address the ways in which discourses of safety, survival, and normality work as an apparatus of crisis capitalism, and in the hands of neoliberal governments that impose an austerity calculus and administer the underfunding and breakdown of public healthcare institutions. The coronavirus outbreak in Southern Europe took place in the aftermath of the 2008 financial disaster and from the social debris that austerity policies and the bailout of the banks have left behind. It is under such conditions that we have to ask about the induced conditions of unlivability, wherein bodies are differentially measured through the market-driven governmentality of profit, debt, and precarity.

This is why left theory needs to engage the ongoing struggles to dismantle the necropolitical banality of *this* present tense. At this historical moment, critical subjectivities confront the *Realpolitik* that affirms the axiomatic inevitability of global capitalism and precludes the possibility of alternative sociopolitical becomings. Viewed from this perspective, these collective forms of contestatory and emancipatory poiesis, however momentary and ephemeral, counter biopolitical logistics predicated upon an ordering of time structured by the ordinary violence of capitalism, colonialism, racism, sexism, and homo/transphobia. The lived possibility of what is yet-to-come is prefigured by these public gatherings and situated knowledges of the precarious, as they at once constitute and expose the condition of possibility for acting in concert with others.

In the wake of movements such as Black Lives Matter and Ni Una Menos (the intersectional feminist movement that resists and fights the killing of women, trans people, and those subjected to the violence of masculinist and neoliberal violence), we need to attend to the ways in which the exhaustion and agonistic (appeal for) breath of those dispossessed and weaponized by interlocking class, racial, and gendered subjection, as non-white, indigenous, Palestinian, female, disabled, migrant, and/or LGBTQI+, troubles such entrenched regimes of uneven vulnerability and disposability. Inspired by the last anguished words “I can’t breathe” gasped by those asphyxiating by police brutality, Black Lives Matter, Ni Una Menos and other activist movements, as they transcend national borders and gather to contest the differential terms of socially situated vulnerability, perform the yet-to-come of social justice in struggling for spaces to breathe as horizons of equality and justice.

### III. Demanding the impossible

The question for left theory in critical times is how to transfigure the present and how to reconfigure it's no longer and yet-to-come, amidst a present that undermines the possibility of imagining differently and from the perspective of what "becoming possible" means for those whose lives have been rendered "impossible."<sup>9</sup>

In order to illustrate my questioning regarding the task of left theory to enact possibilities for the future in the present, I would like to turn to a paradigmatic scene in the history of left social theory, namely the 1964 public dialogue between Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch on the utopian. The conversation was premised on the idea that the utopian register had been depreciated: "there is something anachronistic about our theme," the moderator stated. Adorno was quick to respond by praising Bloch for "restoring honor to the word 'utopia,'" referring to his book *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918), written in the aftermath of the First World War and the Russian Revolution.<sup>10</sup> After presenting certain realized utopian visions, however, Adorno claimed that there can hardly be a positive picture of utopia. "One could perhaps say in general," he notes, "that the fulfillment of utopia consists largely only in a repetition of the continually same 'today.'" This is when Bloch responded to Adorno's reservations by invoking Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's political opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, which was written in the midst of the Weimar Republic and was banned by the Nazis. Bloch specifically quoted the statement made by the character Paul Ackermann, "something is missing"<sup>11</sup> in Mahagonny, whereby Mahagonny figured an ambivalently utopian phantasmagoria of bourgeois alienation. For Bloch, Brecht's phrase "something is missing" implied a sense of lack in the lived moment that propels a desire for another state of things.

The claim that "something is missing" carried a critical force for Adorno too, but not in ways that would guide him to see utopia as an affirmative project. Rather, reading *Mahagonny* as a project of immanent critique, he gestured toward negativity as a mode of undoing the present order from within the midst of "damaged life." Adorno's resistance to the substantiation of the utopian dimension in a positive image was predicated on

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9 Judith Butler in Judith Butler and William Connolly, "Politics, Power and Ethics," *Theory and Event*, Volume 4, Issue 2, 2000.

10 Ernst Bloch, *Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000 [1918]).

11 "*Aber etwas fehlt*" ("But something is missing"). Brecht, *Rise and Fall*, Act 1, Scene Eight.

his philosophy of history, which was positioned within and against limitations on the possibility of the future. To define or illustrate “concrete” utopia in advance and from the standpoint of existing, conventional time was impossible for him. Such an anticipatory conception of time would be inconsistent with the potential of utopian thought to open onto a time radically different from the present and its registers of thinkability and knowability under fascist and capitalist conditions.

In Adorno’s thought, social hope will always reside in the intractable remains of non-realized promises, made in the face of historical catastrophe and despair. Any utopian resolution is, thus, unavoidably a rearticulation of the present order and answerable to the actually existing dystopian possibility. And so, the task of left theory “in face of despair” would be emphatically about the critical exposure of what presently exists, including the reassuring epistemic devices that sustain this existent order. In this sense, utopian vision always remains subject to the fraught dialectics of possibility and impossibility.

For Bloch, on the other hand, utopia becomes a guiding principle for critical imagination, for the overcoming of that which already is, and the striving for what is yet unrealized. And yet, significantly, utopian thought always carries a “melancholy of fulfillment” within itself.<sup>12</sup> In that respect, Bloch’s philosophy of history allows for a utopian openness that remains undetermined. Utopia, in a sense, is partially here in the present but also not quite here, and surely not fully accessible or foreseeable in the now. What matters about utopia is not really the completed realization in the future, but rather the articulation of its possibility; or, to put it differently, the actuality of the “not-yet”, that is, the indefinite “utopian surplus” that exceeds the present protocols of signification and representation.

If Adorno was skeptical about Bloch’s “militantly optimistic”<sup>13</sup> utopian position, Bloch was skeptical about Adorno’s political affectivity of despair.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, however, this complex critical interchange exceeds the scope of mere polemics, and does not easily fit into an

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12 Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Volume 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), p.299.

13 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 206.

14 See Alexander Neupert-Doppler, “Critical theory and utopian thought”, in *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, ed. Beverley Best, Werner Bonefeld, and Chris O’Kane. Volume 2 (New York: Sage Publications, 2018).

oppositional schema that pits optimism against pessimism. Rather, this encounter allows us to critically complicate the uneasy temporalities of utopian thinking. For Bloch, the rehabilitation of hope itself (including the rehabilitation of utopian hope as a neglected concept in Marxism,<sup>15</sup> remains a restless experience of the here and now. In fact, there is no assurance that hope will elicit sustainable forces of worldmaking: “Hope is the opposite of security”, he writes. “It is the opposite of naïve optimism.”<sup>16</sup> Adorno’s notion of utopia, on the other hand, emerges from an intertwining of despair and hope. In the third volume of *Notes to Literature*, writing a few years before his death, he praised Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia*: “I took this motif so much as my own that I do not believe I have ever written anything without commemorating it, either implicitly or explicitly.”<sup>17</sup>

The performative contours of this encounter might be delineated in terms of a comradely tension between a “principle of hope” and negative dialectical critique. In this respect, these two enactments of the utopian, for all their tensions, resonate evocatively with the question of left thinking in critical times. If read together, as I suggested here, they allow for both the reappropriation of the concept of utopia as a figure for critical political imagination and a critique of utopianism as a teleological and essentialist closure of history and political temporality. What plays a catalytic role in this reconsideration is the attention to limits as a condition of possibility for politics: as a performative field of both vulnerability and collective agency.

Taking place within –and constrained by– “the measure of the possible” (to recall Benjamin again), the performativity of left theory demands the impossible, to evoke the Zapatista rallying cry: it struggles to make life more bearable in the present for those whose lives have been subjected to the status of the impossible by class, racial, and gendered powers, while, at the same time, resisting normative frames of time and shifting the conditions of possibility posed by the existing present. Left theory rests upon multiple indeterminate temporalities, then, remaining at once timely and untimely, both in time and out-of-time. Hence enacting possibilities for the future in the present involves reconfiguring the agonistic temporality of living, acting, relating, and thinking

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15 See Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe* (Verso 2017).

16 Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno. “Something’s missing: A discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno on the contradictions of utopian longing”, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, ed. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988 [1964]), 1-17, p. 6.

17 Theodor W. Adorno, “The Handle, the Pot, and Early Experience”, in *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 211-219, p. 212.

with others in the precarious interstices of “no longer” and “not yet.” Left theory is never at one, nor at ease, with the present time. Rather, it takes the present as a historically situated field of performative and transformative possibility; including, of course, the possibility, in Samuel Beckett’s words, to “fail better”, whereby “failure”, a necessary component of social struggles, also involves the collective and organized failure to uphold the normativity of the present.

I proposed in this text that we consider how surviving and resisting a crisis-defined present, can be interwoven with the social urgency of worldmaking by subjects who are injured by—or excluded from—authorized forms of life and relationality within hegemonic modes of space-time. This is a worldmaking that is constantly shaped and reshaped within complex processes of power and subjectivation. It is at once timely and untimely; already happening, underway, and yet-to-come. It takes place here and there, now and then. It encompasses constellations of brokenness, endurance, solidarity, resistance, and responsiveness to account for ways of reclaiming the possibility whose conditions are depleted by disciplinary powers.



# Walter Benjamin, Utopia and Us

Vicky Iakovou

*Happiness, about which so much, or rather so much nonsense, has been talked, consists in having many passions and many means of satisfying them. We have few passions and hardly sufficient means to satisfy a quarter of them; this is why our globe is for the moment one of the most miserable in the universe.*

*Charles Fourier*

*One readily grasps the importance of the culinary in Fourier; happiness has its recipes like any pudding. It is realized on the basis of a precise measuring out of different ingredients. It is an effect.*

*Walter Benjamin*

**T**here is an image that seems to profoundly attract a significant part of contemporary critical theory. I mean the well-known image of the angel of history, from Benjamin's ninth Thesis "On the Concept of History". Let me quote a passage:

"There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. [...] What we call progress is *this* storm".<sup>1</sup>

Given the crucial role that this image plays in the "Theses", the attraction that it exerts is not unjustified –as is well known, Klee's painting haunted Benjamin from the moment he acquired it in the early 1920s. Nonetheless, this attraction can also be considered

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, W. (2003). On the Concept of History (trans. in English by Harry Zohn). In W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings, 4: 1938-1940*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 392.

exaggerated, because this is not the only image that one finds in this concise and difficult text. So, I would like to invite you to turn our gaze to another, equally forceful but totally contrasting image, which appears in the eleventh Thesis, and has been overshadowed by the one just mentioned:

“According to Fourier, cooperative labor would increase efficiency to such an extent that four moons would illuminate the sky at night, the polar ice caps would recede, seawater would no longer taste salty [actually it would taste like lemonade –V.I.], and beasts of prey would do man’s bidding”.<sup>2</sup>

Before contextualizing this passage, let me say that, in my view, what Benjamin does, among other things (in the “Theses”, and elsewhere) is to lay bare the way in which socio-theoretical approaches that are supposed to work for emancipation have often endorsed the thought frames of their opponent. The idea of progress is such an instance. So, in several of the “Theses”, and following the analysis that he had been elaborating mainly, but not exclusively, in convolute N of his unfinished *Arcades Project*, Benjamin proceeds to a virulent critique of the idea of progress and of its endorsement by Marxism. In the eleventh Thesis, he focuses on the conception of labor. He criticizes the fact that social democracy, with its belief in the development of the forces of production as a progressive and emancipatory factor, has embraced “the old Protestant work ethic”,<sup>3</sup> which of course means the capitalist spirit, although the Weberian term does not appear in the text. In this framework, labor is construed as an activity of exploitation and mastery of nature, which is wrongly perceived as being on the antipode of the “exploitation of the proletariat”. To this “positivistic view”, whose “technocratic features” present affinities with fascism, Benjamin juxtaposes the pre-1848 socialist utopias and, among them, he distinguishes “Fourier’s fantasies, which have so often been ridiculed”.<sup>4</sup> He even goes so far as to invert the established characterizations: the soundness (*gesunde Sinn*) is on the side of these “fantasies” while the naiveté is on the side of a politics which, by proclaiming its scientific foundations, also lays claim to its theoretical and practical superiority.

I believe that here Benjamin cites and summons Fourier as someone whose thought

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 394.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 393.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 394.

deservedly partakes in the tradition of the oppressed, along with Marx, Auguste Blanqui and the Spartacus League, which are the three other names from this tradition figuring in the text. Fourier is cited and summoned as an “expert witness”<sup>5</sup> on happiness –an idea through which one should think the order of the profane, according to Benjamin– and as a fine analyst of the way in which the wish and the possibility for happiness are hindered in modernity. The allusion to Fourier thus implicitly points to an important dimension in the history of the oppressed that their official history, imbued with the ethics of Protestantism, had obscured: I mean the repression of the passions and the concomitant “impoverishment” of the “experience of pleasure”.<sup>6</sup> Fourier’s construction of the Harmonian system of “passionate attraction” –where “even the poorest canton in the Alps or the Pyrenees will [...] possess an opera house comparable to the one in Paris”–<sup>7</sup> goes hand in hand with a sustained denunciation of asceticism in all its forms, of the modern debilitation and “obstruction”<sup>8</sup> of the passions –among which he also includes the senses, the “five sensual appetites”<sup>9</sup> as he calls them– and of the “scientific marvels” of modern Civilization that “have been catastrophic rather than conducive to happiness because by augmenting the means of pleasure they have augmented the privations of the great number who lacked the barest necessities”.<sup>10</sup> Actually, it is this very denunciation that makes Marx, a careful reader of Fourier, conclude the final paragraph of the subchapter on “The Factory” in *Capital*, where he points out how factory work injures “every organ of sense [...] in an equal degree”,<sup>11</sup> with the following rhetorical question: “Is Fourier wrong when he calls factories ‘tempered bagnos’?”<sup>12</sup>

This reference to Fourier in Benjamin’s last writing is neither coincidental nor cursory. Quite to the contrary, it is a strong sign of his steady and intense interest in the utopian thinker during the 1930s, when he read Fourier and his disciples, as well as texts on

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5 Benjamin, W. (1999). *The Arcades Project* (trans. English by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin). Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 363 [J76a, 1]. Benjamin uses this expression for Blanqui, who is such a witness on behalf of the proletariat against the bourgeois class.

6 Fourier, Ch. (1996). *The Theory of the Four Movements* (edited by Gareth Stedman Jones and Ian Patterson). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 77.

7 Ibid, 156.

8 Ibid, 79.

9 Ibid, 74.

10 Ibid, 22.

11 Marx, K. (1996). *Capital*. In Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, 35. New York: International Publishers, 428.

12 Ibid, 430.

the history of the labor movement, particularly the French one. To this interest testify the convolute W of *The Arcades Project*, exclusively devoted to Fourier and one of the longest ones, several notes on Fourier or inspired by him in many other convolutes –particularly the one on Saint-Simon and the railroads (U)– the two *Exposés* with which Benjamin presented his project on Paris as the capital of the 19th century to the Institute for Social Research in 1935 and in 1939,<sup>13</sup> the long note in the sixth part of the French version of the article on the work of art published in the Institute’s Journal,<sup>14</sup> the two concise reviews of French books with selections from Fourier’s writings also published in the Journal in 1934 and in 1937,<sup>15</sup> and several other writings where one finds explicit or implicit allusions to the utopian thinker. If Gershom Scholem is correct that the only one of Marx’s books that Benjamin had read in its entirety before 1933 was *The Class Struggles in France*,<sup>16</sup> then one may advance the twofold claim that, far from reading Marx against Fourier, Benjamin reads Fourier along with Marx, and that Pierre Klossowski is right in arguing that Benjamin’s late thought can be seen as moving “between Marx and Fourier”.<sup>17</sup> Actually, both in convolute W and in the two *Exposés*, Benjamin highlights Marx’s praise of Fourier’s “colossal conception of man”<sup>18</sup> against Karl Grün, in the second volume of *The German Ideology*; also, in a note in convolute X, he translates Marx into Fourierist terms: “Marx has the idea that labor would be accomplished voluntarily (as *travail passionné*) if the commodity character of its production were abolished”.<sup>19</sup> From the bulk of these texts it appears that Benjamin finds an ally in Fourier’s “anthropological”<sup>20</sup> or “hedonistic materialism”<sup>21</sup> which, according to

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13 See Benjamin 1999, Ibid 3-26. On the presence of Fourier in the two *Exposés* and the way in which Benjamin took into account but also circumvented Adorno’s criticism of the first *Exposé* in the composition of the second, see Abensour, M. (2000). *L’utopie de Thomas More à Walter Benjamin*. Paris: Sens & Tonka, 119sq.

14 Benjamin, W. (1936). L’œuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproduction mécanisée. *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 5, 47-48; see also Benjamin, W. (2002). The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility. Second version (trans. in English by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn.). In W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings, 3: 1935-1938*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 124.

15 See Benjamin, W. (2010a). Pinloche, A., *Fourier et le socialisme* (trans. in French by Philippe Ivernel). In *Cahiers Charles Fourier*, 21, 131-132 and Benjamin, W. (2010b). Armand, F. et Maurilanc R., *Fourier* (trans. in French by Philippe Ivernel). In *Cahiers Charles Fourier*, 21, 132-134.

16 See Scholem, G. (1995). *Benjamin et son ange* (trans. in French by Philippe Ivernel). Paris: Rivages, 143 (note 24).

17 Klossowski, P. (2014). Between Marx and Fourier (trans. in English by Andrew McGettigan). *Anthropology and Materialism. A Journal of Social Research* [online], no 2.

18 Benjamin 1999, Ibid 5, 17 and 626 [W4, 3] where Marx’s expression is translated “Gargantuan view of man”.

19 Ibid 657 [X4, 2].

20 Ibid 633 [W8, 3].

21 Ibid 628 [W5, 2].

his apt remark, does not include “the desire for possession” among the passions<sup>22</sup> and which opposes civilized morality because it is “calculated to turn us into enemies of our own senses, and into friends of that commercial activity which serves merely to provoke the abuses of sensual pleasure”.<sup>23</sup> Far from being treated as an antiquated thinker whose naïve theory corresponds to a not yet mature proletariat, Fourier is regarded as a precious interlocutor because he demolishes the idealist and bourgeois morality, because of his radical break with the values of his epoch reflected in his pedagogical views and in his protofeminist views on women, because of his sustained attempt to think labor independently from what Simmel regards as a “mythological mode of thought [which] is also at home within the natural-scientific worldview”<sup>24</sup> and, which consists in construing the relation with nature in terms of conquest and subjugation; in a nutshell because of what Benjamin calls Fourier’s “ruthless criticism of his contemporaries”<sup>25</sup> and “the inextinguishable claim of [his] utopia, a claim which Marx had recognized” and which lies in the combination of “the dream of a ‘better humanity’ in which our children would ‘have a better life’” with “the dream of a better nature in which they would live”.<sup>26</sup> Fourier is such an ally and an interlocutor, both against the tradition of the victors and against the dominant Marxist tradition.

Let me now return to the two images. In the ninth “Thesis” Benjamin presents two totally diverging points of view on history: that of the angel and that of us others –remember that he even underlines the pronouns, as if he wanted to prevent the reader from overlooking the divergence: “Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe”. Yet, when one takes into account the image from Fourier and its sharp contrast with that of the angel, a question emerges. Would it be that, by alluding to Fourier, Benjamin does not only perform the gestures that I briefly highlighted (and several others that I have not mentioned), but also proposes a third point of view on history, one from which history emerges neither as continuous progress nor only as

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22 Ibid 629 [W5a, 3].

23 Ibid 628 [W5, 2]. This is a quotation from Fourier’s *Le nouveau monde industriel et sociétaire* (1829).

24 Ibid 662 [X7a, 1]. In this note, after a passage from Simmel’s *Philosophie des Geltes* –from which comes my quotation– Benjamin writes: “It is the great distinction of Fourier that he wanted to open the way to a very different reception of technology”.

25 Benjamin 2010b, Ibid 133.

26 Benjamin 1999, Ibid 342 [J63a, 1]. I would be reluctant to agree with the first part of Martel’s claim that Fourier’s future is for Benjamin “as false as the future that capitalism promises, but as another, different future it nonetheless interferes with the sense of inevitable destiny (or “fate”) that capitalism puts forth”, Martel, J. (2014). *The One and Only Law: Walter Benjamin, Utopianism, and the Second Commandment*. In A. Sarat, L. Duglas, M. M. Umphrey (eds.), *Law and the Utopian Imagination*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 48.

catastrophe? It seems to me that one can plausibly reply positively to this question. I would say that the citation of the utopian thinker is a reference to a third gaze. It is as if Benjamin recognized in Fourier –a virulent critic of the idea of progress– someone who had been able to take “the tiger’s leap” not “into the past”,<sup>27</sup> but out of the tempest of progress, a leap that rendered him able to look at the tempest, to see and judge its disastrous effects, but also, in contradistinction to the angel, able to turn his gaze away from the tempest, elsewhere, toward the future –“in the utopias of a Fourier, an Owen and others, there is the anticipation and imaginative expression of a new world”, Marx writes in an extract from a letter to Kugelmann (9.10.1866) that figures in Benjamin’s notes.<sup>28</sup> If this reading is correct, then one can raise the following question: which viewpoint does Benjamin adopt, and prompts his readers to adopt as well? –if, that is to say, such a unique viewpoint exists at all. I prefer to leave this question partly unanswered by just saying that it would be hasty to claim that he chooses that of the angel. But I would add that Fourier’s imaginative and anticipative gaze –a gaze that does not violate the prohibition, from Thesis B, to inquire “into the future”,<sup>29</sup> since it does not stem from a conception of time as homogeneous, continuous and empty– is for Benjamin as equally important as the remembrance of the past of the defeated for the construction and the re-appropriation of their tradition, for provoking the “real state of emergency” and, consequently, for the “struggle against Fascism”,<sup>30</sup> to which the eighth Thesis refers. It proves to be all the more important for Benjamin when one takes into account the affinity between his thought and Fourier’s, underscored in the following note: “Fourier’s conception of the propagation of the phalansteries through ‘explosions’ may be compared to two articles of my ‘politics’: the idea of revolution as an innervation of the technical organs of the collective (analogy with the child who leaps to grasp by trying to get hold of the moon), and the idea of the ‘cracking open of natural teleology’”.<sup>31</sup>

I would now like to go back to what I suggested at the beginning of this paper: that the Fourierist image has not gained due attention in the literature on Benjamin and

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27 Benjamin 2003, Ibid 395.

28 Benjamin 1999, Ibid 636 [W10a, 2].

29 Benjamin 2003, Ibid 397.

30 Ibid 392.

31 Benjamin 1999, Ibid 631 [W7, 4]. See also Benjamin 1936, Ibid 47-48. For a commentary see Ivernel, Ph. (2010). Utopie pédagogique et souveraineté de l'enfance. In *Cahiers Charles Fourier*, 21, 83-84 and Abensour 2000, Ibid 167-174.

his “Theses”<sup>32</sup> –there are, of course, exceptions, notably in France.<sup>33</sup> How can one explain and interpret this silence on, which is also a kind of silencing of the citation of Fourier? I will venture two interrelated hypotheses. The first one draws inspiration from Miguel Abensour, who argues that, after Engels’ book *The Development of Socialism from Utopia to Science* (this is the original title of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*), Marxism has functioned as a machine of incorporation and of exclusion of utopia. As a machine of incorporation since utopia is recognized as a forerunner of Marxism and is absorbed into its pre-history; as a machine of exclusion because, after the appearance of scientific socialism, utopia is considered obsolete and even treacherous.<sup>34</sup> Also, according to Abensour, Engels’ text has established as canonical the conceptual couple “science versus utopia”, which is actually a couple first introduced by the founder of positivism, Auguste Comte, in 1832, and has nothing to do with the Marxian approach to utopia.<sup>35</sup> This machine has been working quite efficiently, during the whole 20th century and not only within orthodox Marxism—there are, of course, exceptions: Bloch, the par excellence philosopher who ventures to rehabilitate utopia by tracking it down to new ontological and anthropological depths and for whom social utopias, expressing the wish for happiness, form one of the two distinct but complementary currents of the tradition of emancipation, the second being that of natural law, which aims at human dignity;<sup>36</sup> Marcuse, who already in the 1930s claims that Critical Theory “has no fear of [...] utopia”;<sup>37</sup> and even Adorno, who, despite his reluctance toward any attempt to positively picture the emancipated society, publishes in 1966 Fourier’s *Theory of the Four Movements* in the Institute’s for Social Research book series and, in his short preface, argues against the “condemnation of the imagination accused of being chimerical” and for the actuality of those ideas that have been “rejected as utopian” in order to praise Fourier’s “will to

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32 See indicatively Benjamin, A. (2013). *Working with Walter Benjamin. Recovering a Political Philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 162-202, where “On the Concept of History” is thoroughly discussed with no mention of Fourier. Also, the volume edited by Benjamin, A. (2005). *Walter Benjamin and History*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, where there is no other reference to the utopian thinker apart from Howard Caygill’s pertinent but brief remarks in the chapter “Non-Messianic Political Theology in ‘On the Concept of History’”.

33 See indicatively Abensour 2000, Ibid 197-199. Löwy, M. (2005). *Fire Alarm. Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’* (trans. In English by Chris Turner). London-New York: Verso 72-77.

34 See Abensour, M. (1991). Le nouvel esprit utopique. *Cahiers Bernard Lazare*, no 128-130, 139-140.

35 See Abensour, M. (2016). *L’histoire de l’utopie et le destin de sa critique*. Paris: Sens & Tonka, 29-30.

36 See Bloch, E. (1986). *The Principle of Hope* (trans. in English by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight). Oxford: Basil Blackwell and Bloch, E. (2002). *Droit naturel et dignité humaine* (trans. in French by Denis Authier and Jean Lacoste). Paris: Payot.

37 Marcuse, H. (2009). Philosophy and Critical Theory (trans. in English by Jeremy J. Shapiro). In H. Marcuse, *Negations. Essays in Critical Theory*. London: May Fly Books, 106.

give a concrete content to the idea of a better world”.<sup>38</sup> I would say that it is as if most of the readers of Benjamin’s “Theses” were unable to see and reflect on the reference to Fourier, although it is neither brief nor hidden between the lines, because they have fallen victims of this machine, because they have obeyed its prohibition against utopia, even when they do not share its presuppositions or the above-mentioned conceptual couple. An Althusserian reading of the “Theses” would consider the allusion to Fourier as a regression to a non-Marxist and ideological –that is bourgeois or petit bourgeois– humanism, prior to the epistemological break. A Foucauldian reading would remember and remind us the remark from *Society must be defended* which, by attributing a racist component to Fourier’s socialism,<sup>39</sup> also implies that his thought is firmly rooted in the biopolitical framework; such an approach would also see Fourier’s presence as suggesting the advocacy of the false “repressive hypothesis”.<sup>40</sup> A Derridian interpretation would insist on the distinction between utopia and messianism –correctly, I believe– on the difference between messianism and “messianicity without messianism” and on the “weak messianic power”<sup>41</sup> mentioned in the second “Thesis”,<sup>42</sup> in order to minimize the utopian strand of Benjamin’s thought –wrongly, I believe. An Agambenian reading would also focus on the “weak messianic power”, but this time with the view to present Benjamin as a crypto-Paulinian critic of the very idea of power and as a proponent of the “power not to”, which means of a stance similar to Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to”<sup>43</sup> –all this, without considering the fact that Melville’s anti-hero eventually dies. To my knowledge, apart from the Agambenian and part of the Derridian, these readings of Benjamin and the “Theses” do not actually exist as fully-fledged positions; they can nonetheless be considered as forming the background on which, or the theoretical climate in which, several other actually existing interpretations of the “Theses” emerge. Despite their differences, they all converge in that they downplay or even dissimulate

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38 Adorno, Th. (2010). Préface à la version allemande des *Quatre Mouvements* de Charles Fourier (trans. in French by Marc Jimenez). *Cahiers Charles Fourier*, 21, 137.

39 Foucault, M. (2003). *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76* (trans. in English by David Macey). New York: Picador, 261.

40 See Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality. 1. An Introduction* (trans. in English by Robert Hurley). New York: Pantheon Books, 17sq.

41 Benjamin 2003, Ibid. 390.

42 See Derrida, J. (2006), *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (trans. in English by Peggy Kamuf), New York-London: Routledge, 227-228 and Derrida, J. (2004). *Mapξ & Υoί* (trans. in Greek by Kostis Papagiorgis). Athens: Ekkremes, 58-66.

43 See Agamben, G. (2004). *Le temps qui reste. Un commentaire de l’ Epître aux Romains* (trans. in French by Judith Revel). Paris: Rivages, 231-244 and Agamben, G. (1999). *Potentialities* (trans. in English by Daniel Heller-Roazen). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 138-174 (on Benjamin) and 244-271 (on Bartleby). It seems to me obvious that these texts are related, although there is no reference to Benjamin in the chapter on Bartleby.



Benjamin's invocation of Fourier. So here comes my second hypothesis, which is that this downplaying is symptomatic of what might be called the ambiguous predilection of much contemporary critical theory –broadly construed– for sad passions. As Antonia Birnbaum, a fine interpreter of Benjamin,<sup>44</sup> has pertinently argued, in contemporary thought the dimension of struggle is frequently absent from the understanding of history, the vanquished are often hypostasized into victims, and history is viewed through the category of trauma.<sup>45</sup> Whereas for Benjamin the virtues of the oppressed in their struggle are “confidence, courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude”,<sup>46</sup> for much contemporary critical theory melancholy, mourning, vulnerability and weakness seem to be, to use a French expression from Benjamin again, “à l'ordre du jour”,<sup>47</sup> something like our ontological destiny. What is more, the effort to positively picture the otherwise, the not-yet, a more humane and happy social alterity chosen not in a reactive manner, so as to avoid or resist the present bad situation, but because it is desired as such, is regarded as uncritical or even naïve as well as an impediment to the realization and acceptance of human finitude<sup>48</sup> –whereas for Benjamin “every negation has its value solely as background for the delineation of the lively, the positive”.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, the ruling classes and their elites cheerfully and unrestrainedly enjoy and augment their

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44 See Birnbaum, A. (2009). *Bonheur, justice, Walter Benjamin*, Paris: Payot.

45 Birnbaum, A. (2011). Matérialisme, matériau, division du présent. <http://www.cndp.fr/magphilo/index.php?id=112> (accessed: summer 2020).

46 Benjamin 2003, *Ibid* 390. Let me note that, according to Benjamin, Fourier has at least one of these traits: humor.

47 *Ibid*, 390.

48 Given the Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian focus on death and its primacy, it is worth reminding two warnings, which are all the more compelling since they do not come from the tradition of Critical Theory: Ricœur's caution against what he calls the “obsession of metaphysics with the problem of death” or the “anguished obsession with death” –Ricœur, P. (2000). *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Seuil, 465– and Arendt's caution against “the trap of modern death-philosophy” –Arendt, H. (1994). No Longer and Not Yet. In H. Arendt, *Essays in Understanding. 1930-1954*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 161. Far from denying human finitude, both Ricœur and Arendt invite us to think about it otherwise, through life, birth and natality, in order to capture the conditions for human's capacity to act in the world and to change it. Particularly Arendt's deconstruction of the tradition of political philosophy inaugurated by Plato and her related claim that mortality is the central category of metaphysical thought (as distinguished from political thought) raise serious doubts about whether death and mortality offer an appropriate point of departure for thinking politics and political struggle. See indicatively Ricœur, P. (2009). *Philosophie de la volonté. 1. Le volontaire et l'involontaire*. Paris: Seuil (Points), 445sq; Arendt, H. (1958). *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Also, it seems to me that only a biased or cursory reading would attribute to the 19th century utopian thinkers, and particularly to Fourier, a denial of human finitude: the recognition of a constitutive human relatedness, the emphasis on sensibility, the position according to which “the individual ... is a being essentially false, for neither by himself alone nor with another [par couple] can he bring about the development of the twelve passions” –Fourier cited in Benjamin 1999, *Ibid* 646 [W15, 9]–, the distancing from the will to completely master the self, the others or the world, and the ensuing idea of Association, which is “the central idea of the different utopian schools” –Abensour, M. (2010). *L'hommeest un animal utopique*. Arles: Les Editions de la Nuit, 91– testify to an acknowledgment of –but not to a capitulation to– what Ricœur beautifully terms “the sadness of the finite”.

49 Benjamin 1999, *Ibid* 459 [N1a, 3].

power, their wealth and their being subjects –even during the pandemic. It seems to me that Benjamin’s predilection for Fourier during the dark times of the 1930s bears witness to the fact that, before Deleuze and despite the legend about his proper melancholic personality, he had an inkling of the truth that there are three kinds of people who have an interest in the sad passions: the “moral trinity”<sup>50</sup> of the slave, the tyrant and the priest. I believe that we should remember this truth –to which also points Benjamin’s rebuke of “left-wing intelligentsia”, in 1931<sup>51</sup>– in our present dark times.<sup>52</sup>

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50 Deleuze, G. (2001). *Spinoza. Practical Philosophy* (trans. in English by Robert Hurley). San Francisco: City Lights Books, 25.

51 Benjamin, W. (1974). Left-Wing Melancholy (trans. in English by Ben Brewster). *Screen*, 15(2), 29.

52 I would like to thank the Organizing Committee for inviting me to the Conference, and particularly, Michalis Bartsidis for prompting me to present this paper, part of a longer one that I am currently preparing in Greek. Thanks also go to the participants of my panel for their interventions and comments, which led me to insist a little further on some points.

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# Socialism as a Utopia in the present

*Michalis Bartsidis*

## 1. Dark times

**W**e live in a suffocatingly strange and depressing condition, in fear, and surrounded by death. Mainstream politics seem to be left with limited possibilities of reaction unless our collective imaginary opens itself to the invention of an alternative present. I have chosen to use an old term, the name of socialism, and wonder if it is possible to redact this concept in a way that could actually prove useful. Others might opt for another term naming what may eventually come to be.

Drawing on the hegelian tradition and the spinozian perspective, I believe we can start by elucidating theoretically the networks of negative forces that take advantage and hold of the collective imaginary, producing new dystopias, inventing “territories” of escape for the privileged and developing new states of emergency. We can then reflect on the conflict between the social forces in which the action of the death drive tends and is put to use for the purposes of domination<sup>1</sup>, and those in which it is sublimated into resistance and revolt; between those inscribed in catastrophic negativity, and those in which it works for personal and social development. How do these two tendencies converge and diverge? Can we elaborate on dialectical links between them in order to allow the “restlessness of the negative” to play its positive historical part?

The key concepts that can organize this type of theoretical and political debate and could release the internal dialectics of the negative’s versions, are certain bipolarities such as utopia/dystopia.

The focus of this presentation will be on two ideas: first, negativity and how Althusser deals with this concept in his study of Machiavelli. Second, the dimension of the present in an ideal capable of mobilizing individuals and the masses in a positive direction.

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<sup>1</sup> See in this volume Tania Vosniadou, “Dark times, the psychoanalytic concept of negativity and the opening of possibilities, p. 133-141

## 2. Althusser on negativity (in Machiavelli and Us)

Throughout his work, especially in the 60s, Althusser was critical of Hegel and hegelianism, taking up long-standing topics, such as the critique of the “expressive totality” as a closed concept of the whole, that leaves no room for politics. Another topic was the rejection of teleological perceptions of history, especially in his writings at that time, such as “Contradiction and overdetermination” and “Notes on a materialist theater”. On the other hand, in his work on the “materialism of the encounter” or “aleatory materialism”, he understood some of Hegel’s philosophical notions as reflecting the tradition of materialism. As it were, he was rejecting commonplace, conventional, stereotyped and overused forms of dialectics which appear in the context of various hegelianisms in the three-fold configuration that leads to transcendence and the synthesis of a totality. In fact, he was criticizing such forms for constructing a kind of closed wholeness, the so-called “expressive totality”, dominating its elements and leading to a teleological conception of history, thus leaving no possibility for politics. And yet he never stopped seeking the development of new forms of dialectics, not evident up to that time, either implicitly or explicitly and clearly.<sup>2</sup>

Such a moment is his reading of Machiavelli. Althusser, in using the example of the duration of the roman state, takes the opportunity to point out his liminal relationship with Hegel, as shaped through his relationship with the positivity of Spinoza. This is where we can find a practical proposal to the issue of negativity. It should be noted that what we are discussing here is a practical appropriation rather than an interpretation of Hegel’s work by Althusser<sup>3</sup> or, more precisely, the attempt to invent dialectical forms drawing on the hegelian work, to the extent that it is considered interesting and useful in itself, for its own purposes. This does not raise the issue of a full discussion on various other interpretations, nor do we refer to the very corpus of Hegel’s writings.

Let us consider, following certain particular interpretations of the hegelian work, as positivity the movement towards the real (la cosa in Machiavelli’s reading by Althusser, see note 4), the thing outside any ideological or imaginary representations, (Althusser

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2 See Lahtinen, Mikko (2009). *Politics and philosophy: Niccolo Machiavelli and Louis Althusser's aleatory materialism*, Leyden: Brill on Althusser’s critique of Hegelian dialectics 20-30, on displacements and condensations of contradictions 43-49, 197-199.

3 In his master’s thesis, that he wrote it in 1947, “On content in the thought of G.W.F. Hegel” in Louis Althusser (1997). *Early Writings, The Spectre of Hegel I* translated by G.M. Goshgarian. London: Verso.

1999: 33)<sup>4</sup>, and “retaining their sense as positive propositions on history (rather than as philosophical theses)” (Althusser 1999:34, 35). The reverse movement is then the movement from the thing-itself, the given or the immediate, to the object as the most abstract determination, as a “completely empty being or as a void”. This movement “to do away with every pure given” at the level of the perceptual knowledge, forms the field of the representation that turns inwards, to a thinking subjectivity which “is not an empty entity, but a purely negative void” (Althusser 1997:71); a so-called “work of the negative” movement that refers to the negativity of thought, of theory. As Althusser wrote: “The truth of the void is the content of what is negated. Hegel inverts the spinozist axiom, which says that every determination is a negation; for him every negation is a determination” (Althusser 1997: 72). Every negation is a movement from being to thinking; thinking is an irreducible pole as to the real, and the object is always distinct from being, irreducible to it and internalized. This object is distinct from an external object of practice, it is radically internal as the particular object of thought and theoretical practice. In other words, it is not exactly a product of internalization, but it is already always inside while it concerns the real external object of practice. The process of “determinate negation” consists in this sequence of determination, in the movement of the subtraction for thought that has just taken place; a determination that renders being more concrete and more real. Every determination is negation, and the negation of determination is the negation of negation, which each time produces a theoretical object or a concept. In other words, as Being is mediated through substance, it becomes a concept, and if one can speak of totality here, thus opens the way for what Althusser calls “expressive totality” (Althusser 1997: 87, 89).

However, in Machiavelli and us we discover a research on new forms of dialectics, closer to and yet so far from Hegel, which precisely allows Althusser to introduce the dimension of the “aleatory”. It is the negativity that allows this, creating space for the aleatory. This Hegel is not the Hegel of the expressive totality. There is a remarkable reference to Hegel in this text, and we cannot consider that Althusser uses it just to get rid of hegelian debris and terminology. This is a text that repeatedly uses the terminology of negativity, and we cannot ignore it. Even more interesting is that, here, the contingency, the “aleatory”, appears simultaneously. These two elements must somehow be connected. And if we accept that not every dialectics is teleological, then we can devise new forms of dialectics based on historical context. Althusser invents such a thing, which I would

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<sup>4</sup> Louis Althusser (1999). *Machiavelli and us* /Introduction and translation, Gregory Elliot. London: Verso.

provocatively call the “dialectics of immanence” as it combines both perspectives: the “dialectical” and the spinozian “immanence”.

At this subtle point, Althusser introduces the positive of constant determination through the negation of negation, also writing that “We have already witnessed the negation of what I called the first thesis by the second, but we have seen that this negation does not constitute a pure and simple contradiction in terms. Rather, it represents an articulation, a play, a positive determination - in the Spinozist sense - of the negation” (Althusser 1999: 40). This movement is, at the same time, an exit from the theoretical field towards the real practices, an exit beyond the subject/ object distinction that co-articulates the theoretical object and the real (practices) in a relation of difference. A positive movement that shifts the space and the object of negation, a displaced negation, that incorporates the outside from the inside, the real with the theoretical objects, the thought and action, in order to change things. This exit is drawn up in a line with the hegelian “externalization of the concept”, as Balibar put it<sup>5</sup>. Let us now examine this invention again, through the example of Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli.

Here, Althusser describes the three moments of this dialectics, or three instances, three positions on history, thesis-antithesis-synthesis, a terminology that he obviously uses schematically, since these terms cannot be found in the hegelian corpus, at least not in the form of such correlation.

The three machiavellian theses, according to Althusser, are:

1st -The flow of natural, as well as human things, is immutable. The world remains in the same state, it does not change.

2nd- Everything is in a perpetual movement, unstable, subject to an unpredictable necessity.

3rd - A thesis on the cyclic nature of history through which Machiavelli seems to be achieving the “synthesis” of the two previous antithetical theses of the immobile motion (1st thesis) and the universal mobility (2nd thesis): immutable movement of the recurrence of the same changes.

It should be noted that in the cyclical alternation of political regimes Machiavelli, as Althusser reads him, does not make a typology, but says that “they are all defective”, the

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<sup>5</sup> Balibar, Etienne, “Dialectique de la lutte des classes et lutte des classes en dialectique” in *Sur la dialectique* (1977), Centre d’études et de recherches marxistes.

bad because they are bad, the good because they do not last long. What preoccupies him is the notion of duration: in order for the political regime to last, it should be a “mixture” of genres; it should combine the power of the Sovereign, the people and the powerful”.<sup>6</sup> Let us return to the cyclicity of history, in order to be able to conceive a kind of reversal of the well-known in metaphysics notion of the immutable, the unchangeable. It concerns the concept of the “mutable invariant”, instead of the “stable variable”, analogous to the conception of the relation of necessity to contingency, as we will discuss at the end of this chapter.

At this point we should clarify the notion of the utopian in Machiavelli. What comprises a determinate negation? A thesis and its opposite are not a simple and clear contradiction of two terms. They constitute an anti-thesis, namely a couple, a relation, an articulation in a unity of difference, a mutual function-operation in a new context. In other words, their interrelation activates a field of possibilities.

This third moment-thesis constitutes a negation of the second thesis as an object and consequently it opens a new extended, and at the same time even more determined, field of possibilities. But a fourth moment-thesis is a particular negation of the synthesis of the previous ones: it consists not only in a simple negation of a thesis, but also its total displacement and acquisition of a different content. The new anti-thesis emerges from the “wish (volonté in French, MB) to rely on it (the previous thesis) so as to escape it” (Althusser 1999: 41). At this exact point one could detect the whole problem of negativity, as well as the conception of a new dialectics of “displaced negation”, by Althusser. Decision, politics, practice and action are placed in this displacement from the theoretical to the real. What may shed some light in political practice is instead “topography” (la topique), since it situates the historical agents in the social whole (different from the hegelian totality) in the different instances of the social formation, including their conscience in the instance of ideology. Historical actors can see themselves as actors determined by the different instances and as subjects as determined by ideology. De-centering consciousness through the topography, Althusser reintroduces the subject,

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6 Apart from the idea of the immanent relation between multitude and rulers in the constitution of state republic, what emerges from this idea is the notion of state’s “expansion” in order to include three forms of power. This is what Althusser calls “a different reality from mere governments” (oc. 40). A new concept of public power arises and it is neither just individual nor just state, but trans-individual. And the stronger its synthesis becomes, the stronger its parts and poles. See Bartsidis, M. (2021), “Dissensions’ eulogy”: democracy as an active balance of forces in Machiavelli”, in Ιακώβου Β., Σιαμανδούρας Σ., Φαράκλας Γ. (επιμ.), Οι μακιαβελικές στιγμές σε προοπτική/ Ιακωνου, V., Siamandouras S., Faraklas G., (ed), (2021). *Machiavellian moments in perspective*, Athens: Angelus Novus.

but as an effect and not as a principle of synthesis or a subject of imputation (an origin). In doing so, he gets rid of the expressive totality completely based on consciousness and its capacity of synthesis, and thinks of a whole based on dispersion.

What does the concept of displacement mean when it characterizes negation? We are familiar with the use of the conceptual couple of displacement and condensation by Althusser, with references to works of psychoanalytic thought – especially in the text on “Freud and Lacan” – but also in his study of the concept of contradiction, such as his work on “Contradiction and overdetermination”. In a certain sense, it is about the succession of “precondition – thesis – negation – negation of negation” and precisely the fourth moment, namely the negation of negation, is at the same time followed by the reversal of affirmation. This reversal consists in the decision to resist mechanical necessity, a decision equivalent to the movement of emancipation and escape, particularly when he writes about the moment of manifestation of “the wish to rely on it so as to escape from it” (Althusser 1999: 41), to “find the means by which to escape its gravitation and the way to launch oneself into the uncharted space where one ventures” (101). Actually, the third moment is divided in two phases. In Althusser, however, the fourth moment is a leap to a completely different level with the shift we saw. His own variation of the fourth moment is the exit from the work of the negative, in particular, it is a positive determination of negativity. The fourth moment is an opening and not a closing in the circle of the whole. Althusser, after all, has a conception of the open whole or, which is the same, of the open structure, as a “whole without totality”, a structured whole instead of the mechanistic type of whole.

The fourth moment, or the second phase of the third moment, or “... a negation of the third thesis, but a very peculiar negation, since it does not merely deny, but completely displaces it” according to Althusser (41), is the one that helps to keep open the formation of the union, of the whole. Based on new readings of the hegelian work, certain thinkers maintain that when they refer to a fourth moment, they mean an epistemological conception of this moment, without implying its ontological superiority in relation to the previous moments and levels. There isn't a first negation and the determination of negation in the second moment and then the third moment that comes as something better, as ontologically superior, but these are all moments of a process of determination of the Being that moves towards something more concrete and real.



“This time the negation is not term for term – “not-A” against “A” – but it involves a disparity: it is a positive counter-position in which the new term is determined not by a simple formal negation, but by a different content, introduced under the form of negation” (41) as Althusser writes.

In this sense, we better understand what Althusser calls “theoretical utopia”. It means – as Nancy argued in his speech at the Second International Conference on “Left Theory for the 21st century”<sup>7</sup>, that there are three moments in the dialectics of negativity, and there is also one fourth moment. It seems that philosophers who read Hegel again, invent a fourth moment which gives the dialectics of negativity a completely different configuration from its hegelian understanding<sup>8</sup>. This is not an “ideological and political utopia” like those we know from the utopian traditions, but a rather particular epistemological utopia, somehow adjacent to Adorno’s “utopia of knowledge”. We have exited the theoretical disposition, moving towards practice and the political object-objective (la causa effectuale of Macchiavelli) and, at the same time, there is a re-enrollment in the theoretical element in a modality, however, which is now completely changed. Precisely because “it is out”, it ceases to be content (although, here again, Althusser uses the term “a different content”) and it is a theoretical manifesto. A double shift has upset the order of theoretical discourse as a motley element has entered, which has turned the inside out and the outside in: the object is part of the theory and the theory enters the object.

This point leads us to the heart of the discussion about the relation between Machiavelli and the utopian element.<sup>7</sup> As noted before, it is in the displacement from the theoretical to the real that the political and action are conceived, but the second element is nevertheless conceived in its relation to the theoretical. This is the play, Machiavelli’s “leap into the void”. In Althusser’s point of view, the “aleatory materialism” detects in this transition the contingent element that is determined by a necessity. This kind of co-articulation between necessity and contingency is the precondition of possibility, the condition of possibility, to think the gap, the real, to think the unthinkable, if we put it in kantian terms. Machiavelli’s utopian, again following Althusser, is a theoretical utopia precisely

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7 See in this volume p. 163.

8 Alain Badiou also interprets, in his own way, the “fourth moment” as displacement, as “outlier”. In Badiou, though, ideology is a closed element, the subject appears only in the event, therefore the opening comes from the outside without changing the inside. See Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, Trans. Bruno Bosteels, Continuum, 2009, 28-29, “Old Hegel split in two - Scission, determination, limit - Splace [3] and outplace [4]- Deviations on the right and left [5]. There are two dialectical matrices in Hegel [...]”.

because it is a leap into the gap in terms of a performance and an imperative, and not in terms of an abstract and universal ideal. As he puts it, “Machiavelli is not in the least utopian, he simply thinks the conjectural case of the thing” (Althusser 1999, 103).

### **3. Utopias in the present**

Having explored the althusserian perception of negativity, we can now address the question of the universal ideal in a theoretical, but also in a regulatory dimension concerning the present. And at the same time, we can seek a methodology for an alternative to capitalism, whether we call it socialism or something else. Talking about socialism today may sound awkward. Some think that this topic is extremely outdated and too ideological, while others, a bit more conformist, believe that this discussion is of no use, and propose adapting to today’s reality instead. Besides its historical content, what we should focus on is the relevance of socialism as political ideology today. The ever-decreasing use of the term indicates, of course, its historical defeat. But does this also mean its end? In view of major changes provoked by the pandemic condition, let us discuss if the socialist direction has a chance, and what might its future be?

I suggest that we should practice an active methodology, in order to determine whether what we used to call “socialism” as a cause exists today. We should re-conceptualize and transform this concept in order to reflect on socialisms of the present. Otherwise, if we stick to its outdated meaning, then we will understand socialism as an ultimate ideal-goal, beyond and out of the current historical condition.

Saying that such a cause concerns everyone means that everyone should be concerned with a set of questions, and actions; everyone should be involved. It also means that there are issues to be solved, issues of practice and action such as the climate change, the global pandemic crisis, the social inequalities. And, also, it means that there is knowledge shared and to be shared by individuals and groups. We use the expression “in the present” to provoke a counterpoint, as we have already said, to the eschatological and teleological perceptions of socialism, as one very distant and ultimate society, an ultimate goal. This was supposedly the end (telos) of history, on the condition that socialists and communists would intervene; agents who know this goal well, as well as the means to get there. It was a kind of special knowledge given by the privileged position of a worldview on history, a total worldview, which could describe with certainty

historical evolution, successive stages, agents, in other words, its subjects. In fact, quite often, those in possession of such certainty were driven out of “reality” by underestimating some of its aspects and overestimating others. In the course of time, a left-wing culture was organized, increasingly indifferent to current actual politics and its actors, concentrating only on consistency with ideals. It is a view resembling the theological perspective of eternity with which you see the “here and now” from the outside; the present is determined by its future justification, a continuous promise of reward in the future.

On the contrary, by arguing that an end is an affair, a cause of the present, we bring a certain perception of action within the current conditions, within contradictions and existing acting powers in society and politics. This action is based on empirical-experimental knowledge of the correlation of forces of opposite tendencies, formed when what is called “correlation of forces” becomes antagonism between two parts. This entails engagement with one of the two historical tendencies, and struggle for the dominance of the one over the other. Forces and tendencies are not external. They are always interrelated and there is nothing out of this context. If we consider Marx’s Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach, that the reality of the human essence is “the ensemble of social relations”, then everything exists here, in front of us; the possibilities, the interrelated forces, the opportunities, and the politics to pursue our common humanity. The argument that “society is not concerned and does not understand these “things” is simply not valid.

#### **4. Property vs Common(s): Towards a new model of public services**

With that said, socialism/communism is a tendency of the present, an active force opposite to capitalism, and grounded on present and real issues and questions. This is Marx’s widely known position in his Notes on Wagner. Socialism appears in every class society as an existing antithetical tendency in the collective, common and institutional practices, as well as the struggles of individuals, classes and masses, even if it is an internal tendency within the dominant capitalism, even if it cannot be perceived as something external and totally different towards which we should move; even if those experiencing these shifts cannot comprehend them as such.

In today's capitalism, we observe the dominant tendency towards private property or – better said – continuous and perpetual private appropriation of the Commons, both natural and intangible – or digital. There is also a tendency towards their dissolution or even destruction, to the privatization of public services, as well as to detachment from common, global institutions of regulation. But even as internal and inherent in these tendencies, there is also a tendency towards sharing goods, resources, powers; towards their transindividual and collective reinforcement, public property against individual or state property, solidarity, equality and freedom, the defense of public institutions and services, the protection and preservation of common life and common humanity.

Socialism, by definition, lies in the various practices of cooperation (in Latin *sociare*, combine, share) within and against capitalism, and in favor of universal justice. It lies in creating the conditions to move beyond coal, structural racism and sexism, precarious work and in the end, beyond capitalism itself, even though capitalism could follow these same directions in times of crisis (for example, interventionism). In the age of triple crisis – inequalities, refugee crisis and climate change – and in view of major changes, the conflict between these two tendencies today gains importance; this in fact is a new opportunity for socialism. It is time to make ourselves open to and re-appropriate this word again, and thus the idea it expresses (even in the USA, they speak boldly about socialism) because it can give an answer to the needs of our society, it can provide a distinct political plan for Greece and a new model of public services for the entire world; it can be, again, an inspiration for political participation.

## **5. Making our own path**

The knowledge required in this opportunity is not given by a privileged position in history, but it is partial, and characterized by uncertainty. Therefore, we are not talking about laws of causality, namely laws of history, but a knowledge of history through observable regularities and their alterations. We are seeking a historical rationality following dialectics, which explains the facts and is able to predict some developments for the immediate future. In other words, an articulation of knowledge and practice open to the possibilities of the present and the future. We are talking about a materialism which differs from historical dogmatism, by introducing elements of pragmatism and expanding the latter towards the horizon of socialism in a radical and realistic way.

In this perception of knowledge of history, the gaze is internal; we look from the inside to the infinity of the horizon. It is as if you don't consider life to be short, as if you are not

interested in how long it shall last. On the contrary, it is as if there is one and only one life, and you can expand it from within by living in the present all of its moments, which may as well be infinite. We expand and open time and space from within, we expand the present -but also the unfulfilled possibilities of the past- to the future. We see things from the perspective of an eternity in/at the present, quite the opposite from the old theological and teleological eternity.

Thus far, we conceive the articulation of knowledge and practice in a cooperative bipolarity, but in a particularly open way, which we could characterize performative. By this term, we mean that actions make their way opening a path, instead of following a predetermined one. The only way to open and map this new path is by walking. For this reason, we do not know what we are walking into, and we are open to all kinds of developments and possibilities of practices. For this same reason, we make our own goals: positioning, a leap in the void of theory, shift, expectations, a movement towards an uncharted space.

Knowledge in the plural is never enough, but this cannot restrict practice, experimentation. To be precise, everything is possible in the void between knowledge and practice, in the difference between the two elements, in the divergence and distance between them. New possibilities and new meanings arise in the void between them; this void is the Real. Therefore, socialism, as a goal, is simultaneously created by collective actions: “what is involved is not the natural order of things (an existing permanency) but an order to be instituted, a duration to be fashioned, a permanency to be established - in short, a political undertaking and innovation” (Althusser 1999: 43). At this point, we can also conceptualize the planning in a new way, this time in relation to, but also beyond, state rationalism. On the grounds of this conception, socialism is a goal emerging from the difference between general theory and concrete problems; it is, in other words, liminal, a goal on the border, on the limit, one that is too close, and at the same time too far. It is also a constant “coming and going” from future to present and vice-versa, an endless comparison. It is now becoming clear that the suggested attitude of thinking and acting “in the present” does not favor the exclusion of utopia and, in consequence, the fixation to the present. On the contrary, we propose the lifting of the internal borders experienced by political subjects, due to the exile of the imagination. In this sense, we have certain experiences on which we rely for articulating our general position on socialism as an alternative to the present, an alternative plan, a model of strategic perception of movement-like actions, a symbolic challenge and political agenda, a New Social Deal.

## 6. Conclusion

To come to a close, this argument tackles with the multiple meanings of socialism: idea, politics, economy, state, a way of organizing society – but this time “in the present”. All of its dimensions and terms can be re-conceptualized and kept active in wider social processes, parties and movements. Especially now, a new opportunity and possibility for socialism in the pandemic condition emerges from the necessity of public services during the pandemic condition. By pushing in every way possible for their support through additional staff and voluntary help by permanent workers, we also reinforce the demand for their non-privatization. It is a tough task, because the dark forces of negativity seem to be dominant all over the world. However, optimistic events have begun to multiply, as well. We must recognize this possibility, strengthen it, believe in it, not underestimate it, not disregard it. We do need, indeed, some invariants, but these are being extracted by those same practices. We can then represent them as a regulatory ideal that will guide us to action. It is not a matter of mere optimism because ideas do exist, and this is proven by their effects and results, regardless of whether they are victorious or not. In any case, they are actual and active, as a utopia “in the present”<sup>9</sup>. And I don’t see what else we have that will make us able to act in the end


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<sup>9</sup> See also in this volume Athena Athanasiou, “Im-possible temporalities: Left theory in critical times”, p.143-152.








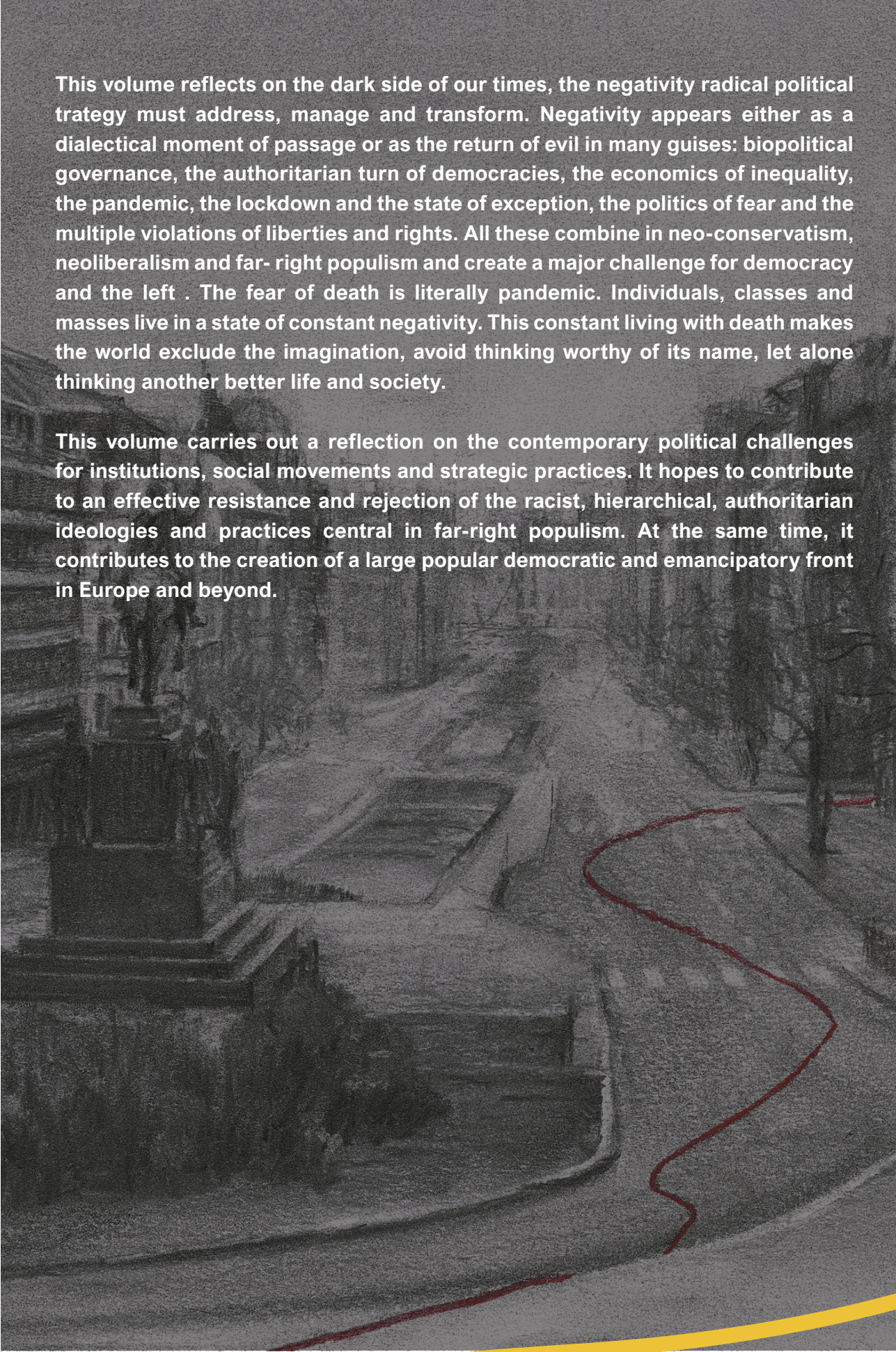


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This volume reflects on the dark side of our times, the negativity radical political strategy must address, manage and transform. Negativity appears either as a dialectical moment of passage or as the return of evil in many guises: biopolitical governance, the authoritarian turn of democracies, the economics of inequality, the pandemic, the lockdown and the state of exception, the politics of fear and the multiple violations of liberties and rights. All these combine in neo-conservatism, neoliberalism and far- right populism and create a major challenge for democracy and the left . The fear of death is literally pandemic. Individuals, classes and masses live in a state of constant negativity. This constant living with death makes the world exclude the imagination, avoid thinking worthy of its name, let alone thinking another better life and society.

This volume carries out a reflection on the contemporary political challenges for institutions, social movements and strategic practices. It hopes to contribute to an effective resistance and rejection of the racist, hierarchical, authoritarian ideologies and practices central in far-right populism. At the same time, it contributes to the creation of a large popular democratic and emancipatory front in Europe and beyond.