and the book of events
is always open halfway through.

*Wislawa Szymborska, ‘Love at First Sight’*¹

## Introduction

### General periodisation of Althusser’s work

Considered most broadly, Althusser’s engagement with Marx and Marxism took place in two stages. The first began with his entry into the French Communist Party in 1948 and ended around the mid-1970s. It was marked by attempts at a critical appropriation of certain parts of Marx’s thought. The more-or-less purely theoretical – centrally philosophical – character of this work was, he wrote, both cause and result of his political isolation in the Party. ‘I wished to . . . to struggle against triumphant Stalinism and its disastrous effects on my party’s politics. I had no choice at the time: if I had intervened publicly in the politics of the Party, which refused to publish even

¹ In Szymborska 1995, p. 198. The theme of contingency occurs in other poems in the same volume, e.g. ‘Could Have’ (pp. 65f) and ‘Under One Small Star’ (pp. 91f).
my philosophical writings (on Marx), judged heretical and dangerous, I would have been, at least down to 1970, immediately expelled, marginalized and left powerless to influence the Party at all. So there remained only one way for me to intervene politically in the Party: by way of pure theory – that is, philosophy’.\(^2\) The second period, which lasted to the effective end of his intellectual life about 1986, was politically a time of public criticism of the French Communist Party and theoretically one of wide-ranging criticism of Marx and Marxism, as well as other positions (such as Lacan’s), including major aspects of his own earlier ones, some of all this involving new developments in his thought.

The question of materialism in Althusser’s late work

A major subject of reflection in this second phase was materialism – ‘one of the most sensitive subjects [thèmes névralgiques] in philosophy’, ‘the hardest question of all’.\(^3\) Very roughly speaking, his work here falls into two periods. The first is marked most notably by his lecture ‘The Transformation of Philosophy’ (1976). During the second, from about mid-1982 to mid-1986, he produced a number of pieces which sought to delineate a certain ‘unique tradition’ of materialism, an ‘underground current’, a ‘materialist tradition almost completely ignored in the history of philosophy’,\(^4\) which was not present (explicitly anyway) in his earlier writings.\(^5\) This he called both the ‘materialism of the encounter [matérialisme de la rencontre]’ and ‘aleatory materialism’ (by which latter name it will be referred to from now on).\(^6\) Only

\(^2\) Althusser 1994d, p. 30. Also Althusser 1994e, pp. 185f, 196f, 221f. (On the aims and achievements of Althusser and his group during the period 1965–75, Althusser 1994d, p. 86.) See also a passage in some private, posthumously published notes from 1977–8 (Althusser 1994f, pp. 447–9) beginning: ‘Philosophy properly so-called was for me only on the horizon of political philosophy.’

\(^3\) Althusser 1994d, pp. 94, 56.

\(^4\) Althusser 1994b, p. 539f.

\(^5\) The qualification in parentheses is meant to take account of, for instance, Althusser’s remark in a 1985 letter in which he speaks of ‘thoughts that I have preserved and cultivated very carefully for a good thirty years, sharing them with only a very few intimates’, thoughts ‘on the philosophy of “the encounter”, which I am jealously sitting on’ (Althusser 1994d, p. 123). In a closely related passage in Althusser 1994e (p. 268), he writes: ‘… between November 1982 and February 1983 ... I expressed, for the first time in writing a certain number of ideas I had stored away in my mind for over twenty years ...’.

\(^6\) I have chosen this designation for two main reasons. Much the more important one is that there are good textual grounds. It was the title of one of his last scripts, dated 11 July 1986 (Althusser 1994c, p. 538), in Althusser 1994d it seems clearly to be
a small part of this was publicly accessible during his lifetime, and not all of it has been published since his death. However, it seems fairly clear that, at the very least, enough of it is now in print to permit a study of its main lines. This will be the main task of the present paper.

Scope of the paper

This is not an easy undertaking, both because the ideas in question are in themselves quite difficult, and because they are mostly presented in a very condensed and indeed often somewhat fragmentary way. (Althusser himself speaks, in a 1985 letter, simply of the ‘intuitions’ set out in one of his main presentations [‘Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre’].) Consequently, this material will certainly become the subject of much controversy as regards both interpretation and evaluation, and the present inquiry can at best contribute to the earliest stages of this discussion.

For Althusser’s preferred nomination (e.g. pp. 35 and, especially, 42), and it is term used the whole time by his interlocutor there (e.g. pp. 23, 34). A very subordinate one is that I cannot think of an acceptable English translation of the first, whereas ‘aleatory materialism’ is both a literal translation and perfectly acceptable English. (It may be worth remarking that ‘aléatoire’ is rendered in Althusser 1994e by ‘uncertain’. This is inaccurate, for the latter belongs primarily to the epistemic context, the former to the context of fact; aleatoriness entails uncertainty but not conversely. This lapse – in an otherwise excellent version – is especially unfortunate as it in effect conceals from the reader solely of the English translation some valuable personal clues to the understanding of Althusser’s late thought. See, e.g. pp. 116, 166, 227, 280, 282, 285, etc. In this last regard, see also 1994f, pp. 458f.)

7 The main very late texts which will be in question in this paper are, listed in the order (or probable order) of dates of composition: (1) Althusser 1994a; (2) Althusser 1994b; (3) Althusser 1994d; (4) Althusser 1994e; (5) Althusser 1993 (partial translation 1997); (6) ‘Portrait du philosophe matérialiste’ in Althusser 1994c, pp. 581–2.
8 Althusser 1994d, p. 123.
9 The history of these texts, so far as I can piece it together from editorial notes to them, seems to be essentially the following: Althusser 1994a was probably written in the summer of 1982, with an eye to its incorporation into a book which was never completed, but the main elements of which are contained in Althusser 1994b, posthumously edited from pages written in autumn 1982. The most important part of Althusser 1994d for present purposes consists of French texts (initially published in Spanish as Althusser 1988a) based on a series of interviews with Althusser by Fernando Navarro, written up mainly by the latter using the interviews themselves, a script of the never completed book just referred to, and earlier published and unpublished texts by Althusser; the result was also worked over by Althusser himself, who contributed a brief preface. Althusser 1994d also contains some letters from Althusser (mainly to Navarro). The whole spans 1984–7. Althusser 1994e was written in early 1985. Althusser 1993/1997 consists of two chapters from the original draft of the preceding, later dropped and replaced by a summary (at pp. 215–20). ‘Portrait du philosophe matérialiste’ was one of a group of philosophical pieces written during June–July 1986, presumably his last.
these reasons, and also because most of this recently published material has not yet appeared in English translation, I shall both give fairly detailed references to and also quote extensively from it. But the matters in question will require much thorough thinking through of the issues and, to some extent, supplementation of what is not, in the patent sense at least, in the texts themselves. I raise questions of criticism only where these are useful – or even necessary – for tackling the task of exegesis. In general, I shall be content if the paper goes some way to exhibiting, with regard to its theme, what are, in Althusser’s own memorable words, the ‘elementary but necessary ingredients of authentic thought – rigour, coherence, and clarity’.

Layout of the paper

Since Althusser on occasion calls the tradition of materialism with which he is concerned ‘underground’ or ‘subterranean’, that with which it is contrasted may be dubbed ‘superterranean’. Section I will be devoted to sketching it. Section II is a first attempt at an outline of the former. Section III presents some problems which arise with this. Assistance in solving these problems is sought in a perhaps prima facie unlikely place, namely, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and Section IV will contain an outline of some parts of this work. Section V tackles the problems set out in Section III with the help of what is in Section IV. Section VI supplements the considerations contained in the preceding section. In Section VII, the general elucidation resumes, treating the closely connected themes of necessity as a modality and of lawfulness (in the scientific sense). Section VIII takes up Althusser’s very

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Althusser 1990a will also be extensively referred to at certain points; it is an earlier text, but sets out some positions present in the later ones, though not in the same amplitude. In addition, it has the immense advantage of having been publicly presented by Althusser himself and indeed published during his life-time (though in Spanish) and also the not inconsiderable one of being available in English.

Althusser 1995 contains earlier texts which, in the main, have less relevance to the subject of this paper than those listed so far. However, it will be necessary to cite some of them later on.

10 [Editorial note: all translations not otherwise attributed are either by the present author or taken from a collection of Althusser’s work to be published by Verso in 2005 under the title *Later Writings*. The text of the present essay has been modified, where necessary, to bring it into line with the translations to appear in *Later Writings*. In particular, it should be noted that ‘gel’, Suchting’s translation of ‘prendre’ in Althusser’s technical use of the term, has been changed throughout to ‘take hold’. Thanks to G.M. Goshgarian for help in such matters.]

11 Althusser 1994e, p. 223.
puzzling notion of ‘constant’, inevitably in connection with the notion of law. Section IX discusses a number of questions clustering about the themes of the status of ‘aleatory materialism’ as a ‘philosophy’. Finally, in Section X, I shall briefly outline some further questions which have emerged or been suggested by the preceding inquiry and which constitute part of the agenda for further work in this area.

I. The superterranean current of materialism

General characterisation of traditional philosophy

What is being called here the ‘superterranean’ current of materialism belongs, Althusser claims, to traditional philosophy. One of his characterisations of the latter is as follows (the matter will be returned to later on).

Philosophy . . . appears as the science of the Whole – that is to say, of all things . . . philosophy . . . considers it has an irreplaceable task to accomplish. This is to speak the Truth about all human practices and ideas. Philosophy believes that . . . if it did not exist, the world would be bereft of its Truth . . . [and] . . . for the world to exist, it is necessary for such truth to be spoken. This truth is logos, or origin, or meaning.\(^\text{12}\)

Thus, from this perspective, traditional philosophy is constituted in the first place by its concern with the totality of what exists (‘the Whole’), and with the truth about this totality \textit{qua} totality (‘the Truth’) – that is, with claims of

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\(^{12}\) Althusser 1990a, pp. 245, 246. Althusser said similar things before, e.g. 1971, p. 173; 1990, pp. 80, 103, and also works belonging to the period particularly in question in this study – see e.g. Althusser 1994d, pp. 43, 50, Althusser 1994e, p. 170. In terms of the distinction made well-known by Isaiah Berlin, it is the truth of the hedgehog rather than the fox: ‘The fox knows many things. The hedgehog only one./ One big one.’ (‘Archilochos’ as translated by B.H. Fowler in Fowler 1992, p. 62, #201.) It may be remarked that Althusser’s characterisation of the nature of philosophy as traditionally understood is in line with ones available in various ‘standard’ sources. For example, Dilthey writes that ‘religion, poetry and unsophisticated [\text{urwüchsige}] metaphysics express the significance and meaning [\text{Bedeutung und Sinn}] of the whole. . . . The appearance of a world-view . . . with a claim to universal validity marks the beginning of metaphysics . . . which promises to solve the riddle of life in a methodical way’ (Dilthey 1960, pp. 82, 94, 96). Jaspers writes: ‘What one calls philosophy is preoccupation with the whole. . . . The metaphysical world-view . . . is concerned with the whole (or totality) and the absolute (or the unconditioned, ultimate). The structure of the human spirit is such that (he absolute is, as it were, a location [\text{ein Ort}] for man, where he must, unavoidably, put something, be it practically, in his life, without knowing it in its own character, or in a thinking way for his consciousness also’ (Jaspers 1994, 1, p. 184f).
unrestricted generality about what exists – a truth which is about the origin and meaning/telos of the totality qua totality.

The two basic tendencies in traditional philosophy

Philosophy as thus conceived exhibits two fundamental ‘lines’, namely, idealism and materialism. These are only fundamental tendencies: each line, each specific system so labelled, contains elements of the other, or what Althusser calls a ‘mutual encroachment [empiétement]’ of idealism and materialism. This is because what constitutes a philosophy is its position in what Kant called, with reference to metaphysics, a ‘battlefield [Kampfplatz]’, and in this struggle each seeks to invest the enemy on his own territory.

Idealism is explicitly concerned with Origin and End. But ‘every . . . materialism of the rationalist tradition . . . including that commonly attributed to Marx, Engels and Lenin . . . is a materialism of necessity and teleology, i.e., a disguised form of idealism’. This traditional materialism regards order as immanent in disorder (which is teleological), and contingency as an exception with respect to a fundamental necessity. (There are also examples of the contrary situation, that is, of elements of materialism in idealism.)

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**Notes:**

13 Althusser 1994d, pp. 52, 56–8, 95–7, 103. Also, at many other places, e.g. Althusser 1976, pp. 61 n. 20, 144f. Althusser refers to Macherey 1976 and Raymond 1973. The two-lines view in general is due to Engels (1970, Chapter 2, pp. 345ff), though he considers them in unconditional terms. The nuance of tendencies is probably due to remarks on Kant in Lenin 1962, p. 198.

14 Althusser 1994d, pp. 98, 103f.

15 Althusser 1994d, pp. 35, 51f, 53f, 55, 102–5, and many other places, e.g. Althusser 1976, p. 166; Althusser 1990a, p. 255; Althusser 1997, pp. 10f. (For Kant’s reference see Critique of Pure Reason, A viii.)

16 Althusser 1994d, pp. 58, 97; 1994b, 542f, 561f.

17 Althusser 1994d, p. 42 – also pp. 95ff. There is a parallel passage in Althusser 1994b, p. 540. (This is how Althusser puts it, but a stricter formulation would be, arguably, that traditional materialism contains elements of idealism rather than being a form of it.)

18 That is, presumably, the End – viz. order – is implicit in the Origin from which it develops of necessity. Cf. Althusser 1994b, pp. 540, 542, 565; Althusser 1994d, p. 42.

II. The ‘underground’, ‘unique’ current of ‘aleatory’ materialism: a preliminary outline

Origins and representatives of aleatory materialism

Whether or not Althusser finds the historical origin of aleatory materialism in Epicurus, it is by reference to him (rather than, say, to the earlier Democritus20) that he presents its basic principles, and by reference to which he identifies it or elements of it in a wide variety of later thinkers: in the first place Machiavelli, Spinoza and Marx.21 The following sets out a preliminary view of aleatory materialism, with primary reference, as in Althusser himself, to Epicurus. This will turn out to be very incomplete and so in need of extensive supplementation, but it will afford an initial orientation.

Atoms and the void

Althusser writes:

Epicurus says that before the formation of the world an infinity of atoms were falling parallel to each other in the void. They are still falling. This implies . . . that . . . before the formation of the world, there was no Meaning, neither Cause nor End nor Reason nor Unreason [Déraison].22

20 Althusser seems to be inconsistent about the character of Democritus’s materialism. It is often referred to in the same breath with that of Epicurus (e.g. Althusser 1994d, pp. 35, 40, 42, 47; Althusser 1993, p. 102f), and, indeed, the first section of Althusser 1994d is headed ‘A Philosophy for Marxism: The Line of Democritus’ (Cf. Lenin 1962, p. 130, who writes of ‘the struggle between materialism and idealism, the struggle between the tendencies or lines of Plato and Democritus in philosophy.’) But in e.g. Althusser 1994b, p. 565, Democritus is cited as a form of traditional materialism: ‘Epicurus . . . never adhered to the “mechanical” materialism of Democritus, this materialism being only a resurgence, within a possible philosophy of the encounter, of the dominant idealism of Order as immanent in Disorder.’ Althusser 1994b, p. 563 appears to be ambiguous.


22 Althusser 1994b, p. 541.
Thus, ‘before the formation of the world’ there exist two basic items: (i) atoms, and (ii) a void. Furthermore, regarding (i), it is said (iii) that there is an infinity of them, (iv) that they fall through (ii), and (v) that they so fall in parallel lines. This is all that exists. Hence no Meaning, nor Cause nor End nor Reason/Unreason.

‘Swerve’, ‘encounter’, world-formation
Supervenient upon this situation there occurs a clinamen,
an infinitesimal swerve [déviation]; ‘no-one knows where, or when, or how’ it takes place, or what causes an atom to ‘swerve’ from its vertical fall in the void, and, breaking the parallelism in an almost negligible way at one point [sur un point], induce an encounter [rencontre] with the atom next to it, and, from encounter to encounter, a pile-up [carambolage] and the birth of a world – that is, of the aggregation of atoms induced, in a chain reaction, by the initial swerve and encounter. [Thus] . . . the origin of every world, and therefore of all reality and all meaning, is due to a swerve . . .

More precisely:

In order for the swerve to give rise to an encounter out of which a world is born, that encounter . . . must be . . . a lasting encounter, which then becomes the basis for all reality, all necessity, all Meaning and all reason. But the encounter can also not last, and then there is no world . . . . The world may be called the accomplished fact . . . this accomplishment of the fact is just a pure effect of contingency, since it depends on the aleatory encounter

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23 Althusser sometimes speaks, as here, of the formation of ‘the’ world and sometimes of ‘a’ world. I cannot see that anything hangs on this distinction. I suggest that ‘a’ simply emphasises the position – set out in the rest of the passage – that there are many possible worlds, whilst ‘the’ makes the points which are made by reference to one (otherwise uncharacterised) of them which happens to be realised. So I shall use the two articles – as Althusser seems to do – interchangeably.

24 Althusser 1994b, p. 541. I render ‘déviation’ as ‘swerve’ rather than, as would be verbally closer to the original, ‘deviation’, because Lucretius’s Latin ‘clinamen’ (Lucretius 1992, 2.292 – cf. his use, in this passage of the verbs inclinare, declinare) is standardly translated into English, in this context, by ‘swerve’ (or ‘swerving’), as is the Greek equivalent [parenglisis] in the context of the philosophy of Epicurus. (The idea does not occur in the latter’s extant writings but is ascribed to him, with complete certainty, on the basis of ancient doxographical reports.) It may be added that, on at least one occasion (Althusser 1994d, p. 42), Althusser speaks of the ‘déviation’ as being ‘produced’ by the clinamen. But this must be a slip, since, as the passage to which this is a note correctly puts it, the two are identical.
of the atoms due to the swerve of the clinamen. . . . Once the fact has been accomplished, [there] is established the reign of Reason, Meaning, Necessity and End.  

Thus, to continue the above listing of basic points, there may occur (vi) a ‘swerve’ – in the previously parallel vertical motion of an atom, producing (vii) an ‘encounter’ between it and a neighbouring atom. As a consequence, a ‘world’ may arise. Whether it does depends on (viii) whether the encounter ‘lasts’ (The passages cited are not quite clear about what exactly must ‘last’, but presumably it is the result of the ‘chain-reaction’ of encounters.) At any rate, (ix) both the original encounter and any subsequent ones are purely contingent, aleatory. This is presumably what Althusser means when he writes later of ‘the miracle of the clinamen [le miracle du clinamen]’: a ‘miracle’, it may be assumed, insofar as it is something which has no (natural) explanation. Consequently, the world produced is similarly purely contingent, aleatory. However, (x) becomes the basis of Meaning (etc.) which was not there before. Thus the world does not have its origin in anything which could confer meaning on it; rather, the world confers meaning on itself, as it were.

In sum . . .

At one place, Althusser formulates aleatory materialism in lapidary form as ‘a philosophy simply of result’. Again, several times he uses a striking figure:

the idealist philosopher is a man who, when he catches a train, knows from the outset the station he will be leaving from and the one he will be going to; he knows the beginning [origine] and end of his route, just as he knows the origin and destiny of man, history and the world. The materialist philosopher, in contrast, is a man who always catches ‘a moving train’, like

26 Althusser 1994b, p. 564.
27 Althusser warns elsewhere (Althusser 1994d, p. 42) against interpreting the clinamen and the deviation it produces in the direction of an ‘idealism of freedom’: ‘the existence of human freedom in the world of necessity itself’. However, the preservation of freedom as against the Democritean doctrine of thoroughgoing necessity was at least one of Epicurus’s own basic motives in introducing the doctrine of the swerve (see e.g. his Letter to Menoeceus, 133–4), and this consideration certainly counted heavily with Lucretius (1992, 2, pp. 251–93). Other ancient writers also read Epicureanism this way (e.g. Cicero, De Fato, x, 22–3). It was one of the features of Epicurus’s philosophy of nature which recommended it over that of Democritus to Marx in his doctoral dissertation (Marx 1968, especially Part II, Chapter 1).
the heroes of American Westerns. A train passes by in front of him: he can let it pass [passer] and nothing will happen [se passe] between him and the train; but he can also catch it while it is moving. This philosopher knows neither Origin nor first Principle nor destination. He boards the moving train and settles into an available seat or strolls through the cars, chatting with the travellers. He witnesses, without having been able to predict it, everything that occurs in an unforeseen, aleatory way, gathering an infinite amount of information and making an infinite number of observations, as much of the train itself as of the passengers and the countryside which, through the window, he sees rolling by.  

III. Some problems for the further exegesis of ‘aleatory materialism’

A problem about the ontological status of ‘atoms’

What has been said in the passage from the major exposition already cited above (in the subsection “‘Swerve’, ‘encounter’, ‘world-formation’”) ‘implies’, Althusser continues, that before the formation of the world, there was nothing, and also that all the elements of the world existed from all eternity, before any world ever was. . . . The encounter creates nothing of the reality of the world, which is nothing but agglomerated atoms, but . . . it endows the atoms themselves with their reality, which, without swerve and encounter, would be nothing but abstract elements lacking substantiality [consistance] and existence. . . . The encounter in no way creates the reality of the world, which is only agglomerated atoms, but . . . it confers their reality upon the atoms themselves, which without swerve and encounter, would be only abstract elements, with neither consistence [consistance] nor existence. . . . The atoms’ very existence is due to nothing but the swerve and the encounter prior to which they led only a ghostly [fantomatique] existence. . . . Before the accomplishment of the fact, before the world, there is only the non-accomplishment of the fact, the non-world that is merely the unreal existence of the atoms.  

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This seems to threaten the intelligibility of the picture just sketched. How can it be the case both that there is ‘nothing’ before the formation of a world and also that the elements of the latter, the atoms, exist eternally? This problem is hardly cleared up by the assertion that, before the formation of a world, these elements exist in a merely ‘abstract’, ‘ghostly’, ‘unreal’ way. What could be meant by this?

A similar exegetical problem arises in a slightly later passage, according to which once an encounter has resulted in a durable outcome

... the atoms enter the realm of Being that they inaugurate: they constitute beings, assignable, distinct, localisable beings endowed with such-and-such a property (depending on the time and place); in short, there emerges in them a structure of Being or of the world that assigns each of its elements its place, meaning, and role, or, better, establishes them as ‘elements of...’ in such a way that the atoms, far from being the origin of the world, are merely the secondary consequence [retombée] of its assignment and advent [assignement].

This, in effect, repeats the exegetical puzzle set out to start with: whereas, to start with, it seemed as though atoms are ‘the origin of the world’, or, at least, the existential presupposition of the encounters which gives rise to a ‘world’, it seems now to be said, in effect, that the converse is the case.

Problems about the ‘swerve’

If what endows the atoms with reality is encounters (whatever that may mean) and if what produces encounters are swerves, then it would seem to follow that the latter are (to borrow a phrase from Aristotle) ‘prior by nature’ to the parallel, rectilinear motion which up to this point seemed to be ascribed to atoms in their primordial state. This is in fact affirmed where Althusser speaks of ‘the primacy of the swerve over the rectilinearity [rectitude] of the straight [droit] trajectory’. But what can ‘swerve’ mean (in this context anyway) if not deviation from a rectilinear path?

Confusion is worse confounded by the following passage:

In the ‘nothing [rien]’ of the swerve there occurs an encounter between one atom and another, and this event [événement] becomes advent [avènement] on

31 Althusser 1994b, p. 565.
condition of the parallelism of the atoms, for it is this parallelism which, violated on just one occasion [une unique fois], induces [provoque] the gigantic pile-up and collision-interlocking [accrochage] of an infinite number of atoms, from which a world is born (one world or another: hence the plurality of possible worlds, and the fact that the concept of possibility can be rooted in the concept of original disorder).33

Why is the swerve called ‘nothing’, or, more precisely, “‘nothing’”? What is to be understood by ‘event’ and ‘advent’? How can the ‘parallelism’ (of motions) be said to be ‘violated’ if the swerve is indeed ontologically primary?

A problem about the determinants of a ‘world’

The previously cited passage continues immediately:

Whence the form of order and the form of beings whose birth is induced [provoquées à naître] by this pile-up, determined as they are by the structure of the encounter; whence, once the encounter has been effected (but not before), the primacy of the structure over its elements . . .34

Does the final remark imply that before the encounter there was a structure, but that it did not have a primacy over the elements? But what could this structure be but the parallel vertical fall of the atoms in the void? And is it implied that, at this stage, the elements have primacy over the structure?

. . . whence, finally, what one must call an affinity and complementariness [complétude] of the elements that come into play in the encounter, their ‘readiness to collide-interlock [accrochabilité]’, in order that this encounter ‘take hold [prenne]’, i.e., ‘take form [prenne forme]’, finally give birth to Forms, and new Forms – as water ‘takes hold’ when ice is there waiting for it, or milk does when it curdles, or mayonnaise when it emulsifies. Hence the primacy of ‘nothing’ over all ‘form’, and of aleatory materialism over all formalism. In other words, not just anything can [n’importe quoi] produce just anything, but only elements destined [voués] to encounter each other and, by virtue of their affinity, to ‘take hold’ one on [sur] the other . . . the atoms are . . . ‘hooked’, that is, susceptible of [propres à] interlocking one after the other, from all eternity, for good, for ever.35

33 Althusser 1994b, p. 564.
34 Ibid.
35 Althusser 1994b, pp. 564f. The translation into English of ‘prendre’/‘prise’ as
This passage seems to affirm that atoms have properties prior to their encounters with one another and that these properties delimit or constrain the possible outcomes of encounters. But this appears to be inconsistent with the previous assertion that atoms are, prior to their encounters, merely ‘abstract’ (etc.) (whatever that may mean). We are used to the idea that the ‘abstract entities’ of pure mathematics have definite properties, but it is indeed much less clear how an atom could intelligibly said to have them without being existentially determinate.

However, a little further on, Althusser seems to restate the idea that the atoms, considered in themselves, as it were, have no determinate properties:

... nothing in the elements of the encounter prefigures, before the actual encounter, the contours and determinations of the being that will emerge from it. ... [N]o determination of the being which issues from the ‘taking-hold’ of the encounter is prefigured, even in filigree [en pointillé], in the being of the elements that converge in the encounter. Quite the contrary: no determination of these elements can be assigned except by working backwards [dans le retour en arrière] from the result to its becoming, in its retroaction.36

Finally, shortly after this, Althusser writes, apropos Hobbes:

No doubt man in the state of pure nature, although he has a body and, so to speak, no soul, bears within himself a transcendent capacity for all that he is and all that will happen to him – perfectibility – which is, as it were, the abstraction and transcendental condition of possibility for all anticipation of all development; and also a faculty that is perhaps more important, pity. ... But all that, which is posed from the beginning of the state of ‘pure’ nature, is not active there, has no existence or effect, is only expectation of the future that awaits man.37

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Althusser uses them here and clinamen poses a problem which I cannot see how to solve in any very satisfactory way. It arises from the fact that no single set of cognate English words is appropriate for all the contexts in which Althusser uses the original ones, and the fact that, since they have a sort of technical use in his lexis, they would seem to require a univocal English rendering. Althusser 1994e, p. 227 has ‘gel’, which is excellent in some contexts but unacceptable in others; e.g. one cannot properly say that water ‘gels’ when it turns to ice. ‘Set’ and ‘take’ (and cognates) each have similar advantages and disadvantages. [Here, preference has gone to ‘take hold’, perhaps the least unsatisfactory option (Suchting’s choice was ‘gel’).]  
36 Althusser 1994b, p. 566.  
37 Althusser 1994b, p. 558.
What is – indeed can be – meant here by a ‘transcendent capacity’, ‘transcendental condition’ for what is to happen in the future, one which – presumably qua ‘transcendent’/‘transcendental’ (whatever this means) – ‘has no existence’?

**IV. Materials for a solution to these problems: the ontology of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus***

*The materials*

What is to be made of these exegetical problems? I suggest that we have at least two clues to solutions.

One is afforded by Althusser’s passing reference\(^{38}\) to the proposition which opens Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: ‘The world is all that is the case [*was der Fall ist*]’. The point of Althusser’s citation lies in the word ‘case’ – in the original, *Fall*, cognate with *fallen*, to fall, this being tied up with the ‘fall’ of the atoms, and with ‘case’ from the Latin *casus*, ‘chance’ cognate with *caedere*, to fall. But this is not the significant point for present purposes, which is rather that it directs attention to the *Tractatus* as such. More specifically, I suggest that what may be called the ontology of the *Tractatus* presented in the paragraphs which follow the opening statement just cited, gives us, at a minimum, decisive help in solving the exegetical problems in question.

The other clue is an incidental remark by Althusser himself in a much earlier writing that ‘in philosophy you can only think through metaphor’\(^{39}\). However, this second clue will be of more use later on. The immediate task is, then, to delineate the ontology of the *Tractatus*, just to the extent necessary for present purposes.

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\(^{39}\) Althusser 1976, p. 140, and similarly p. 107. It may be worth noting that this is very much in the spirit of Wittgenstein’s later work where philosophical doctrines are seen as dependent upon certain ‘pictures [*Bilder*]’ embodied in language and dominating us through it (e.g. *Philosophical Investigations*, Pt. I, sec. 115), pictures which are to be combated by other pictures (e.g. the picture of meanings as determined by inner images criticised with the help of languages seen in terms of the metaphor of games).
Elements of the ontology of Wittgenstein’s ‘Tractatus’

The following two statements, from the first main section of the work, encapsulate what may be not too inadequately called the ontology set out in it, at least insofar as it is relevant to the present context. (Numbered – most often decimalised – references are all to the *Tractatus.*)

(A) ‘The world is the totality of facts [*Tatsachen*], not of things [*Dinge*].’ (1.1)

(B) ‘Each one [*sc. fact*] can be the case or not the case and all the rest remain the same.’ (1.21)

The primacy of ‘facts’ over ‘things’

(A) presupposes a distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘things’. What, more precisely, is meant by these terms?

(1) ‘Fact’ . . . a fact is the existence [*das Bestehen*] of states of affairs [*Sachverhalten*].’ (2 – cf. 2.04)

There is disagreement among commentators as to whether ‘fact’ and ‘state of affairs’ are synonymous, or whether the latter designates a certain sort of possibility, what may be called the class of ‘possible facts’, a ‘fact’ tout court being a state of affairs which is the referent of a true statement. It is not important for present purposes to go into this exegetical question. It must suffice to say that it is the second view which will be adopted here, if only to have a terminologically convenient way of referring to ‘possible facts’. The main immediate issue is: what is meant by ‘state of affairs’?

A state of affairs is a combination [*Verbindung*] of objects [*Gegenstände*] (affairs [*Sachen*] things). (2.01)

So, the initial expression ‘things’ is fairly clearly synonymous with ‘objects’ or ‘affairs’. They may thus be used interchangeably, and what is meant by ‘thing’ may be elucidated by what is said about ‘object’ and ‘affair’.

(2) ‘Thing’ (‘Object’, ‘Affair’) (a) ‘It is essential to a thing that it can be a constituent [*Bestandteil*] of a state of affairs.’ (2.011)

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40 There are two published English translations of the *Tractatus*, by C.K. Ogden and F.P. Ramsey (1922) and by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuiness (1961) – I have consulted both but followed neither consistently.

41 Black 1964 discusses the issue in detail at pp. 39ff and comes to the conclusion that, on balance, they are at least usually synonyms.
That is, a thing is a possible constituent of a state of affairs.

(b) ‘. . . there is no object that we can think outside its combination with others.’ (2.0121)

That is: reference to a thing is intelligible only as a constituent of a state of affairs (here: a possible fact).

A thing is independent insofar as it can occur in all possible situations [Sachlagen], but this form of independence is a form of connection with a state of affairs, a form of dependence. (2.0122)

That is: a thing is independent insofar as it need not occur in any state of affairs but it is dependent insofar as it must be possible for it so to occur.

That things contain the possibility of all their combinations (cf. 2.014) and that they are only thinkable in combinations are two sides of the same coin.

(c) ‘Objects are simple.’ (2.02) ‘Every statement about complexes can be broken-up into a statement about their constituents and into the propositions that describe the complexes completely’. (2.0201)

That is, a thing is what may be called an ‘atom’. Such ‘atoms’ may combine into ‘molecules’. However, what is true of the latter is wholly reducible to what is true about the former.

(d) ‘. . . if a thing can occur in a state of affairs, the possibility of the state of affairs must be already written into [präjudiziert] the thing’. (2.012) What is thus ‘written into’ a thing is its ‘internal’ versus ‘external’ properties (2.01231). ‘A property is internal if is unthinkable that its object should not possess it’. (4.123) Thus it is objects’ internal properties which determine the specific possibilities of its occurrence in states of affairs, its ‘logical space’ (1.13).

‘The possibility of its occurring in states of affairs is the form of an object.’ (2.0141) Thus the logical form of an object is the totality of its ‘degrees of freedom’, as it were, to combine with other objects ‘an imaginary [gedachte] world, however different it may be from the real one, must have something [Etwas] – a form – in common with it’. (2.022) ‘This unalterable [feste] form consists precisely in objects’. (2.023)

‘Form’ is connected with ‘structure’:

‘In a state of affairs objects relate to one another [verhalten sich . . . zueinander] in a definite way’. (2.031) ‘The way in which objects hang together
[zusammenhängen] is the structure of the state of affairs’. (2.032) ‘The form is the possibility of the structure’. (2.033) ‘The structure of a fact consists in [besteht aus] the structures of states of affairs’. (2.034)

(e) ‘Objects are what is unalterable, what is stable [das Bestehende]; their configuration is what is changing, what is unstable [Unbeständige]’. (2.0271) ‘The configuration of objects forms [bildet] the state of affairs’. (2.0272)

Thus, things are, in a way, like the co-ordinates of positions in a mathematical space, in one sense independent of one another insofar as they are specific, but, in another, dependent insofar as they are positions in ‘a’ space. A state of affairs is a certain combination of those positions (into, for example, a square or a circle). Facts are states of affairs realised by material points which may, on occasion, occupy the relevant positions in a real space represented by the mathematical space.

(f) In a passage cited above it is said that objects/things ‘hang together’. The significance of the use of this particular verb emerges from another passage. ‘In the state of affairs objects fit into one another [hängen . . . ineinander] like the links of a chain.’ (2.03) So it is etymologically appropriate to describe a state of affairs as a ‘concatenation’ of objects. The central point of the remark is to deny that the objects are linked to one another by something else, which idea would, of course, lead to an infinite regress of linkages. The links are linked just by virtue of what they individually are and their position with respect to one another.42

In sum, with regard to (A): What actually exists is the totality of ‘facts’, that is, of certain combinations of ‘things’. What facts are possible (the class of ‘state of affairs’) is determined by the internal properties of ‘things’, that is, what constitutes them as specific sorts of ‘things’. But ‘things’ are not ‘constituents’ of states of affairs and hence of facts, in the sense of actually existing prior to what they are ‘constituents’ of, for they are always already such constituents. To borrow a term from mediaeval philosophy, ‘things’ may be described as ‘virtual’.

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42 Were Wittgenstein given to historical allusions, one might think that there is a polemical one here to the mediaeval notion of vinculum substantiale, doubtless best known from Leibniz’s use of it (see especially his correspondence with des Bosses).
The reciprocal independence of facts

We turn now to (B). On the one hand, facts qua states of affairs are interdependent in the sense that the latter are subject to the constraint of ‘logical space’ and: ‘In logic nothing is accidental’ (2.012). However, on the other hand, what states of affairs are realised as facts does not depend on logic and ‘... outside logic everything is accident [Zufall]’ (6.3). ‘Whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is. There is no a priori order of things’ (5.634). ‘What can be described can also happen’ (6.362). ‘States of affairs are independent of one another. From the existence or non-existence [Bestehen oder Nichtbestehen] of a state of affairs it is impossible to infer the existence or non-existence of another’ (2.061–2 and cf. 5.135). There is no ‘causal nexus’ (5.136, 5.1361 cf. 6.37). (Note that ‘nexus’ is derived from ‘nectere’, to bind, fasten together, and cf. the preceding remark about how objects are combined in states of affairs like links in a chain, that is, without mediation.) To borrow Black’s admirable image:43 the world is a ‘mosaic’ of facts.

The primacy of facts again

Thus, to return to the beginning, what is being denied in affirming that the world is a totality of facts and not of things is that the world is an entity which can be named (for example, ‘atoms and the void’, ‘God or nature’, ‘Absolute Spirit’) rather than the common object of a set of true statements/propositions. Facts cannot be named/designated, only stated/asserted. They are, qua facts, that is, existent, irreducible to things/objects, though statements about them can be analysed into them.44

The materials contained in this section may now be used to propose a solution to the exegetical problems outlined in Section III.

44 This view is uncommon in the history of philosophy. C.S. Peirce is one of the few who held it. ‘Reality belongs primarily to facts, and attaches to things only as elements of facts.’ (Collected Papers, 8: p. 87, cit. Black 1964, p. 30). John Anderson, whose work is practically unknown outside Australia (and little known there nowadays), was another.
V. Proposed solutions to the earlier exegetical problems

The problem of the ontological status of ‘atoms’

This was (see Section III above) the problem of reconciling two positions; (i) what are ontologically and temporally primary are atoms (falling vertically and in parallel through the void), atoms which sometimes ‘swerve’ in aleatory fashion and are consequently involved in ‘encounters’ which, if lasting, form ‘worlds’; (ii) these atoms are somehow abstract entities with respect to these combinations (‘worlds’), which are thus what is actually primary.

Now suppose (a) that ‘atoms’ here are thought of on the model of ‘things’ in the Tractatus and (b) that ‘world’ is thought of on the model of ‘totality of facts’ there.

Furthermore, let us make a distinction between different sorts of ‘priority’ – specifically between (i) ‘logical’ (ii) ‘ontological’ and (iii) ‘temporal’ priority, introducing these in the following way, (i) A is ‘logically’ prior to B if and only if the constitutive properties of A determine the logical possibility of B (for example, the system of natural numbers is logically prior, in this sense, to the system of real numbers). (ii) A is ‘ontologically’ prior to B if and only if B really exists (that is, is what makes a certain statement true) only if A really exists (for example, atoms are ontologically prior to molecules). (iii) A is ‘temporally’ prior to B if and only if A exists before (in the temporal sense) B does (for example, a certain bullet is temporally prior to the wound it causes). These characterisations are certainly rough and ready, but if they serve to help clear up the exegetical problem under consideration then this does not matter.

Using this apparatus, we may say that (a) ‘atoms’ are prior with respect to (b), a ‘world’ in sense (i), but not in either sense (ii) or sense (iii). We may also say that (b) is prior with respect to (a) in both sense (ii) and sense (iii) but not in sense (i).

In other words, (a) may be said to be ‘analytically’ prior but not ‘existentially’ so, whereas the reverse is true of (b). To borrow terminology from Hume, what is in question here is that (a) are ‘distinct’ but not ‘separable’: there is, between them only what he calls a ‘distinction of reason’.45 In such terms, (a) may well be described as ‘abstract’, insofar as, since there are different possible

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worlds, they may, for various reasons, be considered in isolation only in abstraction from the combinations in which they always actually occur. Taking an image from Lucretius, though using it to make a somewhat different point, atoms might be thought of as, in some respects, like the letters of an alphabet, which have their primary existence only in the words (here thought of as the analogy of facts) which they make up, though they may be, for certain purposes, considered in isolation from those words. That is, letters may be regarded, metaphorically, as linguistic atoms.

The original exegetical problem may be diagnosed as arising from a confusion between these contexts of ‘priority’ The confusion which must surely be sheeted home, in the final analysis, to Althusser’s maladroit presentation at this point, for this makes it entirely natural to take Althusser to mean that there exist first of all – temporally ‘first’ – separate atoms which only afterwards – temporally ‘afterwards’ – combine into a ‘world’. However, on the present interpretation, ‘before’ here should be taken rather in a non-temporal, ‘logical’, ‘analytical’ sense.

The problem about the ‘swerve’

This was the problem (see Section III above) of reconciling two positions: (i) what gives rise to an ‘encounter’ is an (aleatory) ‘swerve’ of atoms from primordial rectilinear, parallel motions, (ii) the ‘swerve’ is prior to rectilinear motion. What has been said in the preceding subsection furnishes the materials for solving this problem in the following way. Swerves are responsible for encounters between atoms, and encounters, if they last, produce those

46 Though ‘things’/‘objects’ are ‘abstract’ with respect to their combinations in ‘facts’/‘states of affairs’ which alone exist independently, they are not ‘abstract’ in the way in which, to recur to a distinction in Althusser’s earlier work, which is preserved in the later, ‘theoretical’ ‘objects’ are abstract with respect to real objects. ‘Things’ are as real as ‘facts’, they belong to the same ontological ‘category’, since the first are constituents of the second; they are both, in terms of the second pair, ‘real objects’. However, both ‘real’ and ‘object’ in ‘real object’ are categorically different, respectively, from both ‘theoretical’ and ‘object’ in ‘theoretical object’. ‘Theoretical objects’ are necessary for the purpose of referring to, analysing both ‘facts’ and ‘things’. In this regard, there would seem to be a relation to the idea of ‘minimal parts’ (Epicurus: Elachista [Letter to Herodotus, 36–59], Lucretius: Minimae partae, minima [1992, 1, pp. 599–634, 2, pp. 478–99]), that is, those parts which an atom must have, since it has magnitude, but which are, qua parts of actually indivisible atoms, really inseparable from one another, and can be separated only in thought.

47 See Lucretius 1992, 1, pp. 196–7, 823–5, 912–14; 2, pp. 1013–18. The comparison has even more force in Lucretius, since in Latin elementa (like stoicheia in Greek) means both physical elements and letters of the alphabet.
combinations of atoms which are called ‘worlds’. But it is the latter which are ontologically prior and, in this sense, swerves have ontological priority over the rectilinear, parallel motions with respect to which they are described as ‘swerves’. Furthermore, calling on the second clue to solve our exegetical problems alluded to in the first section of Section IV above, namely, Althusser’s thesis that philosophy works exclusively through metaphor, it may be suggested that talk of the rectilinear, parallel motions serves to express the fact that the properties of the ‘atoms’ understood as ‘abstract’, isolated objects do not determine specific combinations or ‘worlds’. From this perspective, those motions are, considered from an ontological point of view, as ‘abstract’ as the ‘atoms’ themselves.

Finally, we saw that a ‘swerve’ was said to be a ‘nothing’. This may also be explicated as a metaphor along the preceding lines. For, since the swerve is what is ontologically prior, it is only in the logical sense of priority that a swerve is a movement away from a prior parallel ‘motion’.

The problem of the determinants of a ‘world’

A further problem of interpretation arose in the subsection ‘A problem about the determinants of a “world”’ in reconciling two positions: (i) encounters are totally aleatory and atoms are purely abstract; (ii) atoms have ‘affinities’ with one another, dispositions to combine, as it were, which pre-exist encounters, so that not just anything can arise as a result of an encounter.

This problem can be solved along the above line of interpretation, as follows. ‘Things’ have ‘internal’ properties which constitute their ‘form’, and constrain, though in no way determine, their ‘external’ properties (given by the facts in which they happen to occur); the ‘internal’ properties thus determine, to borrow Althusser’s own language in another place, the ‘limits of variation’ of facts, those which are logically possible. Similarly, atoms qua units of analysis have such internal properties and these are the ones which constitute the ‘affinities’ of atoms towards one another. With respect to the ‘internal’ properties of atoms, they are ‘distinct’ but not ‘separable’, though the atoms with such properties may combine in many different ways – consistent with those properties – conferring on them their ‘external’ relations.

Furthermore, all this is consistent with the passage quoted above in which Althusser says that nothing in the elements ‘prefigures’ the character of an encounter between them: the character of the elements is consistent with many different outcomes. But, an outcome having occurred, then ‘determinations’
of these elements are ‘assignable’ by ‘working backwards’ from that outcome, that is, by a regressive inference. The natures of the elements put certain limits on what can result from their encounter but does not determine the character of what may occur within those limits. The elements of the encounter only become ‘elements of the encounter’ in the encounter itself: before that encounter, they are only what has been called above ‘virtual’ elements of that encounter, because their characteristics prior to the encounter are what may be called dispositional and in this sense those elements are not fully determinate.

VI. Remarks supplementary to the preceding section

Introductory

The preceding three paragraphs have sketched in the briefest way proposed solutions to the exegetical problems posed in Section III above. But what has been said there, and in the preceding Section IV, suggest some further questions of exegesis and development of what Althusser says about aleatory materialism, particularly taking into account the thesis of the essentially metaphorical character of philosophical ideas, and also making use of some of his remarks on one of the central figures in his later work, namely, Machiavelli, in whose thinking, he writes, a philosophy is present, ‘a “materialism of the encounter”, thought by way of politics’. 48

‘Atom’

(a) ‘Atom’ must certainly be taken metaphorically, that is, not in the literal sense of an item in the repertory of physics, but in the sense of an ultimate

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48 Althusser 1994b, p. 546. Through his encounter with Machiavelli, he writes, ‘I was to experience the fascination of fascinations. . . . He is, without doubt, much more than Marx, the author who has fascinated me the most’ (Althusser 1997, pp. 13–14). The book Machiavelli and Us, published only posthumously in Althusser 1999, was written for the most part during 1971–2, but Althusser revised it from then until 1986. It is of the greatest interest to follow, with the help of the editorial notes, how the author brought the earlier text little by little into line with his later aleatory materialism. In the final paragraph, added in 1986, Machiavelli is called ‘the greatest materialist philosopher in history’ and ‘the most incisive in materialist philosophy’ (Althusser 1999, p. 103). On the primacy of political philosophy in Althusser’s philosophical thought, see note 2 above. It is plausible to conjecture that Althusser’s aleatory materialism and his studies of Machiavelli developed hand in hand. (There is scope for a rich study here.)
unit of analysis in the domain in question. Thus Althusser writes, ‘the atom, in its “fall”, [is] the simplest figure of individuality’.\(^{49}\)

(b) This may be taken in connection with the following passage: ‘. . . that there exist only singular individuals wholly distinct from one another is the basic thesis of nominalism . . . [and nominalism] is materialism itself’.\(^{50}\) If the interpretation of aleatory materialism offered so far is to be followed here, ‘singular individuals’ should be thought of not as particular objects in the ordinary sense, but as facts.

(c) In the history of atomism, and in particular in the context of Epicurean atomism in which Althusser roots aleatory materialism, the term ‘atom’ carries the connotation (indicated indeed by its etymology) of an absolutely, unconditionally, non-contextually *ultimate* unit of analysis.\(^{51}\) This is also suggested by the connection with the *Tractatus* doctrine of things as ‘simples’. But this would seem to rule out a world of unlimited complexity, and such an *a priori* restriction can surely be no part of an aleatory materialism.\(^{52}\)

However, this problem can be taken care of by contextualising the idea of ‘atom’ or ‘simple’ in the spirit – indeed along the lines – of Wittgenstein’s later thought.\(^{53}\) Thus, some item is an ‘atom’ in a certain context if it is not subject to further analysis at least in that context. For instance, actual atoms are the ‘atoms’ of chemistry at a certain level of study. In other words, what counts as a ‘simple’ is determined by linguistic-theoretical context, though, of

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\(^{49}\) Althusser 1994b, p. 561.

\(^{50}\) Althusser 1994d, p. 46f. Cf. Althusser 1994e, p. 217: ‘Marx taught me that nominalism was the royal road to materialism. In fact . . . I can think of hardly any more profound form of materialism than nominalism.’ (No reference is given to Marx here, but it is probably an allusion to his discussion of the history of materialism in *The Holy Family* where he calls nominalism ‘the first form of materialism’ [Marx-Engels, *Collected Works* 4: 127/MEW 2: p. 135].) There is an even stronger endorsement of nominalism in the pages omitted from Althusser 1994e: ‘nominalism is not the royal road towards materialism but the only conceivable materialism in the world’ (Althusser 1997, p. 11). It may be noted that this seems to represent a change of mind, from Althusser 1976 in which Althusser writes that if the distinction between real objects and theoretical objects ‘is not solidly supported, it may lead to nominalism, even to idealism. It is generally agreed that Spinoza fell into nominalism’ (p. 192). This is even more curious in the light of the fact that earlier in the same book (p. 137) he writes of Spinoza ‘as a good nominalist’ and adding parenthetically that ‘nominalism, as Marx recognised, could then be the antechamber of materialism’.

\(^{51}\) See the remarks on the Epicurean doctrine of ‘minimal parts’, note 46 above.

\(^{52}\) See Lenin on ‘the inexhaustible electron’, Lenin 1962, p. 262.

\(^{53}\) See *Philosophical Investigations*, I, Sections 46ff.
course, that having been determined, what is true of these ‘simples’ is determined by the way the world is.

(d) The idea of ‘internal’ properties in the *Tractatus* has been generally found to be a very obscure one. However, it is fairly clear that they are in some sense thought of in ontological mode – that is, ‘atoms’ have such properties inherently, independently of descriptions, which are in fact determined by them. This inevitably means that there are, in some sense, *de re* necessities, even if only in the infra-factual context. This would seem to be incompatible with at least the spirit of Althusser’s resolute nominalism.

However, this problem can be avoided by again following the lead of Wittgenstein, this time the later Wittgenstein’s critique of essentialism about linguistic meaning, which entails relativising the ‘internal’ properties to the language in which their designators occur. For instance, it may be said that it is an ‘internal’ property of a ‘Newtonian’ atom that it has, at the same time, a precise position and momentum ascertainable to (in principle) any desired degree of accuracy; that is, if this is not true of a certain physical item (for example, an ‘electron’ as this is understood within quantum theory), then the latter is not properly describable as a ‘Newtonian atom’.

‘Taking hold’

As has been seen, Althusser frequently compares the way in which atoms bond with one another (so to speak) to form ‘worlds’ (on the present interpretation: facts and complexes of facts) with the way in which water turns into ice, milk curdles or mayonnaise thickens, the common verb used here (*prendre*) having been (very inadequately) brought over as ‘to take hold’. The metaphor is in fact a very curious one, and its point not at all clear. The suggestion may be hazarded that it has a broadly similar one to that of the *Tractatus* metaphor which likens the connection of things in a fact with the links in a chain. It will be remembered that this is meant to signify that the connection in question is immediate, that is, does not exist by virtue of something else: that the links form a chain is a direct consequence of their individual natures and their being in a certain spatial relation to one another. Then the ‘taking hold’ metaphor may be taken to signify that just as, to cite one example, water simply becomes ice when it is cooled to a certain

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point – no further bonding agent is required – so nothing is needed to bond or ‘cement’ atoms which have been involved in an encounter into an (at least relatively) enduring complex: it has just happened that way.

‘Void’

This idea functions in Althusser’s late thought in at least two ways. (a) The doctrine that the atoms fall in parallel and in a void is a metaphorical way of expressing the view that the external properties of the atoms are purely contingent. That nothing determines them to occur in this rather than that combination.\(^{55}\) This is why Althusser underlines the significance of the idea of a void thus: the ‘introduction of the void into philosophy . . . marks out [\(d\'\esize{\text{esig}\text{n}}\) the true materialist tradition in philosophy’.\(^{56}\)

(b) But this latter remark may be said to have another significance too, namely, that a genuine (aleatory) materialism involves philosophical ‘void’:

It is a philosophy of the void which not only says that the void pre-exists the atoms which fall in it, but also creates [\(\text{fa\text{it}}\)] the philosophical void in order to endow itself existence: a philosophy which, rather than setting out from the famous ‘philosophical problems’, begins by eliminating them and by refusing to endow itself with ‘an object’ . . . in order to start from nothingness [\(\text{du néant}\)]. We have then the primacy of nothingness over any form, the primacy of absence (there is no Origin) over presence.\(^{57}\)

This ‘primacy of absence over presence’ is elucidated in another passage thus:

not as a going-back-towards, but as a horizon receding endlessly ahead of the walker who, seeking out his path on the plain, never finds anything but another plain stretching out before him (very different from the Cartesian walker who has only to walk straight ahead in a forest in order to get out of it, because the world is made up, alternatively, of virgin forests and forests that have been cleared to create open fields: without Holzwege).\(^{58}\)

That is, to think of change in terms of the metaphor of ‘going-back-towards’ is to think of it as an approach to a pre-existing somewhere which is the goal of the return, that is, it is to think of it teleologically. The same orientation is

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\(^{55}\) See his remark in Althusser 1994e, p. 241f that, for Machiavelli, chance = void.

\(^{56}\) Althusser 1993, p. 102.


\(^{58}\) Althusser 1994b, p. 563f.
expressed by the metaphor of the walker who, proceeding in a certain definite direction through a forest, inevitably finds himself out of it, since the path is prearranged precisely to enable someone to gain this end. However, the aleatory materialist is conceived of on the metaphor of someone who arrives only at plain after plain, that is, areas bare of topographical determinations. Or, in terms of the other metaphor, the walker in a forest can have no confidence that, by sticking to a definite direction, he will eventually find himself out of it, for it may turn out that he is on a trail leading to a dead-end (Holzweg – cf. Heidegger) within the forest.

*Machiavelli: atom, void, swerve, encounter*

Machiavelli’s sixteenth-century Italy was a people divided but fervent, fragmented into small obsolete states, engaged in generalised but disorderly revolt against foreign pillage and occupation, but with profound latent aspirations towards unity. ‘In sum, an atomized country, every atom of which was descending in free fall without encountering its neighbour.’

Machiavelli’s project was to think the conditions for the constitution of a national state. All the circumstances favourable to imitate France and Spain were present but without connection with one another: ‘It was necessary to create the conditions for a swerve, and thus an encounter, if Italian unity was to “take hold”.’

Machiavelli believed that none of the existing states and their princes (above all none of the papal states) could create these conditions. Unification would be achieved only on the condition that the swerve and hence the encounter take place in a ‘void’ which is here represented by, on the one hand, the namelessness both of the right man, the ‘Prince’, and of the corner of Italy in which the encounter is to take place. The encounter depends on the nameless man installing himself somewhere in Italy and who, starting from this atomic point, little by little assembles Italian states around him in the great project of bringing about a national state.

This is a completely aleatory line of reasoning, which leaves politically blank both the name of the Federator and that of the region which will serve as starting-point for the constitution of this federation. Thus the dice are tossed

60 Ibid.
on the gaming table, which is itself empty (but filled with men of valour).

. . . A man of nothing who has started out from nothing starting out from an unassignable place: these are, for [Machiavelli], the conditions for regeneration.\footnote{Althusser 1994b, pp. 544, 545.}

. . . [T]his new man is a man of nothing, without past, without titles or burdens, an anonymous man, alone and naked.\footnote{Althusser 1997, p. 15.}

This silence about the identity of the Prince and of the place is a political condition of the encounter. Encountering ‘Fortuna’ (chance), it is necessary that the Prince have the virtù to utilise it for the realisation of his destiny. But it is essential that there be ‘nothing’ standing in his way. That the Prince is ‘alone and naked’ means that he is free, without determination . . . that bears down on him and imped[ing] the free exercise of his virtù. Not only is he like a naked man, but he finds himself intervening in one place as anonymous and as stripped of every outstanding social and political determination which could impede his action. . . .\footnote{Althusser 1997, pp. 14–15.}

It is in the political \textit{void} that the encounter must come about, and that national unity must ‘take hold’. But \textit{this political void is first a philosophical void}. No Cause that precedes its effects is to be found in it, no Principle of morality or theology (as in the whole Aristotelian political tradition . . .); one reasons here not in terms of the Necessity of the accomplished fact, but in terms of the contingency of the fact to be accomplished . . . all the elements are both here and beyond \textit{là et au-delà} . . . but they do not exist, are only abstract, as long as the unity of a world has not united them in the Encounter that will endow them with existence.\footnote{Althusser 1994b, p. 546.}

The elements are thus real enough insofar as they exist in various combinations but ‘abstract’ with respect to being conditions of Italian unity, because they are not \textit{intrinsically} such conditions: they only become such in the context of their being brought together. It is not as though it is part of their nature that they should contribute to Italian unity, though, of course, they could not turn out to be such without already having a determinate character which is also manifested in the circumstances which obtain before the encounter.
in this philosophy, there reigns an alternative: the encounter may not take place, just as it may take place. Nothing decides the matter, no principle of decision predetermines this alternative, which is of the order of a game of dice. ‘A throw of the dice will never abolish chance.’

Furthermore:

A successful encounter, one that is not brief, but lasts, never guarantees that it will continue to last tomorrow rather than come undone. Just as it might have not taken place, it may no longer take place. . . . In other words, nothing ever guarantees that the reality of the accomplished fact is the guarantee of its durability. Quite the opposite is true: every accomplished fact . . . like all the necessity and reason we can derive from it, is only a provisional encounter, and since every encounter is provisional even when it lasts, there is no eternity in the “laws” of any world or any state. History here is nothing but the permanent revocation of the accomplished fact by another undecipherable fact to be accomplished, without our knowing in advance whether, or when, or how the event that revokes it will come about. Simply, one day new hands will have to be dealt out, and the dice thrown again onto the empty table.65

If, by chance, the encounter between fortune and virtù does in fact take place, then, for it to be lasting, ‘the Prince has to learn to govern fortune by governing men’.66 In order to do this, the Prince must learn to be evil, but in all circumstances he must know how to appear to be good, to possess the moral virtues which will win over the people. Thus the Prince should be like the Centaur of the ancients, who was both man and beast. But the beast is twofold, at once lion and fox. However, ultimately, it is the fox who governs everything. For it is the fox who has the Prince manufacture a popular (ideological) image for himself, which answers to his interests and to the interests of the ‘little people’:

the Prince is governed, internally, by the variations of this other aleatory encounter, that of the fox on the one hand and the lion and man on the other. This encounter . . . has to last long enough for the figure of the Prince to ‘take hold’ among the people . . . i.e., to take form . . . .67

65 Althusser 1994b, pp. 546f.
67 Althusser 1994b, p. 546.
... the quiet instinct of the fox... is in fact the instinctive intuition of the conjuncture and of possible fortune to be seized: a new ‘encounter’ but this time controlled and prepared as in advance.\textsuperscript{68}

Machiavelli ‘thinks of the fox not in terms of its internal nature as “cause” but only in its effects of semblance’.\textsuperscript{69}

\textbf{VI. Aleatory materialism: necessity and law}

We have seen that ‘every encounter is aleatory [in] its origins (nothing every guarantees an encounter)... every encounter might have not taken place’.\textsuperscript{70} Furthermore, ‘every encounter is aleatory... in its effects’,\textsuperscript{71} because the characters of the elements do not determine a unique outcome of whatever encounter in fact takes place between them. Indeed, as we have also seen,

no determination of these elements can be assigned except by \textit{working backwards} from the result to its becoming, in its retroaction... That is, instead of thinking contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception to it [\textit{comme modalité ou exception de la nécessaire}], we must think necessity as the becoming-necessary [\textit{le devenir-nécessaire}] of the encounter of contingents...\textsuperscript{72}

To take the view being rejected first, it is clear enough what is meant by the idea of contingency being an ‘exception’ to necessity; namely, (i) that the two are incompatible and (ii) that necessity is the rule. However, it is by no means clear what is or could be meant by the assertion that contingency is a ‘modality’ of necessity, unless it is the idea that necessity shows itself at work, manifests itself, as it were, in the field of contingency, for instance, by determining value of a variable which is dependent upon a contingent independent value of another variable. This aside, what, more precisely, is meant by the positive view affirmed here, namely, that of ‘necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingents’?

An answer to this question is set out in a slightly later passage which ties in necessity with lawfulness:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Althusser 1997, p. 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} Althusser 1997, p. 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{70} Althusser 1994b, p. 566.
  \item \textsuperscript{71} Althusser 1994b.
  \item \textsuperscript{72} Althusser 1994b, p. 566 – cf. Althusser 1994d, p. 42.
\end{itemize}
It will be granted that no law presides over the encounter in which things take hold [la rencontre de la prise]; but, it will be objected, once the encounter has ‘taken hold’, that is, once the stable figure of the world, of the only existing world (for the advent of a given world obviously excludes all other possible combinations), has been constituted, we have to do with a stable world in which events, in their succession, obey ‘laws’ . . . the world, our world [born of] the encounter of atoms . . . is subject to rules . . . it is . . . a fact . . . that there is order in this world and that knowledge of this world comes by way of knowledge of its ‘laws’ . . . and the conditions of possibility, not of the existence of these laws, but only of knowledge of them.73

At least two points are made here. (i) Though there are no laws (formulations of necessities) which explain the coming-to-be of a world, once the world has come about, there are, contingently, stabilities in its working, laws which may be said to be necessary and used in explanations of particular features of it. The existence of order in the world is not a result of the existence of laws; rather, the converse is the case. (ii) A corollary of this is that there are no ‘conditions of possibility’ of the existence of the laws themselves (for instance, as in Descartes, the will of God). However, there are such ‘conditions of possibility’ of knowledge of these laws. It may be remarked that this last point is very puzzling in the light of Althusser’s explicit rejection74 of the Kantian idea of transcendental ‘conditions of the possibility’ of knowledge, in favour of the idea that knowledge is always produced within practices which have their own contextually determinate conditions.

The passage continues:

. . . the necessity of the laws that issue from the taking-hold induced by the encounter is, even at its most stable, haunted by a radical instability, which explains something that we find it very hard to grasp . . . that laws can change: not that they can be valid for a time but not eternally . . . but that they can change at the drop of a hat, revealing the aleatory basis that sustains them, and can change without reason, that is, without an intelligible end.75

The laws so formed are said to be ‘haunted by a radical instability’. Why ‘haunted’? Perhaps, in one sense, because of their origin: the fact that a law

73 Althusser 1994b, pp. 567f.
74 See e.g. Althusser 1997, p. 3 and Althusser 1993, pp. 108f.
75 Althusser 1994b, pp. 568f.
is an outcome of a wholly aleatory situation has, as it were, died and been buried in the appearance of unconditional necessity which now attaches to them, but its origin continues to exist as, so to speak, a perturbing spirit. The latter is denegated, as it were, in people’s resistance to recognising that such laws as they are have only conditional fields of application: that they may change over time or hold only for certain domains and not others.\textsuperscript{76}

\textbf{VIII. Laws and ‘constants’}

\textit{Introductory}

Though the idea of ‘law’ as so far presented offers much material for further discussion, this may be set aside here, except to the extent that it is involved in a consideration of the problem of the distinction which Althusser makes in several places between laws and what he calls ‘constants’ (sometimes ‘invariants’). The problem is a very knotty one. I shall first assemble the principal textual protocols from his two main presentations, with only that minimum of analysis necessary to make somewhat clearer and more explicit what these assert, on the surface, so to speak, next bring these two together in summary, then go over to a synoptic analysis, and lastly bring the whole discussion together.

\textit{The presentation in Althusser 1994d}

In Althusser 1994d, Althusser remarks that the aleatory materialist records \textit{sequences} \textit{[séquences]} of aleatory encounters . . . [he] can conduct \textit{experiments} \textit{[expériences]} on the consecutions \textit{[consecutions]} of aleatory sequences that he has been able to observe, and can (like Hume) work out laws of consecution, ‘customary’ \textit{[habituelles]} laws or \textit{constants}, that is, structured theoretical figures \textit{[figures théoriques structurées]}. These experiments will lead

\textsuperscript{76} The passage quoted seems to me to be ambiguous about the possibility of ‘laws’ changing over time rather than with respect to domain: it is not entirely clear whether the former is being ruled out or whether what is meant is just that this is not \textit{only} what is meant. The general thrust of Althusser’s doctrine of aleatory materialism would seem to be wholly hospitable to the idea of variation of laws over time. Certainly, it has been the subject of discussion at least since C.S. Peirce, through Poincaré ([1913]) to the present day (e.g. Balashov 1992).
him to deduce universal laws for each type of experiment, depending on the kind of beings that it took as its object: that is how the natural sciences proceed. Here we . . . meet the term and function of ‘universality’.\(^{77}\)

Understanding just what this passage means faces many difficulties, and it is necessary to proceed cautiously.

It will be best to start by listing, simply in the order in which they occur, a number of terms used, after which the question of their meanings (including interrelations) can be posed. The terms in question are the following: (i) ‘sequences’, (ii) ‘consecutions’ (of sequences), (iii) ‘laws of consecution’, (iv) ‘customary laws’, (v) ‘constants’, (vi) ‘structured theoretical figures’, and (vii) ‘universal’/‘universality’, (viii) ‘kind of beings’.

(i) and (ii) would seem to mean different things, if only because (ii) is said in some sense to characterise (i): the passage speaks of ‘the consecutions of . . . sequences’ (emphasis added).

What then does (i) mean? The language used – ‘records’, ‘observes’ – may be taken to suggest that it refers to sequences of events as ordinarily, more or less immediately observed – these are the subject-matter, the raw material of experiment.

If this is at least broadly correct, then what does (ii) mean? It is at least very doubtful whether the passage allows of any conclusive or even reasonably satisfactory answer to this question. However, in the light of (iii), the suggestion may be hazarded (the word is used advisedly) that (ii) may refer to that which in (i) is more than ‘accidentally’ sequential, though only so by virtue of being derivative from other sequences. For instance, the sequence of someone sneezing and the collapse of a building nearby may be described as accidental simpliciter, whilst the sequence of day and night is not accidental, though only so by virtue of its being a consequence of non-accidental sequences.

Some light is cast on the problem of interpretation here by a passage in another of Althusser’s writings of this period. (It occurs in the context of a discussion of Machiavelli.) Here, Althusser contrasts thinking ‘in terms of cause-effect as consequence [la conséquence cause-effet]’ with thinking ‘in terms of factual consecution [la consécution factuelle] . . . between “if” and “then”’. The first is said to be a feature of ‘the whole Platonic and Aristotelian tradition’. The second is said to be ‘already present in black and white in the Sophists

\(^{77}\) Althusser 1994d, p. 65.
and Epicurus, combated for this serious reason by Plato and developed at length by the Stoics’, and ‘recovered’ by Machiavelli in ‘a true revolution in ways of thinking which will open the way to the whole of modern experimental science’. In the first case, it is ‘a matter of an effect’s being a consequence of a cause [d’une conséquence de cause . . . à effet] (or principle or essence), of derivation or logical implication’, in the second, of ‘a simple consecution of conditions, “if” signifying given factual conditions, that is, the factual conjuncture without originating [originaire] cause, “then” designating what observably and reliably follows on the conditions of the conjuncture’.  

In sum, (ii) are represented in the form of contingent conditional statements, discovered by experiment on (i). They may be about particular items (‘If Fido barks the baby cries’), but are at least implicitly (vii) universal relating to (viii) kinds of rather than particular things. All this is held to pertain to the domain of natural science.

Now, what of (iv)–(vi)? To start with, whatever they may mean, (v) and (vi) are pretty clearly meant to be synonymous. But (a): is (iv) meant to be in opposition with (iii)? And (b): what is the force of ‘or’ between (iv) and (v)? Does it indicate a mere verbal alternative as between (iv) and (v) or a genuine conceptual disjunction? It is at least plausible to argue that the answer to (a) is yes, on the ground that (iii) is explicitly associated with the name of Hume and (iv) may be taken to be implicitly thus associated through the use of ‘customary’. There is no basis for an answer to (b) in the passage under discussion, either grammatically or by reference to what might be meant by (v), but the immediately following passage makes it fairly clear that (iv) (therefore (iii)) and (v) are indeed quite different. Let us now consider this passage.

In it, Althusser asks to start with what the situation is in a field where ‘it is not a question of objects which repeat themselves indefinitely and on which experiments can be repeated and rerun from one corner of the world to the other by the scientific community’. Here, the aleatory materialist ‘who is attentive to “singular” cases cannot state ‘laws’ about them, since such cases

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78 Althusser 1993, pp. 99, 100. It may be noted that Althusser’s much-admired Spinoza was surely a consequentialist in this sense: he identifies causa and ratio (e.g. Ethics, preface to Book IV) so that an effect follows from a cause like a conclusion from its premises (e.g. Ethics, Book IV, Prop. 57, Schol.).

79 Althusser 1994d, p. 65.
are singular/concrete/factual and are therefore not repeated, because they are unique.\textsuperscript{80}

The contrast with the preceding sort of field concerns, then, (i) the subject-matter: not ‘kinds’ of things, forms of repetition, but ‘cases’ which are ‘singular’, ‘factual’, ‘concrete’, (ii) the consequence that experiment is not applicable to them, since experiment involves repetition, and (iii) the further consequence that it is not possible to affirm universal laws about them.

Nevertheless, Althusser continues, the aleatory materialist can single out ‘general constants’ among the encounters he has observed, the ‘variations’ of which are capable of accounting for the singularity of the cases under consideration, and thus produce both knowledge of the ‘clinical’ sort as well as ideological, political and social effects. Here we again find not the universality of laws (of the physical, mathematical or logical sort), but the generality of the constants which, by their variation, enable us to apprehend what is true of such-and-such a case.\textsuperscript{81}

But what, more specifically, are ‘constants’ as distinct from ‘laws’, and what is the ‘generality’ which attaches to the first as distinct from the ‘universality’ which attaches to the second?

A clue as to the nature of ‘constants’ is offered, in the passage from which the previous quotations have been taken, by Althusser’s claim\textsuperscript{82} that the idea is exemplified by Lévi-Strauss in his treatment of ‘cosmic myths of primitive societies’. However, this is a fairly enigmatic allusion, and it will be best, in attempting to cast further light on the matter, even at the expense of what is here a digression, to look at a passage earlier in Althusser 1994d where Althusser discusses the nature of history.

There are, he writes, ‘two types of histories, \textit{two} histories’:

\begin{itemize}
  \item to start with, the History of the traditional historians, ethnologists, sociologists and anthropologists who can speak of ‘laws’ of history because they consider only the accomplished fact of past history. History, in this case, presents itself as a wholly fixed object all of whose determinations can be studied like those of a physical object, an object that is dead because it is past . . . an accomplished, unalterable, petrified history from which one can draw
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{81} Althusser 1994d, pp. 65f.
\textsuperscript{82} Althusser 1994d, p. 65.
determinant, deterministic statistics. It is here that we can locate the source of the spontaneous ideology of the vulgar historians and sociologists, not to speak of the economists.  

The other type of history is what is denoted by the German word *Geschichte*, which designates not accomplished history, but history *in the present* [*au présent*], without doubt determined in great part by the already accomplished past, yet only in part, for a history which is present, which is living, is also open to a future that is uncertain, unforeseeable, not yet accomplished, and therefore *aleatory*.  

Althusser goes on to say that Marx did not employ the term ‘constant’, but rather

an expression of genius: ‘tendential law’, capable of inflecting (but not contradicting) the *primary tendential law*, which means that a tendency does not possess the form or figure of a linear law, but that it can bifurcate under the impact of an encounter with another tendency and so on *ad infinitum*. At each intersection the tendency can take a path that is unforeseeable because it is *aleatory*.  

The interviewer then asks, ‘Could we sum this up by saying that present history is always that of a singular, aleatory conjuncture?’ Althusser replies:

Yes, and it is necessary to keep in mind that ‘conjuncture’ means ‘conjunction’, that is, an aleatory encounter of elements – in part, elements that exist, but also unforeseeable elements. Every conjuncture is a singular case, as are all historical individualities, *as is everything that exists* [my emphasis, W.S]. [The objects of] the history of Marxism or psychoanalysis . . . belong not to accomplished history but to *Geschichte*, to living history, which is made of, and wells up out of, aleatory tendencies and the unconscious; this is a history whose forms have nothing to do with the determinism of physical laws. It

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83 Althusser 1994d, pp. 44f. Cf. ‘A truly materialist conception of history implies that we abandon the idea that history is ruled and dominated by laws . . .’ (Althusser 1994d, p. 32), and in particular dialectical laws. ‘The dialectic (not only in the form given it by Engels, the science of the laws of movement of matter) is more than doubtful, indeed it is harmful [néfaste], that is, always more or less teleological’ (Althusser 1994d, pp. 128f).
84 Althusser 1994d, p. 45.
85 Ibid.
follows . . . that aleatory materialism [is] required to think the openness of the world to the event, the as-yet-unimagined \( l’imagination inouïe \), and also all living practice, including politics.\(^{86}\)

These passages offer a great many puzzles and much material for analysis. But, for the moment, let us just sum up some of the main points relevant to our theme. (i) A fundamental distinction is made between two sorts of subject-matter of knowledge, namely, (a) kinds of items which have recurrent instances and (b) ‘cases’, items which are singular, concrete, unique. (ii) (a) form the domain of ‘laws’ which are ‘universal’, arrived at by way of experiment, this domain being the province of the ‘natural sciences’. (iii) (b) form the domain of ‘constancies’, which are ‘general’, not arrived at by way of experiment and exemplified by the provinces of history and psychoanalysis. (iv) Examples of constancies are Lévi-Strauss’s ‘cosmic myths’ and, from the Marxist tradition, are class struggle with respect to history and Marx’s notion of ‘tendential law’.

\(^{86}\) Althusser 1994d, pp. 45f.

. . . not only the world of life . . . but the world of history too, congeals [se fige] at certain felicitous moments, with the taking-hold of elements combined in an encounter [que conjoint une rencontre] apt to trace such-and-such a figure . . . such-and-such a species, individual, or people. Thus it happens that there are aleatory men or ‘lives’ . . . and their ‘works’, and the great figures of the world to which the original ‘throw of the dice’ of the aleatory has given their form, the great figures in which the world of history has ‘taken form’. . . . This makes it all too clear that anyone who took it into his head to consider these figures, individuals, conjunctures or states of the world as either the necessary result of given premises or the provisional anticipation of an end would be mistaken, because he would be neglecting the fact (the ‘Faktum’) that these provisional results are doubly provisional, not only in the sense that they will be superseded, but also in the sense that they might have never come about [advenir], or might have come about only as the effect of a ‘brief encounter’, if they had not arisen on the happy basis of a stroke of good fortune which gave their ‘chance’ to ‘last’ to the elements over whose conjunction it so happens (by chance) that this form had to preside. (Althusser 1994b, p. 567)

The passage concludes:

This shows that we are not – that we do not live – in Nothingness \( le Néant \), but that, although there is no Meaning to history (an End which transcends it, from its origins to its term), there can be meaning in history, since this meaning emerges from an encounter that was real, and really felicitous \( une rencontre effective et effectivement heureuse \) –, or catastrophic, which is also a meaning \( qui est aussi du sens \). (Althusser 1994b, p. 567)

Thus there is no meaning to history as a whole, transcendent to history, but, as it were many meanings immanent to history.
The presentation in Althusser 1993

Passages relevant to the theme under discussion occur in Althusser 1993/1997. They have to do, in the first place, with aspects of what Althusser considers he learned from Spinoza and, correlatively, with what he considers Spinoza has to teach us. These references to Spinoza will be, where possible, omitted in the following citations both in the interest of brevity and, much more importantly, because what is mainly relevant here is what Althusser has to say in general terms.

... [in] history ... and ... psychoanalysis ... there are only ‘cases’. ... Marx ... wrote that there is never production in general, labour in general, and so forth and that each history is always a singular ‘case’ ... [we] never encounter ‘the same case’ again, but always and uniquely singular, and, therefore, different ‘cases’. ... In individual and social life [there are only] singularities (nominalisms [nominalismes]), really singular ... \(^87\)

If this is so, then

... how, then, to pretend to draw out consequences that are general, that is, abstract, since every case is concrete, and – as is not true of concrete objects (oak trees, beech trees, plum trees, pear trees, etc., as realisations of the concept ‘tree’) – one can never abstract from individual singularities in order to reach the abstract concept of the thing itself? \(^88\)

Indeed, the situation is even more serious than this:

... how can one claim to speak about singularity itself in general if one has no previous knowledge of it, if the fact of singularity is not and can never be a ‘concept’, even its own concept? And Spinoza would himself warn us: he speaks of an intuitio in the case of ‘knowledge of the third kind’ ... just as the politician speaks of a feel for the conjuncture [le sens de la conjuncture]). How to abstract from whatever singular and therefore not comparable intuitions there are? \(^89\)

However, these singularities are nevertheless universal, for ... [they] ... are as if traversed and haunted by repetitive [répétitifs] invariants or constants – that one can discover [retrouver] under

\(^{87}\) Althusser 1997, pp. 8–9.
\(^{88}\) Althusser 1997, p. 8.
\(^{89}\) Ibid., translation modified.
their singular variations in other singularities of the same species and genus. . . . Constants or generic invariants . . . arise [affleurent] in the existence of singular ‘cases’ and . . . permit their treatment (whether theoretical or practical).\textsuperscript{90}

For example, ‘Spinoza rediscovers quite naturally in the singular history of the Jewish people a constant that he has treated “in general” in the appendix to Part I [sc. of the Ethics – W.S.] regarding religion in general, and yet there never exists religion in general in Spinoza, any more than production in general ever exists in Marx’.\textsuperscript{91}

Althusser goes on to emphasise that these constants/invariants are ‘generic and not “general” . . . not laws’. As such, they are not subject to ‘verification in an abstract, renewable [renouvelable] experimental dispositif, as in physics or chemistry’.

However, their repetitive insistence [instance répétitive] permits us to mark the form of singularity in presence and, therefore, its treatment. It is obviously a question here of a test [d’une épreuve] which has nothing to do with experimental methods of proof [preuve] in the physical sciences, but which possesses its rigour, whether it be in the knowledge and treatment of individual singularity (medicine, analysis) or social singularity (history of a people) and action over history (politics).\textsuperscript{92}

What is meant here by the distinction between ‘épreuve’ and ‘preuve’ is by no means clear. It may be the sort of distinction made in English between something being ‘tried out’ (tested, assayed) – for example, a car for its safety on the road – and someone being ‘tried’ on a criminal charge, where what is in question is the truth or falsity of a claim.\textsuperscript{93}

This sort of knowledge of the singular (of the relevant generic constant/
invariant) is, Althusser says, what Spinoza called ‘knowledge of the third kind’. Here

we are never faced with a new object, but simply a new form of relation of appropriation (the word is Marx’s) of an object that is always already there since the first kind of knowledge: the ‘world’, the Lebenswelt of the first kind is elevated while remaining completely the same, [a] concretion of universal singularities in itself. . . . What changes is never the being itself of things . . . but the relation of appropriation that the human subject enters into with them. In this sense, which will be taken up again by Hegel and Marx, every process of knowledge indeed proceeds from the abstract to the concrete, from the abstract generality to concrete singularity.94

The last sentence of this passage contains at least one baffling element: Althusser says that ‘every’ process of knowledge involves knowledge of ‘the concrete singularity’ in terms of ‘generality’, whereas, so far, a sharp and fundamental distinction has been drawn between sciences which deal with types of things in ‘universal’ terms and those which deal with singular cases in ‘general’ ones. Thus what is said here is completely anomalous in the context of Althusser’s foregoing general argument. For the moment, in order to pursue the main line of Althusser’s argument, I simply flag the point and shall return to it later.

Finally, he relates this to his earlier account of the production of knowledge:

In my language I have called that very roughly the passage from Generalities I to Generalities III by means of Generalities II; I deceived myself in that the reality envisaged by knowledge [i.e. the product of the process – W.S.] . . . is not that of a generality but of a universal singularity. But I was indeed on Spinoza’s ‘line’ by insisting with Marx and Hegel on the distinction between the ‘real concrete’, therefore the universal singular (all the ‘cases’ that constitute the world from the beginning of knowledge of the first kind) and the concrete-in-thought that constitutes knowledge of the third kind.95

It is now time to sum up the main lines of the preceding passages. (i) In the cases of history and psychoanalysis, we have to do with ‘cases’, ‘singularities’ which are unique, concrete. (ii) Since knowledge is, in the nature of the case, abstract, knowledge of ‘cases’/‘singularities’ cannot take the form of general

94 Althusser 1993, pp. 9–10.
95 Althusser 1993, p. 10.
concepts/laws, for the latter abstract precisely from the differences which characterise the singularities. Indeed, how can one speak of singularity in general if it is of the essence of the singular to be non-general? (iii) Such knowledge is possible because the singularities are ‘traversed’ by ‘constants’/‘invariants’. These are not ‘general’ but ‘generic’. (iv) An example of the latter, from Spinoza, is his treatment of religion which is used as a means to knowledge of the Jewish people, an example of the former. (v) This sort of knowledge of the singular cannot be vouchsafed by experiment, which is only applicable to the general. (vi) However, it has its own rigour involving not experimental test but a ‘testing out’ of the case for the presence of a constant/invariant. (vi) This knowledge of the singular does not have an object different from the singular which is known. The difference resides in a different sort of appropriation, a different sort of relation to the singular. The latter remains as it was, but to start with it is apprehended abstractly, that is, in abstraction from the constants/invariants which ‘traverse’ it, whilst it ends, as being apprehended, in its representation as a ‘concrete-in-thought’, in the context precisely of those constants/invariants. This account is similar to Althusser’s earlier account of the cognitive appropriation of objects in terms of three ‘generalities’, except that now the final stage is now called, as it should have been all along, not a generality but a universal singularity.

Bringing together the two presentations

Both presentations agree on the centrality of a distinction between two sorts of subject-matters, namely, that between (1) the sort of recurrences which are dealt with by the sciences based on experiment and (2) the singular, concrete, unique ‘case’. The form of knowledge appropriate to the first is (1’) laws and to the second (2’) ‘constants’ which are also called, in the second presentation, ‘invariances’. (For the sake of brevity, the first only will be used in what follows.) Althusser’s terminology with regard to them is somewhat – and confusingly – different in the two presentations. In the first, he uses ‘universality’ to characterise (1’) and ‘generality’ to characterise (2’). In the second presentation, ‘universality’ characterises both, and ‘generality’ is used in the sense which ‘universality’ had in the first. Simply for the sake of clarity, the following will stick to just one consistent terminology, specifically (and fairly arbitrarily) to that of the first presentation. As examples of constants, he adds to those provided in the first presentation that of Spinoza’s idea of religion. The second presentation adds more detail to the epistemology of the situation.
It is now necessary to try to analyse the preceding considerations more carefully.

**Althusser’s ‘constants’ and Marx’s ‘tendential laws’**

The first problem concerns the fundamental dichotomy of subject-matters and forms of knowledge alleged by Althusser in the main line of his presentation. Since ‘constant’ is the most obvious *terminus technicus* in the latter, and since it is by no means one whose meaning is clear, an obvious place to start is to tackle the task of getting clearer about it. Since Althusser’s characterisation in general terms is unclear, the most hopeful jumping-off point is a consideration of examples he provides.

Of these we have seen that there are four: one from Lévi-Strauss, one from Spinoza and two from Marx. He hardly does more than mention the first two, and, besides, there are obvious advantages in having examples from Marx. So let us look at the second two examples.

The first is class struggle: history understood as *Geschichte* ‘obeys only a constant (not a law): the constant of class struggle’.

This is a puzzling remark for at least two reasons. The first is that everything said about *Geschichte* so far would seem to apply not only to social history but also to natural history, from cosmology to biological evolution (if the first were to be ruled out on the – arguably quite spurious – ground that it is basically just applied physics, the second surely cannot), and that there is no class struggle in the domain of natural history. The second puzzle arises, even in the domain of social history, as follows. Consider someone as living in a pre-class society. Then, for that person, *Geschichte* is open, but it does not obey the ‘constant’ of class struggle, for the simple reason that there are no classes. Furthermore, if we imagine ourselves in a post-class society, *Geschichte* would not obey the ‘constant’ of class struggle either.

The second example, namely, Marx’s idea of a ‘law of tendency’, looks much more promising. In considering this in Marx’s writings, the obvious place to start is the case of what he quite explicitly calls such a law, namely, the ‘Gesetz des tendenziellen Falls der Profitrate’ (heading of Part III of *Capital*, Volume III) – the ‘Law of the Tendential Fall in the Rate of Profit’ or ‘Law of the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall’ (translations in Penguin and Moscow editions respectively). Let us see how Marx sets the matter out.

The part in question begins with Chapter 13, entitled ‘Das Gesetz als solches’ – literally, ‘The Law as Such’ (rendered ‘The Law Itself’ in the Penguin
The law is here derived from certain fundamental features of the capitalist mode of production and says that the law for the latter, ‘the rate of surplus-value . . . is expressed in a steadily falling general rate of profit’. That is, there is a functional relation between changes in two variables, the rate of profit and time, such that the former decreases as the latter increases. Marx goes on immediately, ‘We shall show later why this drop does not emerge in this absolute form, but more in a progressive tendency to a progressive fall’ (loc. cit., trans. revised). The promised demonstration is given in the following Chapter 14, entitled ‘Counteracting Causes’ (of which six are listed, beginning with more intense exploitation of labour and reduction of wages below their value). Marx thus calls the law as stated the law in its ‘absolute form’, which ‘emerges’ as a ‘tendency’ . ‘Absolute’ is used here in its original, etymological sense (ab-solutus) as referring to what exists unconditionally.

It is now possible to hazard a suggestion as to how the preceding may aid the elucidation of what Althusser has to say about ‘constants’ and knowledge of singulars. The real starting point is a concrete, specific, singular value of the rate of profit. The ‘constant’ here may be taken to be the ‘law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit’ ‘as such’, in its ‘absolute’ form. The singular case may then be conceived as being ‘traversed’ by the former, insofar as its cognitive representation is derivable from the constant in conjunction with certain specific instances of various ‘counteracting causes’, which determine what Althusser calls ‘variations’.

In this regard, it must be insisted that the law ‘as such’ in its ‘absolute’ form is a purely discursive entity. There is no significant sense in which it can be said to be somehow a part or aspect of the world of real objects, for it is never true of the latter. It is ‘true’ only of a certain model of real objects, a model defined by the conditions from which it is derived, in other words, it is ‘true’ of, or ‘governs’, what is sometimes referred to as a ‘pure case’. The latter has cognitive value to the extent that a ‘fit’ can be demonstrated, through various procedures, between it and real systems.

This is why a certain terminological exactitude is very important here, specifically, to speak of a ‘law of a tendency’ and not a ‘tendential law’, as

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97 The idea of a ‘pure case’ has roots in everyday thinking, in particular in the idea of what is ‘normal’. However, this tends to be confused with the quite different idea of what might be described as what is ‘usually’ the case. See Suchting 1993, pp. 141f. Also, the ‘pure case’ should not be confused with Weber’s ‘ideal-type’ (see e.g. Weber 1949); for the distinction between the two, see Nowak 1980.
some writers do. For the latter may well suggest that the law itself is tendential, which does not make sense: either the law holds (of a certain model) or it does not – tertium non datur. To speak of a ‘tendential law’ is, at a minimum, to run the risk of conflating the law itself, which belongs purely to the domain of ‘thought-objects’, with real circumstances.

In general, a law of tendency states, briefly, that if a certain state of affairs $F$ obtains, then a certain other state of affairs, $G$, will obtain, ‘other things being equal’, those other things being at least partly specified (without this the ‘law’ would be vacuous), though often the ‘deeating’ or ‘saving’ clause is left to some extent open. (The latter circumstance is not a defect but an advantage for it provides the law with heuristic power in further inquiry.)

The conclusion indicated by the above is that Althusser’s notion of a ‘constant’ can indeed be given a fairly clear interpretation in terms of Marx’s idea of a ‘law of tendency’ as exemplified paradigmatically in the ‘law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall’.

**Marx on the general applicability of the idea of a ‘law of tendency’**

Insofar as ‘the law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit’ is indeed a law, it is, of course, one about socio-historical subject-matter. What about Althusser’s further thesis that there is a sharp contrast between, on the one hand, ‘general’ ‘constants’, characteristic of (to repeat his repeated examples, history and psychoanalysis) and, on the other, ‘universal’ ‘laws’ characteristic of the sciences of nature?

Since Althusser calls upon Marx’s notion of a ‘law of tendency’ in elucidating and exemplifying his notion of ‘constant’, it is relevant to ask whether Marx himself made such a distinction. Constraints of space make detailed reference to his texts impossible, but a couple of them, which may be made to stand for all, show quite decisively that he did not.

First of all, consider his statement in *Capital*, Volume I of ‘the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation’. ‘Absolute’ here may be taken, *prima facie*, to have the same meaning as it had in connection with the law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit. This is confirmed by the immediately following remark. ‘It is, like all other laws, modified in its realisation [Verwirklichung] by manifold circumstances’. 98 That is, since it is precisely the

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existence of such countervailing conditions which makes the absolute law regarding a fall in the rate of profit manifest itself as only a ‘tendency’, this ‘general law of capitalist accumulation’ is also only the law relating to a tendency, and this is said to be true of ‘all’ laws.

Can it be plausibly suggested that Marx is here referring, however implicitly, only to all social laws, ones relating to human history? There is absolutely no textual evidence for this. Moreover, in another place, Marx explicitly compares laws in political economy with those in that paradigm of the natural sciences, mechanics, in this respect.

... Capital is in itself indifferent to the particular nature of every sphere of production. ... In reality this fluidity [Flüssigkeit] encounters frictions which cannot be considered further here. ... Furthermore, ... that same fluidity of capital assumes a like fluidity or versatility [Variabilität] ... in the capacity for application of labour-power in the worker. ... Classical economics regards the versatility of labour-power and the fluidity of capital as axioms, and it is right to do so, insofar as this is the tendency of the capitalist mode of production which ruthlessly wins through despite all obstacles. ... At all events, in order to present the laws of political economy in their purity, abstraction is made from these sources of friction, as in pure mechanics abstraction is made from the particular frictions that have to be overcome in every particular case of its application.99

Independent considerations on the logic of concept-formation and laws

Let us now consider the matters in question independently of Marx texts – after all, Marx could have been wrong in his view about the common character, in the respect indicated, between social and natural laws.

All production of knowledge (at the very least of non-formal knowledge, if there is such a thing as purely formal knowledge) starts with the singular,

99 ‘Results of the Immediate Process of Production’, Appendix to Capital, Volume I, Penguin ed., pp. 1012f, 1014/ Resultate des unmittelbaren Produktionsprozesses (Frankfurt: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1969), pp. 39, 40 (translation revised). All this has, arguably, an important bearing on Marx’s reference in the first volume of Capital to the ‘natural laws’ of capitalist production and his approbation of a passage from a Russian review of the work in which it is said, inter alia, that according to him ‘the social movement’ is a ‘process of natural history’ (Penguin edition, pp. 91, 101/MEW 23: pp. 12, 26), and also to his claim, in the ‘1857 Preface’ that the economic conditions of production ‘can be ascertained with the accuracy of natural science’. But discussion of these matters would take us too far afield.
unique, ‘real concrete’ (Marx), and ultimately returns to it in the context of explanation, prediction, testing, control.

Althusser’s views about the distinction between natural-scientific laws, characterised by universality and the ‘general’ ‘constancies’ proper to non-natural-scientific subject-matters rests, quite explicitly, on a certain account of concept-formation, one which may be called ‘Aristotelian’ or ‘pre-modern’ (using this term in both a systematic and historical sense). According to it, concepts are of classes of things and are formed by abstraction, that is, by omission, in thought, of differences between sets of objects, leaving only common features. This gives a ‘nested’ hierarchy going ‘downwards’, from genera the most general, through species, to, ultimately, individual, singular things, from which abstraction has been made, and which are, to proceed ‘upwards’ in the hierarchy, instances of, successively, species, and of genera.

The post-‘Aristotelian’ method of cognitive appropriation of the singular, initiated by modern natural science, proceeds in a quite different way. First of all, it focuses, in the first place, not on singulars but on properties of singulars, which in itself removes the latter from the centre of the stage, since the properties are general. This initial step is not the crucial one, however, since the Aristotelian method also does this. What is distinctive about this modern method is the way it treats these properties. What it does in the first place is to set up general relations between them, and, specifically, constant relations

100 The fundamental source on this matter remains the work of Cassirer – both primarily historical (1922) and primarily systematic (1953, 1928 and 1957, especially Part III). But see also two splendid pieces by Cassirer’s student Lewin 1927, 1935, and the books by Burkamp 1927, and Dewey 1929 and 1938.

101 In the present context, it is worth pointing to Marx’s own recognition of the primacy of relations in concept- and theory-formation. Just one particularly explicit passage may be adduced.

In his discussion of the distinction between fixed and circulating capital, he writes: ‘It is here a question not of definitions under which things are subsumed. It is a question of definite functions that are expressed in definite categories’ (Capital, Volume II, p. 303, Penguin edition/ MEW 24: p. 228 tr. rev.). We have here a correlation between three pairs of contrasts: between (1)(a) ‘things’ versus (b) ‘functions’, (2)(a) ‘definitions’ versus (b) ‘categories’, and (3)(a) being ‘subsumed’ versus (b) being ‘expressed’. The items in (1) belong to the domain of real objects, those in (2) to that of theoretical objects. (1)(a) may be taken to be individual substances, fundamental to Aristotle’s metaphysical scheme, the fixed nature of which are determined by their inherent essences (‘formal causes’) formulated in (2)(a) (class-concepts), which assign those substances fixed places in the order of being, and in relation to which they stand by virtue of (3)(a). However, for Marx, what is fundamental is not (1)(a), that is, not things with natures independent of the relations within which they stand, but (1)(b), determined by those relations, which may differ according to context, formulated in
between the variations in these properties, that is, functional relations. Classes of things are then defined, not by omitting from consideration what distinguishes them but by replacing such differences by certain sorts of constants (in the logico-mathematical sense), which, when appropriately filled in, yield the original classes.

This procedure may be most easily understood by an example, and indeed one from elementary mathematics – it is easy to transfer this to the case of non-formal knowledge.

Ancient ‘synthetic’ geometry studied a number of sorts of figures, including the circle, ellipse and parabola. What was seen as common to them all was that each arises from a distinct way in which a plane intersects a cone. They may thus be regarded as species of the genus ‘conic section’ under which they are subsumed (individual such forms being similarly subsumed under the relevant species). The geometry of each was worked out separately from one another. Whilst each type of figure may be arrived at by adding a differentia specifica to the genus, this was, as it were, added to the genus from outside it. There was no geometry of conic sections as such.

In modern ‘analytic’ geometry there is indeed such a geometry, governed by a completely general equation

\[ Ax^2 + 2Bxy + Cy^2 + 2Dx + 2Ey + F = 0 \]

From this, equally general theorems may be deduced. Then less general equations may be derived from this one by assigning certain values to one or more of the arbitrary (‘parametric’) constants \( A, B, C, \ldots \). For instance, it is possible thus to derive the equation

\[ \frac{x^2}{p^2} + \frac{y^2}{q^2} = 1 \]

where \( p \) and \( q \) identify a class of ‘foci’. This equation defines, and yields the geometry of what is known as an ‘ellipse’.

Finally, the assignment to \( p \) and \( q \) of particular values (individual constants) relative to an appropriate particular set of abscissae signifies the identification of

\[ \text{(3) a unique ellipse.} \]

\[ (2) \text{(b), which, since they are dependent upon, derivative from real situations, stand to the latter in the relation (3)(b). (Specifically, a physical item is not fixed or circulating capital in itself, but falls under one or other description according to the role it plays in the circuit of capital.)} \]

\[ ^{102} \text{Any standard work on the subject contains the relevant material – e.g. Alexandrov et al. (eds.) 1963, pp. 207–9.} \]
In Aristotelian terms, (1) may be said to be the genus, (2) a species of (1), and (3) an individual ellipse. But note that (1) does not arise by abstraction from the various species (2), nor (2) by abstraction from its instances (3); on the contrary, (3) arise by specification of (2) and (2) from specification of (1). Whilst, on the Aristotelian theory, the genus has less specific content than either its species, or, a fortiori, the members of the latter (the traditional so-called law of the inverse relation of connotation/intension and denotation/extension), in the above case (1) has the most content of all since (2) and (3) may be derived from it by specifying further what is already implicit in it in the form of arbitrary constants.\footnote{See, here, Hegel’s three-fold distinction between ‘universality’, ‘particularity’ and ‘singularity’. That Hegel already gripped the crucial point here emerges from his brilliant but generally neglected remarks on mathematical series in his Science of Logic, especially at p. 647 of the Miller translation. It may be shown that this contains the clue to understanding his otherwise obscure notion of ‘concrete universality’ (foreshadowed in Spinoza’s also obscure idea of ‘knowledge of the third kind’), but doing so here would, again, take us too far afield.}

Looked at in the context of empirical concept-formation, the question of individuality can best be seen as dealt with by means of the notion of ‘constant’ of which three general types can be distinguished. (i) Universal constants – for example, the velocity of light in vacuo or the electrical charge on the electron – may be seen, in an only superficially paradoxical way, as both (putatively anyway) wholly general but also as wholly individualising, that is, as marking out this ‘world’ from other logically possible ones. (ii) Arbitrary (‘parametric’) constants demarcate classes of items within such a ‘world’. For instance, a particular sort of element is specified by its constant ‘atomic number’ (number of electrons orbiting the nucleus of the neutral atom of that element or, equivalently, the number of protons in the nucleus). Subspecies of a specific element may then be marked out in terms of further constants, for example, isotopes in terms of the mass of the atom, determined by the number of neutrons in their nuclei. The general concept ‘element’ is formed not by omitting differences between kinds in these regards, which would ultimately yield some substantively largely vacuous idea, but precisely by representing kinds of such differences by constants of type (ii), constants which then be replaced by particular numbers. (iii) Individual constants then help to identify strictly unique items; for instance, such such-and-such individual instance of such-and-such an element may be identified in terms
of its spatio-temporal co-ordinates. The qualification ‘help’ is necessary because an item in its absolute singularity can only be specified asymptotically by locating it as the intersection or focus of an in principle endless conjunction of descriptions.\footnote{Althusser’s problem with grasping singularity in conceptual (universal, abstract) terms disappears when his general abstractionist theory of concept-formation is dropped. It may then be defined indirectly, for instance, as that which is the value of a variable (cf. Quine 1961, p. 13).}

**Universal, general and singular again**

It is now both possible and necessary to draw some conclusions as regards Althusser’s considerations on laws and ‘constants’ and venture some independent remarks.

The first is that Althusser’s general contrast in principle between, on the one hand, the domain of fixed types of things about which the natural sciences seek universal laws and the domain of ‘cases’, singular, unique, concrete, dealt with by, for instance, history and psychoanalysis, in terms of ‘general’ ‘constants’ is unacceptable, based on a premodern, ‘Aristotelian’ conception. All scientific knowledge starts with the singular and returns to the singular, via ‘constants’\footnote{Cf. Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, lecture XXIX, *Complete Psychological Works*, S.E. 22: p. 29. ‘If, for the sake of studying it, we isolate one particular psychical function, such as dreaming, from the psychical machinery as a whole, we make it possible to discover the laws that are peculiar to it; but when we insert it once more into the general context we must be prepared to discover that these findings are obscured or impaired by collision with other forces.’ Althusser’s contrast seems to be a rather peculiar resurrection of the distinction, which arose round the turn of the century between ‘nomothetic’, and ‘ideographic’ disciplines, arising in the work of neo-Kantian philosophers like Windelband and Rickert, but active in the work of, for example, Weber. However, Althusser does not introduce the characterisation of the second in terms of values as occurs in this tendency.}.\footnote{Cf. Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, lecture XXIX, *Complete Psychological Works*, S.E. 22: p. 29. ‘If, for the sake of studying it, we isolate one particular psychical function, such as dreaming, from the psychical machinery as a whole, we make it possible to discover the laws that are peculiar to it; but when we insert it once more into the general context we must be prepared to discover that these findings are obscured or impaired by collision with other forces.’ Althusser’s contrast seems to be a rather peculiar resurrection of the distinction, which arose round the turn of the century between ‘nomothetic’, and ‘ideographic’ disciplines, arising in the work of neo-Kantian philosophers like Windelband and Rickert, but active in the work of, for example, Weber. However, Althusser does not introduce the characterisation of the second in terms of values as occurs in this tendency.}

Now, we have seen in Section VIII that Althusser himself makes essentially this point, though in a way which renders it completely anomalous with regard to the general line of his argument. This is all the more peculiar when it is considered that he had said the same thing in the course of a critique of Lévi-Strauss as long ago as 1966:

... modern scientific thought sets out to think *singularity*, not only in history ... and psychoanalysis, but also in physics, chemistry, biology, and so on ... it is only possible to think the singular and concrete in *concepts*
(which are thus ‘abstract’ and ‘general’); but that is the very condition for thinking the singular, since there can be no thinking without concepts (which are, consequently, abstract and ‘general’).

It may be added that what has been said does not imply that relevant and indeed necessary distinctions between sciences cannot be drawn. The most apposite such distinction in the present context is probably that between the context in which what is sought and presented are ‘constants’ and the context in which what is sought and presented are explanations of singular cases and the construction of certain unique sequences of the latter, those ‘narratives’ which may be inclusively called ‘histories’, which, indeed, are in general the basis of explanations of singular cases. This distinction holds in the case both of natural and non-natural sciences. (For the case of the natural sciences, see the singular sequences sought by cosmology underpinned by physics, by geology – for example, concerning continental drift – by macrobiology regarding the evolution of species, and so on). It may be noted that the first volume of Capital is built throughout on the plan of an alternation of general theoretical chapters and historical ones based on the latter.

No distinction between the natural and ‘non-natural’ cases can be drawn on the basis of a distinction between the province of Geschichte and the rest; genuine novelties occur in both nature and human history, and in both ‘constants’ are sought.

The applicability or otherwise of experiment does not determine a difference in kind between the two domains either. Marx mentions in the preface to the first edition of the first volume of Capital the role of experiment in the natural sciences in producing ‘pure cases’, but assigns no special significance to this: he simply remarks that in economics the ‘power of abstraction’ must replace

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106 Althusser 2003, p. 55.
107 Of course, there may be a distinction between what may be called the ‘ranges’ and what maybe called the ‘levels’ of applicability of those disciplines which are oriented to the universal or general. Thus, as regards ‘range’, the subject-matter of theoretical physics is commonly thought of (rightly or wrongly) as coextensive with the universe as a whole, and its theories as applying, to the extent that they do anywhere, everywhere, whilst the subject-matter of the sciences of life is almost certainly fairly restricted, spatio-temporally. As regards ‘level’, the various branches of theoretical physics tend to be specific, for instance, the ‘classical’ domain and the ‘quantum’ domain, and within the former, ‘macroscopic’ and ‘microscopic’ (e.g. phenomenological thermodynamics versus statistical mechanics). But these considerations do not touch the points made in the main text.
it, that is, that what is abstracted in fact in natural science must, in political economy, be abstracted only in thought. No fundamental distinction can be drawn on the basis of the greater prevalence of experiment in the domain of the natural sciences. On the one hand, this is only true, at best, of the fundamental natural sciences (for example, cosmology in itself is not an experimental science – its experimental basis is in the physics involved), and, on the other, experiment is not excluded in principle from the non-natural sciences.109

IX. Aleatory materialism and/as philosophy

The question of the character of aleatory materialism qua philosophy

Althusser wrote as far back as 1967 that Marx had introduced ‘a . . . new . . . practice of philosophy’,110 that is, that he had not abandoned philosophy as such but rather introduced a new sort of philosophy. Along similar lines he wrote in 1976:

Marx did not discover a new philosophy . . . but adopted a new philosophical standpoint, in a field (that of philosophy) which both pre-existed him and continued after his death. . . . [For Marx and Lenin] [i]t was no longer a question of creating a new philosophy in the classic mould, but of reworking the categories which had always existed in the history of philosophy and still did on this new basis.111

All this immediately suggests the question: how does aleatory materialism fit into this ‘new practice of philosophy’, this ‘new philosophical standpoint’? In other words: if it is not a ‘new philosophy’, what is its character qua philosophy?

Marx’s ‘new practice of philosophy’ (I)

Answering this question involves answering a prior question: What, more precisely, is the ‘new practice of philosophy’, the ‘new philosophical standpoint’ referred to? And answering this question in turn involves answering the

109 On experiment in psychology, see Lewin 1927 and 1935. Lewin, in turn, was a central influence on the account of the relation between laws and individual cases in psychology presented in Holzkamp 1983, Chapter 9, especially pp. 545ff.
110 Althusser 1971, p. 67.
questions: what, according to Althusser, is philosophy in general? And, more specifically: what is the practice of this philosophy with respect to which the new practice of it is new?

Althusser offered answers to these questions in work contemporary with ‘Lenin and Philosophy’ and in particular in his contribution to the co-operative ‘Cours de philosophie pour scientifiques’ given at the École normale in 1967. The first four parts of this contribution were later published as (in the English version) *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*. The fifth and final part, of special importance for the present theme, was unaccountably not included in this volume but is now available in Althusser 1995. These ideas were, in effect, restated and filled out in his later work, which also, beginning with Althusser 1990a [1976], contains new developments. This and the following subsection attempt a very brief synoptic statement of what in all this is primarily relevant to the present question.

What is constitutive of philosophy as such (as distinct from, in particular, ‘world views’) is a special relation to the sciences, the way it treats the sciences in situating itself with respect to them. What is specific to a traditional philosophy is the dual character of this relation. On the one hand, it assigns the sciences a certain limited and subordinate place with respect to itself. On the other hand, it declares itself a science, in general on the alleged basis of a form of rationality deriving from an existing science, but a sort of super-science, the science of sciences, claiming to offer the Truth about the Whole of what there is, its Origin and End. This alleged Truth is, in the final analysis, a vehicle of dominant class-ideologies, and in particular political ideologies.

This Truth is thought of as being encapsulated in

*logos*, or origin, or meaning. And since there are common origins between *logos* and speech . . . there is only one means of knowing *logos*, and hence Truth: the form of discourse. This intimacy between *logos* and speech means that truth, *logos*, can be entirely enclosed or captured and offered up only in the discourse of philosophy. For this reason . . . its discourse is not a medium, or an intermediary between it and truth, but the very presence of truth as *logos*.

The key to overturning this traditional practice of philosophy and instituting the new – Marxist-materialist – practice of philosophy is briefly as follows:

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112 On which see Althusser 1995, pp. 260–2, 289.
‘materialist philosophies affirm the primacy of practice over theory’.\textsuperscript{114} There follows at this point a passage\textsuperscript{115} which, in effect, repeats in a much more elliptical way what Althusser had already set out in much more detail in his earlier Althusser 1990a. Let us therefore follow this more accessible because more explicit presentation.

In his first thesis on Feuerbach, Marx claims that all hitherto existing materialism conceives reality (etc.) in the ‘form’ of the ‘object [\textit{Objekt}]’ or of ‘contemplation [\textit{Anschauung}]’. To this, Marx counterposes ‘practice’. However, in doing so he

has not introduced any philosophical notion on a par with the ‘object-form’ and the ‘contemplation-form’, and hence destined to replace them in order to establish a new philosophy, to inaugurate a new philosophical discourse. Instead, he establishes a reality that possesses the particularity of being at one and the same time presupposed by all traditional philosophical discourses, yet naturally excluded from such discourses.\textsuperscript{116}

What Althusser means here by saying that practice is ‘presupposed’ yet ‘excluded’ by all traditional philosophical discourses is elucidated as follows.

What in fact are the ‘object-form’ and the ‘contemplation-form’? . . . in the guise of the metaphor of vision (a metaphor interchangeable with the metaphor of presence or that of the speech of the \textit{logos}), they are the very condemnation of the claim of any philosophy to maintain a relation of discursive presence with its object . . . the peculiarity of the philosophical conception of the truth is its inability to exist in any other form than that of the object, or of contemplation. In both cases we confront the same privilege, the same claim. For philosophy men live and act subjected to the laws of their own social practices, they know not what they do. They believe they possess truths, they are not aware of what they know. Thank God philosophy is there, that it sees for them and speaks for them, tells them what they do and what they know.\textsuperscript{117}

The passage continues:

\textsuperscript{114} Althusser 1994d, p. 60.  
\textsuperscript{115} 1994d, pp. 60–2.  
\textsuperscript{116} Althusser 1990a, p. 248.  
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
the irruption of practice is a denunciation of philosophy produced as this kind of ‘philosophy’. [I]t opposes philosophy’s claim to embrace the ensemble of social practices (and ideas), to see the ‘whole’ . . . in order to establish its dominion over these same practices. It is counter to philosophy that Marxism insist that philosophy . . . exists only through and for . . . [an] ‘exterior’. This exterior (which philosophy wishes to imagine it submits to Truth) is practice, the social practices. . . . In contrast to the logos (that is, to a representation of something supreme, to what is called ‘Truth’, whose essence is reducible to ‘speech’ . . .). Practice, which is utterly foreign to the logos, is not Truth and is irreducible to – does not realise itself in – speech or sight. Practice is a process of transformation which is always subject to its own conditions of existence and produces, not the Truth, but rather ‘truths’ (or the truth, let us say, of results or of knowledge, all within the field of its own conditions of existence). And if practice has agents, it nevertheless does not have a subject as the transcendental or ontological origin of its objective, its project, nor does it have a goal as the truth of its process. It is a process without subject or goal.

If we take the term Truth in its philosophical sense . . . it must be affirmed that there is no truth of practice.

Accordingly, there is a problem involved in assigning practice the role of Truth, of foundation, of origin, in a new philosophy that would be a philosophy of praxis. . . . [P]ractice is not a substitute for Truth for the purposes of an immutable philosophy, on the contrary it is what knocks philosophy off balance. . . . [P]ractice is what philosophy . . . has never been able to incorporate. . . . [P]ractice compels philosophy to recognise that it has an exterior.118

Thus, from this standpoint, there is a renunciation in principle of claims to knowledge of the Truth and this because it rests on a thesis of the primacy of practice about which there are no unconditional truths, practice giving rise only to partial conditioned truths.119 Spinoza, for one, escaped the temptation

119 The idea of the primacy of practice gives a non-metaphysical/ontological basis for taking the world to be the totality of facts and not of things. For practices, in their cognitive aspect anyway, always begin and end (both of these to be understood contextually) with assertions that something is the case, even if this is presupposed by a question (problem) resting on assertions.
of the Truth: ‘[he] speaks, clinically, of the “true”, not of the Truth. He held that “the true is the index of itself and the index of the false”. It is the index of itself not as presence but as product, in a double sense: 1) as the result of the labour of a process that discovers it, and 2) as proving itself [se prouvant] in its very production’.\textsuperscript{120}

A genuinely materialist philosophy

does not pretend to be autonomous or to found [fonder] its own origin and its own power. Nor does it consider itself to be a science, and still less the Science of sciences. In this sense it is opposed to all positivism. In particular, it should be pointed out [signalé] that it renounces the idea that it possesses the Truth.\textsuperscript{121}

This means, among other things, that ‘the primacy of practice’ must not be conceived of as asserting a new fundamental truth, as such an idea (represented by, for example, a ‘philosophy of praxis’) would represent a regression to the old idea of philosophy as a provider of foundations, guarantees.

All this opens up the possibility of ‘a philosophy which remains philosophy, but ceases to exploit the sciences’.\textsuperscript{122} To remain philosophy, it must have a special relation to the sciences. But, if it does not exploit the sciences, then it cannot have an object, like the sciences, about which it furnishes alleged (privileged) knowledge, because all cognitive niches in the ecology of knowledge (with respect to claims about what is the case) are always already filled, or, at least, reserved, by some specific practice of scientific inquiry.

What fits this bill is the idea of philosophy not as a matter of making various assertions about the world, but of a certain activity,\textsuperscript{123} namely, that of drawing ‘lines of demarcation’ between what is scientific and what is ideological, taking up ‘positions’, ‘theses’ (to recall the etymologically original sense): between a materialist and an idealist approach, a contrast which coincides with the division in the class struggle between working class and bourgeoisie respectively. The lines may be drawn in theory, in which case

\textsuperscript{120} Althusser 1994d, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{121} Althusser 1994d, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{122} Althusser 1995, p. 265.
\textsuperscript{123} This is another similarity between Althusser and Wittgenstein, for the latter, in both his earlier and later thought, though in somewhat different ways in each, considered philosophy to be a certain sort of ‘activity’ rather than as an attempt to set up doctrines. Of course, there are fundamental differences between the two thinkers as regards the character of the activities envisaged.
philosophy is (‘in the last instance’ – Althusser emphasises this qualification)\(^\text{124}\) a matter of representing working-class political interests, or in politics where it is a matter of defending working-class theoretical interests.\(^\text{125}\) An activity, a practice differs as regards its very categorial character from an assertion, which belongs to the domain of theory. The assessment appropriate to the latter is ‘true’ (or ‘false’), that appropriate to the former is ‘correct [\emph{juste}]’ (or ‘incorrect’).\(^\text{126}\) Thus, materialism as a philosophical position cannot properly be said to \emph{affirm} something about the world as a Whole, or even, as was noted above, about the primacy of practice.\(^\text{127}\) So, philosophy conceived in this way is connected in a dual way with practice: firstly, it is \emph{itself} a practice, and, secondly, this practice is a matter, \emph{inter alia}, of representing the \emph{standpoint} of the primacy of practice.

There are (contextually determinate) procedures for checking the truth-value of assertions. How are claims of ‘correctness’ associated with a ‘position’ or ‘thesis’ to be assessed? It cannot be in terms of grounds which are logically and epistemically prior to it, since the materialist position as such rejects any such \emph{a priori} grounds. So, if it cannot be judged in terms of grounds – ‘causes’ in an older usage of the word – it can only be in terms of \emph{its effects}.\(^\text{128}\)

\[\ldots\text{ a good materialist should }\ldots\text{ judge a philosophy }\ldots\text{ by its acts, its mode of action, which is not just any mode of action, but the specific mode by}\]

\(^\text{124}\) For example, Althusser 1994d, pp. 55f.
\(^\text{125}\) Althusser states clearly in Althusser 1994e (p. 169) that he still held to the first of these definitions, though he does not disclaim the second (he simply does not mention it). Cf. also Althusser 1994d, pp. 5, 35, 127.
\(^\text{126}\) See, for example, Althusser 1994d, p. 79n.
\(^\text{127}\) Is this a possible example of the procedure alluded to in an enigmatic remark from 1976: ‘the nub of all philosophical (as well as political and military) problems \ldots\ [is] \ldots\ how to escape the circle while remaining within it’ (Althusser 1994e, p. 319)?
\(^\text{128}\) The determination of these effects is not itself a business of philosophy as such. ‘The philosopher \ldots\ has no tools or procedures for verifying things. He must limit himself to putting forward theses without ever being able to verify them himself. He must always anticipate the effects of his philosophical claims without even knowing when or how they will manifest themselves. Obviously, he does not put forward positions arbitrarily but takes into account what he perceives to be the Whole, or believes it to be, and the way it is evolving, and sets them against existing arguments in his own field.’ (Althusser 1994e, pp. 172f). In the title piece in 1990, he writes in Althusser 1994e, p. 174, he expressed the view that ‘all philosophy was essentially \emph{dogmatic}. \ldots\ It put forward its claims as true and was concerned solely with putting them forward.’ In Althusser 1997, at p. 4, Althusser speaks of ‘the truth of a philosophy’ but this is clearly only a manner of speaking. As he goes on to speak in familiar terms, saying that this truth ‘lies entirely in its \emph{effects}, while in fact it acts only at a distance from real objects, therefore, in the space of freedom that it opens up to research and action \ldots’ (The whole passage at this point repays careful study.)
which a philosophy acts: by which it acts on ideologies, and, by way of those ideologies, on practices. . . . Limit-cases aside, a philosophy never acts directly on practices, but, almost always, acts by way of ideologies. This is what one might call, in order to bring out its specificity, the ‘philosophy-effect’. It follows that in order to be able to characterize a philosophy . . . it is necessary to consider it in its effects on practices: does it exploit them or does it respect and assist them, etc. . . . The closer a philosophy comes to the practices, the more it respects them, the more it assists them by way of ideologies, the more a philosophy tends towards materialism, a materialism other than that inscribed in the pair idealism/materialism, which is a speculary pair.129

What this signifies is well illustrated in Althusser’s ‘Reply to John Lewis’ (1972). He argues here that Lewis’s positions have two sorts of deleterious effects. One is political:

if the workers are told that ‘it is men who make history’ . . . sooner or later, that helps to disorient or disarm them. It tends to make them think that they are all-powerful as men . . . prevents them from making use of the only power they possess: that of their organizations as a class and their class organizations . . . by which they wage their class struggle.130

This is clearly philosophy at work in the domain of politics, representing the standpoint of materialist theory there.

The second deleterious effect of Lewis’s positions is that they ‘prevent’ the development of existing scientific knowledge . . . are an obstacle to the development of knowledge. Instead of helping it to progress, they hold it back . . . ’.131 Althusser goes on:

That is how philosophy ‘works’ in the sciences. Either it helps them to produce new scientific knowledge, or it tries to wipe out these advances and drag humanity back to a time when the sciences did not exist. Philosophy therefore works in the sciences in a progressive or retrogressive way. Strictly speaking, we should say that it tends to act in one way or another – for every philosophy is always contradictory.132

129 Althusser 1994d, pp. 101f.
130 Althusser 1976, pp. 63f.
131 Althusser 1976, p. 60.
132 Althusser 1976, p. 61.
This is, then, philosophy at work in the sciences. But, so far, there is no mention of working-class interests, only of purely cognitive ones. However, he goes on to say that a certain idealist thesis presented by Lewis ‘paralyzes revolutionary philosophers, theoreticians and militants. It disarms them, because in effect it deprives them of an irreplaceable weapon: the effective knowledge of the conditions, mechanisms and forms of the class struggle’.\textsuperscript{133} That is, working-class interests are represented in theory indirectly, via cognitive interests. The not entirely explicit premise here is that the advancement of knowledge is in working-class interests. The argument would appear to be not that claims to knowledge are justified because they are in working-class interests, but rather, conversely, justified claims to knowledge are in working-class interests.

With respect, then, to the domain of theory in particular, the gist of what has been said may be put in an only slightly different way by saying that a materialist line/position is justified, in the first instance, to the extent that it keeps particular practices of production of knowledge epistemically ‘open’, preventing premature (ideologically based) ‘closures’ which work to prevent the posing of new problems and solutions to them.\textsuperscript{134} This, in turn, is justified,

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{134} This way of putting the matter brings Althusser’s conception into close connection with one of Engels’s characterisations of materialism as the idea of conceiving ‘the real world – nature and history – just as it presents itself to anyone who approaches it without preconceived idealist fancies [Schrullen] . . . to sacrifice mercilessly \textit{every} idealist fancy which could not be brought into harmony with the facts conceived in their \textit{own} and not in a purely imaginary \textit{phantastischen} interconnection. And materialism as such means nothing more than this’ (Althusser 1970, p. 361). In fact, Althusser sometimes alludes to this passage (e.g. Althusser 1971, pp. 43, 59; Althusser 1976, p. 194, n. 19; Althusser 1997, p. 6). See also Althusser’s remarks in Althusser 1994e: ‘“Not to indulge in storytelling” still remains for me the one and only definition of materialism’ (p. 121) and ‘my objective never to tell myself stories, which is the only “definition” of materialism I have ever subscribed to’ (p. 169). Further, pp. 211, 223, and cf. Althusser 1994f, p. 523. It is also true that Althusser has, on at least one occasion, formulated the materialist conception in the sort of ‘metaphysical’ way fairly standard in the later Marx and in Engels: ‘Philosophy of a materialist tendency recognizes the existence of objective external reality, as well as its independence of the subject who perceives or knows this reality. It recognizes that being, the real, exists and is anterior to the discovery of it, to the fact of being thought or known’ (Althusser 1994d, p. 60). There is no room here for a criticism of this way of putting the matter. I have argued in Suchting 1986, Study 2, that arguments for ‘philosophical’ materialism considered as a true or false doctrine are basically \textit{dogmatic} or what in fact comes to the same thing \textit{circular} (question-begging): they all basically, at some point, simply affirm or presuppose what is supposed to be being proved. It may be noted here, as regards the Engels formulation, that it is not inconsistent with scientists actually holding non-materialist views. This was particularly in question in Lenin’s \textit{Materialism and Empirio-Criticism},
it would seem, by reference to the claim that the cause of the emancipation of the working class is forwarded by the growth of knowledge. How is this claim justified? Presumably by the ascertainable effects of the latter on the former.

Marx’s ‘new practice of philosophy’ (II)

Beginning with Althusser 1990a, Althusser began a new development in his theory of philosophy. It is expressed in a very lapidary form in the following passage written in 1984:

My main idea [idée maîtresse] can be summed up in a few words: philosophy is, as it were, the theoretical laboratory, solitary and isolated, despite all the links tying it to the world, in which are elaborated categories appropriate for [propres à] thinking, and, above all, for unifying/diversifying, appropriate for thinking the various existing ideologies in unitary/unifying forms . . . there is an . . . exigency to unify diverse (and contradictory) ideologies in order to draw them into the process of the constitution (never completed, infinite, see Kant’s regulative idea) of what can be called the dominant ideology.135

It had already been put in Althusser 1990a as follows:

. . . philosophy produces theoretical schemas, theoretical figures that serve as mediators for surmounting contradictions and as links for reconnecting the different elements of ideology. Moreover, it guarantees (by dominating the social practices thus reordered) the Truth of this order, enunciated in the form of the guarantee of a rational discourse.136

especially in the chapter on ‘The Crisis in Physics’: a distinction is made between the scientist’s actual work and his philosophical views about his work. This work of Lenin’s also contains, besides the usual ‘metaphysical’ conception of materialism (certainly the main one), other elements which seem at least compatible with the ‘lines’ conception, for instance his distinction between matter as (scientifical) ‘concept’ and (philosophical) ‘category’, his criticism of Mach in terms of the effects of his philosophical questions (closing off questions), and his account of dogmatism/scepticism (for references see Suchting 1986). Althusser refers to matter as a ‘category’ in Althusser 1971, p. 50. See also Lecourt 1973. (Further queries belonging to this general area arise with a consideration of the question of the status of the idea of a ‘Marxist philosophy’ in general. See note 52 above.)


136 Althusser 1990a, p. 259.
Althusser then poses the following question:

. . . if, in the last instance, philosophy plays the role of laboratory for the theoretical unification and foundation of the dominant ideology, what is the role of philosophers who refuse to serve the dominant ideology? . . . Put another way: if what I have proposed is plausible, how is a Marxist philosophy conceivable?137

The second formulation of the question registers the at least *prima facie* inconsequence of the first formulation: if philosophy is at least partly *constituted* in terms of its function in helping to form a dominant ideology, it would seem that there *logically* cannot be something properly termed a ‘philosophy’ which does *not* have this function. *Caedit quaestio.*

Althusser begins his answer as follows:

In order to grasp its possibility, it is sufficient to reflect on the fact that the expression ‘dominant ideology’ has no meaning if it is not set against another expression: the dominated ideology. . . . The fact that, in a society divided into classes, the dominant class must forge an ideology that is dominant . . . issues in a process that unfolds with a good deal of resistance. Particularly because . . . there exist in class society what Lenin called ‘elements’ of another distinct ideology, that of the exploited class. The ideology of the dominant class does not constitute itself as dominant except over and against the ideological elements of the dominated class.

He continues:

A similar opposition can be found within philosophy itself. . . . Philosophy, which works in its own theoretical laboratory to the benefit of the ideological hegemony of the ascendant or dominant class, without realizing it, confronts its own adversaries, generally under the name of materialism. . . . The forms of philosophical partisanship for the dominated class are represented in the forms that constitute philosophy, and hence under the forms of the question of ideological hegemony. Thus it is that the entire history of philosophy resounds deafeningly with the echo of the exploited or the opponents. Some, such as the eighteenth-century materialists, went so far as to oppose their own system of truth to the representatives of the dominant class. But rather

137 Althusser 1990a, p. 260.
than the eighteenth-century materialists... perhaps those who ought to interest us are the ones who only half succeeded (or hardly succeeded) in imparting to their opposition the form of a philosophy produced as ‘philosophy’. For my part I would closely investigate the cases of Epicurus and Machiavelli, to cite only them. But if I do so, it is only to try to understand Marx...

Thus, we have the sudden introduction of a distinction between ‘philosophy’ and “‘philosophy’”. The use of this terminological couple renders many passages devoted to the present theme very confusing. The situation seems to be as follows. What Althusser characterises in the passage we started with as philosophy tout court (that is, roughly, the unifying discourse of the dominant ideology which is, in the first place, the ideology of the dominant classes) comes to be called ‘philosophy’, which is in fact only one form of what is actually philosophy tout court. The dominated classes in general also represent themselves philosophically in the forms of the dominant ideology, that is, as ‘philosophy’. The question then becomes: how can dominated classes represent themselves philosophically in a form independent of the forms of the dominant ideology, that is, not as ‘philosophy’, but as an alternative form of philosophy as such? In particular, it is a question of how this is possible with respect to the working class, and, since Marxism is the standpoint of the latter, how there can be a Marxist philosophy, rather than a Marxist ‘philosophy’. This elucidation permits a clearer reading of the passages quoted so far and should do the same for ones about to the quoted in resuming the thread of the exposition.

Althusser writes: ‘When we observe the history of the Marxist workers’ movement through the prism of the philosophical forms in which it has recognised itself, we encounter two typical situations.’

In the first we find ourselves with Marx, Engels, Lenin, Gramsci and Mao, who, in one way or another, always give the impression of distrusting like the plague anything that might appear to be a philosophy produced as... ‘philosophy’, in the forms of ideological hegemony we have analyzed.

By contrast, we find ourselves in the second situation with people like Lukács... and above all with Stalin... who was... decisive in opening the highway for a Marxist philosophy produced as ‘philosophy’...

138 Althusser 1990a, pp. 260f.
it is as if . . . Marx, Lenin and Gramsci had suggested that the philosophy required by Marxism was by no means a philosophy produced as ‘philosophy’, but rather a new practice of philosophy. . . . Marx has bequeathed Marxists . . . the task of inventing new forms of philosophical intervention to hasten the end of bourgeois ideological hegemony. In sum: the task of inventing a new practice of philosophy. . . . This new practice of philosophy serves the proletarian class struggle without imposing upon it an oppressive ideological unity . . . but rather creating for it the ideological conditions for the liberation and free development of social practices.\textsuperscript{139}

Read in the way suggested, this joins seamlessly onto the account of the ‘new practice of philosophy’ outlined above. Synoptically, Althusser’s account is briefly as follows. Philosophy as such, as a genus, is constituted by a special relation to science involving in the most general way the interests, expressed in ideologies, of groups engaged in social, and in particular class, conflict. Traditional philosophy (‘philosophy’) proceeds by exploiting the sciences and giving dominant interests/ideologies a fictitious unity in the form of claims about the Truth regarding the Whole. The ‘new practice’ of specifically Marxist philosophy combats ideological exploitation of the sciences because (ultimately) it is contrary to working-class interests, but also combats any attempt to impose on the working class ‘an oppressive ideological unity’.

\textit{The character of aleatory materialism qua philosophy}

It is now possible to sketch an answer to the question posed earlier (‘the question of the character of aleatory materialism’).

At first sight, the answer may seem to be somewhat as follows. The special character of aleatory materialism \textit{qua} philosophy is that it rejects all the various claims of traditional philosophy to ground the totality of what there is in some all-embracing principle, transcendent or immanent, which accounts for how it is (Origin) and where it is heading (End) and to replace this with a theory of universal, radical contingency. Such a view of the matter might well call on passages like the following.

For Epicurus and aleatory materialism, Althusser writes,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{139} Althusser 1990a, pp. 262, 264, 265. At certain points, Althusser seems to want to say that if there is no ‘philosophy or physics, mathematics etc., then, insofar as Marx’s achievement was mainly scientific, there is no “philosophy of Marxism” as distinct from a “philosophy for” Marx(ism)’. See Althusser 1994d, pp. 23, 35f, 37f, 39, 87–9.
\end{quote}
... before the formation of the world, there was no Meaning [Sens], neither Cause nor End nor Reason nor Unreason [Déraison]. . . . All question of Origin is rejected, as are all the great philosophical questions: ‘Why is there something rather than nothing? What is the origin of the world? What is the world’s raison d’être? What is man’s place in the ends of the world?’ and so on. . . . [For there to be] a structure of Being or of the world that assigns each of its elements its place, meaning, and role, or, better, establishes . . . the atoms as elements of bodies, of beings, of the world . . . it is necessary that the world exist, and, prior to that, that the atoms exist [il faut que le monde soit, et les atomes déjà], a situation which puts . . . the philosophy of Being for ever in second place . . . thus making . . . impossible . . . any discourse of first philosophy.\textsuperscript{140}

This obviously rules out Plato and Aristotle, for instance. But it also ‘explains why Epicurus . . . never subscribed to the “mechanical” materialism of Democritus, this materialism being only a resurgence, within a possible philosophy of the encounter, of the dominant idealism of Order as immanent in Disorder’.\textsuperscript{141} This bespeaks Epicurus’s ‘audacity’: what other philosophy has ever put forward ‘the thesis that Swerve was originary [originaire], not derived?’\textsuperscript{142}

What then, on the basis of this thesis, does philosophy come to?

. . . philosophy is . . . [the] theory of their contingency and a recognition of fact, of the fact of contingency, the fact of the subordination of necessity to contingency, and the fact of the forms which ‘gives form’ to the effect of the encounter. It is now no more than observation [constat]: there has been an encounter, and a ‘taking-hold’ [prise] of the elements with one another.\textsuperscript{143}

The central problem with the answer sketched to start with, and supported by at least one reading of passages of the kind just quoted, is that it runs the risk of representing aleatory materialism as basically just another traditional philosophy, in particular, another form of materialism. In this way, the denial that the Whole has any Origin or End as its Truth is itself really about the Whole, is a different answer to questions posed within the traditional practice, a heretical answer, so to speak, but not an answer different in principle to

\textsuperscript{140} Althusser 1994b, pp. 541, 542, 565.
\textsuperscript{141} Althusser 1994b, p. 565.
\textsuperscript{142} Althusser 1994b, p. 541.
\textsuperscript{143} Althusser 1994b, p. 542.
traditional ones—something in the way in which a diabolism is a form of theism. On this reading, it may be taken to be something like a version of indeterminism, either of a more or less purely speculative sort, like Peirce’s ‘tychism’,144 or with putative scientific backing, like Popper’s,145 opposed, most clearly, to a general determinism.

Quite independently of what has been said above, an indication that this is an ‘incorrect’ answer is provided by Althusser’s reluctance, expressed here and there, to call aleatory materialism a ‘materialism’ at all.

As we saw to start with, Althusser claims that all traditional philosophies (presumably, he means at least all ‘superterranean’ traditional philosophies) are, tendentially, either idealisms or materialisms—‘tendentially’ because, not only idealism but also the historically most visible and influential forms of materialism, bear traces of their opposites within themselves.

In the interviews published in Althusser 1994d, Althusser’s interlocutor asks at one point: ‘Have any philosophies escaped the idealism-materialism pair?’146 He replies:

... if certain philosophies escape this pair, they can be recognized by the fact that they escape, or attempt to escape, questions of origin and end, that is, ultimately, the question of the End or Ends of the world and of human history. These philosophies... in avoiding the trap... express the need to abandon idealism and move towards what may be called (if you like) materialism, thus distinguishing themselves, I repeat, from every philosophy of Origin—whether it is a matter of Being, the Subject, Meaning or Telos—since it considers that these themes fall to religion and morality [la morale], but not to philosophy.147

Elsewhere, he writes (in effect apropos the parenthetical ‘if you like’ in this passage):

... are Epicurus’s theses still materialist? Yes... but on condition that we have done with a conception of materialism which, setting out from the questions and concepts it shares with idealism, makes materialism the answer to it. We continue to speak of a materialism of the encounter only for the

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144 For example, Pierce 1992.
145 Popper 1982.
146 Althusser 1994d, p. 58.
147 Althusser 1994d, p. 58f.
sake of convenience: it should be kept in mind that this materialism of the encounter eludes the classical criteria of every materialism, and that we need, after all, some word to designate the thing.\textsuperscript{148}

But the only secure way of avoiding misinterpretations of aleatory materialism as a form of traditional materialism is not in the direction of terminological reform but in that of sticking to the letter of Althusser’s doctrine about the character of philosophy as a practice of intervention, involving not assertions but ‘positions’, ‘theses’.\textsuperscript{149} Specifically, aleatory materialism is a philosophical ‘thesis’ directed at combating ‘closures’, at enjoining optimal ‘openness’. With respect to the cognitive-theoretical domain, this intervention is directed against both dogmatic and sceptical assumptions about what is or must be the case about the world. In particular, it should be understood as affirming anti-necessitarianism, not ontologically but in purely methodological terms. With respect to the practical-political domain, its intervention is directed at untested – even untestable – assumptions about the possibilities for emancipation, assumptions either about what forwards or what constrains it. As such, aleatory materialism may be compared with ‘the principle of causality/determinism’, interpreted not as an all-embracing assertion about how the world is (for example, ‘Every event has a cause’) but as a rule of procedure enjoining the search for certain sorts of conditions for what happens rather than others (such as teleological ones).

\textbf{X. Conclusion – further questions}

The preceding considerations have raised at various points, explicitly, or by implication, a number of lines of necessary further work.

First of all, there is an historiographical question, namely, that of the degree of fidelity of Althusser’s presentation of the history of materialism to the relevant facts (however this expression might be construed). Even were this presentation to be found wanting to one or another extent, this would leave open, of course, the systematic – that is, general theoretical – value of Althusser’s conception of aleatory materialism.

\textsuperscript{148} Althusser 1994b, p. 543 – see also p. 562. In a footnote to this last reference he refers to Lecourt’s term ‘surmaté rialisme’ and recommends his discussion of it in Lecourt 1981, Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{149} In this regard, it is important to note that Althusser regards Machiavelli’s general principles about the course of history not as substantive scientific assertions but as philosophical ‘theses’ (Althusser 1995, pp. 79, 91).
This last context involves a number of questions which stem from Althusser’s own criterion for assessing a philosophical position (that is, the context of an immanent assessment), namely, that concerning both the cognitive and the political effects induced, or tending to be induced, by it.

The cognitive effects may be considered from two general points of view, (a) one is that of the advantages or otherwise of this approach for resolving – or, more precisely, dissolving – traditional (including, of course, current) philosophical problems. For instance, aleatory materialism has a crucial bearing on the seemingly endless disputes about modalities, particularly with reference to the question of the character of ‘laws of nature’.\(^{150}\) (b) The other perspective is that from the sciences. From this angle, questions concern (i) the consonance or otherwise of aleatory materialism with already well-established results of the sciences and, in particular, the contemporary sciences. Possible areas of inquiry here include the treatments of that area of non-linear processes in physics popularly known as the domain of ‘chaos theory’ and work in biology both molecular and macro-evolutionary.\(^{151}\) The questions concern (ii) an assessment of the effects which an aleatory materialism might foreseeably have in the sciences, which would include a consideration of the possible deleterious effects which non-aleatory materialism may have induced. An area of special interest to those engaged in the Marxist tradition is, for instance, interpretations of historical materialism in terms of evolutionary ‘progress’, often rooted in theories of pan-historical technological progress.\(^{152}\)

The political effects may be studied from the point of view of the historical effects of non-aleatory materialism on emancipatory movements and from the point of view of its potential effects. Again, the history of Marxist theory and its actual and potential political effects must be a prime point of interest.

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\(^{150}\) The contemporary state of this discussion may be studied very conveniently and comprehensively in Weinert 1995.

\(^{151}\) ‘Chaos theory’ is more exactly defined by Kellert in his excellent book on the subject as the field of ‘the qualitative study of unstable periodic behaviour in deterministic nonlinear dynamical systems’ (Kellert 1993, p. 2). On the subject see also Kamminga 1990. On geology, see Davis 1996, and in biology see, for example, Gould 1989, especially Chapter 5, Jacob 1982, Monod 1977, Pollack 1994 (especially Chapter 3). Dupré 1993 contains much of relevant interest.

For instance, the standpoint of aleatory materialism is fairly clearly inconsistent with the view, rooted deeply in Marx’s own work from beginning to end (stemming, arguably, from Hegel) that political aims, strategic and also tactical, as well as political means to those ends, are basically a matter of the realisation, the making ‘for itself’ of what is already present ‘in itself’ in the social-historical situation.

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Introduction

W.G. Runciman’s *Treatise on Social Theory* is one of the finest works in its field published over the last fifty years. It is a rich, capacious, magisterial work in three volumes and 1,200 pages. My purpose in this paper is not to assess the work overall, nor to offer an account of its author, who is a fascinating figure in his own right, but to engage the argument in the *Treatise* on a narrower front, at its places of closest approach to historical materialism.

Runciman’s point of departure is the view that ‘there is no escape from the recognition that any substantive social theory is and cannot but be evolutionary’, which means that ‘although biological theory cannot explain the structure and culture of human societies directly, the process of social evolution is both continuous with, and analogous to, biological evolution.’

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1 Runciman 1989a, p. 37 and Runciman 1989b, p. 12, respectively. For further reflections by Runciman on the evolutionary analogy, see Runciman 1989a, pp. 38, 296; the ‘Introduction’ to Runciman, Smith and Dunbar (eds.) 1996, pp. 1–8 and Runciman 1998. For an excellent recent critique of Runciman’s work see Chattoe 2002. I am grateful to Paul Wetherley for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
I share this view, but I will not defend it here.\textsuperscript{2} I am interested primarily in the manner in which Runciman cashes out his claim to develop a social theory that is analogous to neo-Darwinian evolutionary biology, and the relationship of his theory to the version of historical materialism I favour, which is centred on the concept of competitive primacy.\textsuperscript{3}

My conclusions will be that:

(i) Runciman’s analysis of long-run historical trends is consistent with historical materialism, his occasional diatribes to the contrary notwithstanding;\textsuperscript{4}

(ii) Runciman has a flat-pack problem, in that he has chosen the right elements for his social theory, but has assembled them in the wrong order;

(iii) social power is less central to historical development than his theory supposes.

Runciman has a great deal nevertheless to offer contemporary historical materialism, and contemporary historical materialism perhaps has something to offer Runciman in return.

The compact statement and the biological analogy

The following excerpt (hereafter ‘the Compact Statement’) offers the most compact statement of Runciman’s social theory:

\begin{quote}
Briefly, my [view] is that the process [of social evolution] is one of competitive selection whereby certain roles and institutions come to replace or supersede others; that the units of selection are not roles or institutions but the practices of which classes, status-groups, orders, factions, sects, communities, age-sets and so forth are the carriers; that their function lies in maintaining or augmenting the power which attaches to the roles and thereby institutions which they constitute and thus in preserving or changing the mode of the distribution of power in societies (or ‘social aggregates’ or ‘social formations’) taken as a whole; and that the direction which evolution has thus far taken has in consequence been one of both increasing and diminishing variation –
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{2} For a preliminary defence see Carling 1998.
\item \textsuperscript{3} See Carling 2002 and Carling and Nolan 2000.
\item \textsuperscript{4} See, for example, the attacks on Immanuel Wallerstein as a representative Marxian ‘Attitude-Merchant’ and on John Westergaard and Henrietta Resler for ‘attitude-peddling’ in Runciman 2000, pp. 61 and 200 respectively.
\end{itemize}
increasing as mutant or recombinant practices create new roles and institutions, and decreasing as the competitive advantages which they confer on their carriers compel pre-existing ones to adapt to them.\textsuperscript{5}

First, the fundamental topic of the theory is the distribution of power in society, or more particularly, the \textit{mode} of distribution of power in society: the \textit{way} in which social power is exercised under different sets of historical circumstances. Social evolution is then understood as the process by which these ways of exercising power are either preserved, or changed.

Second, there is a typology of power relations, not mentioned explicitly in this quotation, but prominently rehearsed elsewhere, according to which there are three and only three fundamental types of power: economic power, ideological power and coercive power.\textsuperscript{6} Runciman adopts the Marxian term ‘mode of production’ to signify the mode of exercise of economic power, and extends the terminology likewise (and Weber-wise) to the modes of persuasion and coercion in respect of the other two dimensions of power.\textsuperscript{7} A society is thus characterised by a three-dimensional variable whose components are its modes of production, persuasion and coercion.\textsuperscript{8}

Comparative historical analysis then allegedly yields the finding that there are only eight main variants in the mode of production, eight again for persuasion and seven for coercion. Examples illustrating each dimension are ‘serfdom’ for production, ‘an age-set ranking in which prestige is automatically accorded to elders’ for persuasion, and ‘a republican magistracy and civilian militia’ for coercion. An exhaustive taxonomy of actually-existing types of society then arises from the independent permutation of the various possibilities on each dimension: eight multiplied by eight multiplied by seven, or 448 in all.\textsuperscript{9} One such society might be, for example, a serf economy controlled by a

\textsuperscript{6} On the three respective modalities of power, cf. ‘The practising sociologist wants in the first instance to be able to report to his [sic] readers who is acquiring what from whom, who is being accorded prestige by whom and who is giving orders to whom in accordance with a pattern sufficiently consistent that the term role . . . can be applied’ (Runciman 1989a, p. 20).
\textsuperscript{7} See Runciman 1989b, p. 10 for the further suggestion that the distinction between the three types of power is based on the distinction between three types of resources that may be used to wield power, namely the means of production, the means of persuasion and the means of coercion respectively.
\textsuperscript{8} This context evidently changes the meaning of ‘mode of production’ from its conventional Marxist usage as a complex totality embracing all three dimensions.
\textsuperscript{9} Runciman 1989a, pp. 58/9, and cf. Runciman 1989a, p. 46.
republican magistracy whose prestigious roles were occupied on the basis of age. It seems that, in principle, the permutations on each dimension can occur independently, so that Runciman’s viewpoint differs from an orthodox-Marxist position in which certain kinds of superstructure tend to go with certain kinds of base. Social evolution has nevertheless been circumscribed considerably. It consists in the process by which a society maintains its existing niche within this sociological version of a periodic table, makes a transition between two of the 448 niches, or reaches an entirely novel niche undreamed-of in the prior taxonomy.

Third, an explicit answer is given to the question of what the process of social selection selects for, in either preserving or changing modes of the distribution of power, and thus niche-membership. The unit of selection is the social practice, as opposed to either ‘roles’ or ‘institutions’. Practices are ‘carried’ by distinctive social groups, such as ‘classes, status-groups, orders, factions, sects, communities, age-sets and so forth’. But practices are not fundamental in themselves. What makes them so is their function, which ‘lies in maintaining or augmenting . . . power’.

Fourth, roles and institutions to which social power attaches are said to be constituted by practices. There is a competitive selection of practices, which thereby changes (or of course preserves) social roles and/or institutions, and therewith the distribution of social power. The causal chain is: practices to roles-cum-institutions to societal types.

Fifth, Runciman introduces one neologism as a collective noun for the social groups he presents in this quotation by means of an indicative list. Thus a social group characterised by the (power-relevant) practices it carries (‘classes, status-groups, orders, factions, sects, communities, age-sets and so forth’) is known by the technical term of ‘systact’.

The upshot of his explanatory scheme is a one-to-one correspondence with the theoretical architecture of neo-Darwinism: ‘social evolution comes about because practices (like genes) give roles (like organisms) advantages in competition for power (like competition for reproductive capacity) through being thereby attributes of systacts (like groups) and societies (like species)’. Interaction between ‘role-incumbents’ is like sexual activity, which can lead

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10 Runciman does love lists, a verbal mannerism that reaches a climax when he introduces 18 synonyms for the word ‘chat’ in 2000: p. 210. For another instructive example of listophilia, see Runciman 1989a, pp. 20/1.

11 Runciman 1989a, p. 46.
to the appearance of ‘mutant and recombinant practices’ – a favourite Runciman expression. Practices spread preferentially (or die out) when and because they confer advantages (or disadvantages) in the struggle for power on the roles grouped into systacts that carry them, on one or more of the three dimensions of power.

If this is Runciman’s theory in a nutshell, I will comment first on his views of the macroscopic distribution of social types, and then on his analysis of the microfoundations of social reproduction and social change. These are the ‘Darwinian’ and the ‘Mendelian’ aspects respectively of the question of social evolution.

**The magnificent peroration and the ‘direction that evolution has thus far taken’**

The received neo-Darwinian view holds that biological evolution is a non-directed process. As he winds himself up to close the second volume of the *Treatise*, Runciman makes the analogous point for social evolution with unusual passion, as if he would burn it into the reader’s mind:

Social evolution is just as susceptible to scientific explanation as biological evolution. But the form which that explanation must take is such as to bury beyond hope of resurrection any and every teleological account of human history. There is no one mode of the distribution of power predetermined to inherit the earth; no nation, race or empire has a manifest destiny; there is no valid interpretation of the history of human societies in terms of progress towards a goal; there is no inexorable sequence from one mode of production, persuasion or coercion to the next; there is no process of cumulative rationalisation at work in either a formal or a substantive sense; there is no dialectic by which opposing tendencies are reconciled at a higher level; there is no will of God being acted out; there is no master plan being followed, whether consciously or not. There are only people in their roles, linked within institutional catchment areas by relations of both domination and cooperation and competing with one another for economic, ideological and coercive power, as they will continue to do for as long as the human species may survive.\(^\text{12}\)

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This polemic is evidently intended to sweep aside Marx, not to mention Spencer, Weber, Hegel, and, indeed, everyone else including the Lord God Almighty, in order to open out the vista at the end of which stands the nugget of Runciman’s insight displayed in its final sentence. But it is not quite as clear as this passage implies that Runciman has in fact shaken off the Marxian heritage, or that his theory is inconsistent with historical materialism.

First, the obvious paraphrase for the last sentence is that, for Runciman, the history of all hitherto-existing societies (not to mention all societies yet to come) is the history of systactic contention. This is not a rejection of classical Marxism, so much as a generalisation of it, which implies that classical-Marxist theses can be recovered as empirical propositions within the new social evolutionary framework, for example, by means of the hypothesis that class struggle is a form of systactic contention with peculiar historical significance. I will return to this point in the concluding section.

Second, the peroration is aimed against any suggestion that history is a goal-directed process, whether the goal is given by national will, divine intervention, collective agency, moral progress, general advances in human mentality, or by any externally-imposed framework of interpretation. But this denial of *telos* by no means precludes the possibility that history may exhibit a directedness after the facts, so to speak, as an emergent property of historical evolution itself.

This kind of directedness is, for example, entertained in the ‘Compact Statement’’s thoughts on ‘increasing and diminishing variation’. These contemplate an overall balance within the historical process between the randomising tendency of social evolution, which continually throws up new varieties of mutant and recombinant practice, and the homogenising tendency, which, like Fisher’s ‘Fundamental Theorem’ in biology, envisages a rising gradient of adaptation, as sociological varieties evolve on pain of social death.13

Equally significant is the progression Runciman introduces into his presentation of the actual historical sequence of social evolution, under the chapter heading of ‘Social Structure’ in the second volume of the *Treatise*. He begins by acknowledging that ‘a certain accumulation of resources is a necessary condition of the emergence of novel roles and institutions and the consequent evolution of societies from one to another mode’.14 He then proceeds to muster

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13 I am indebted to Paul Nolan for my awareness of the Fisher Theorem.
14 Runciman 1989a, p. 149. Paul Wetherly has pointed out in correspondence that
societies for historical parade according to the level of resource-accumulation that they exhibit.

Thus, hunter-gatherer societies are all fairly similar in their forms of distribution of power because their low level of resources implies that there is not much surplus power to distribute within them. The underlying thought is presumably that there is only one way to distribute nothing.

Second in ascending order of classification are a variety of ‘stateless pastoralists and tribal or communal semi-states’ in which ‘there may be quite substantial resources available [. . . but] there are no economic, ideological or coercive roles to which there attaches a monopoly of power’. The power thus made available (but not monopolised) may be ‘dissipated’ (the case of the Melanesian ‘big-men’ societies); ‘shared’ (among ‘adult male household heads, whether living in the kraals of the East African Nuer, the long-houses of the Daflas of the North-east Indian frontier, or the yurts of the Kirghiz of the Central Asian Pamirs’); or finally ‘obstructed’ (the case of Hawaiian ‘chiefs’).

Next up the scale of resource concentration and use are five categories of genuine state societies, in which power is monopolised in some manner. These are respectively:

(i) the slave-owning citizen-militia societies of classical Greece and premodern Italy;
(ii) the warrior societies of the thirteenth-century Mongols, the Teutonic Knights and the Islamic caliphates, the latter both in the earliest times and in ‘the Sokoto Caliphate of the early nineteenth century’;
(iii) the bureaucratic monarchies of late Rome, Sung China, or Louis XIV’s France;
(iv) the genuinely feudal societies, including ‘not only late Lombard Italy, post-Jagellonian Poland, post-Mongol, pre-Safavid Iran and Latin America in the period following independence’ but also ‘the Roman Empire in the West after the central government had lost its hold over the large

the necessity assumed here by Runciman may not withstand closer inspection. Why should increasing accumulation of resources lead automatically to changed modes of persuasion or coercion? Perhaps this quotation discloses the lingering presence of a base-superstructure model.

16 Runciman 1989a, p. 151.
17 Runciman 1989a, p. 156.
aristocratic landowners, and the Byzantine Empire in the East after the “Collapse”;\(^{18}\)

(v) premodern state societies whose states are controlled by a dominant systact which is located ‘as it were, in the middle’. The last case is exemplified by the bourgeois control of Parliament in seventeenth-century England.\(^{19}\)

These premodern societal types finally give way to the modern societies comprised by ‘industrial or industrialising states’, which are subdivided in more familiar ways between (i) liberal-capitalist, (ii) socialist and (iii) authoritarian modes in their distribution of power.\(^{20}\)

Runciman speaks frequently of the ‘Linnaean’ character of his 448-fold classification of social types.\(^{21}\) But, if societal types are the genera and societies are the species of this classification, the four-fold grouping according to the intensity of resource use appears to create the orders: the highest level of classification. It is significant that this broadest basis of classification corresponds closely with the partition of fundamental social types introduced by G.A. Cohen in his influential exposition of historical materialism.\(^{22}\) This places Runciman on large-scale historical process within the Marxian ball park, if not exactly on the Marxist team.\(^{23}\)

\(^{18}\) Runciman 1989a, p. 158.

\(^{19}\) Runciman 1989a, p. 159. ‘Seventeenth Century England can be classified neither as a Polish-type feudalism nor as a French-style absolutism. Its systactic structure was one in which a national (or in some of its regions supranational) monarchical state was compelled to accommodate a systact of increasingly commercialised gentry secure in their control of local government, their hold through Parliament on the finances of the central government, their preservation of chartered liberties, their independence (if they so chose) of the patronage of the Court, and their capacity, in the last resort, to resist by recourse to the militia.’

\(^{20}\) Runciman 1989a, p. 160. The defining characteristic of authoritarianism according to this scheme is a nationalist and/or racist ideology operating in the context of a capitalist economy and a one-party state. ‘Totalitarianism’ then depends on the success of the single party in totalising its penetration of social institutions, and this criterion cuts across the basic classification: ‘Hitler’s Germany is the totalitarian sub-type of the authoritarian mode, as is Stalin’s Russia of the socialist’ (Runciman 1989a, p. 165).

\(^{21}\) For example, at Runciman 1989a, pp. 59, 147, 149, 283.

\(^{22}\) Cohen (1978, pp. 197–200) distinguishes ‘four epochs’ of social development in Marx, corresponding to increased levels of economic productivity.

\(^{23}\) Runciman acknowledges that ‘. . . all sociologists subscribe to one of the presuppositions of historical materialism, for it would hardly be possible to deny that the increase in usable resources has been a necessary condition of the parallel increase in organizational complexity’ (Runciman 1989a, p. 39).
But, even more surprisingly, Runciman deploys the broad classification to venture a progressive thesis of his own:

Perhaps it is plausible to suggest that just as coercive power tended to be more important in the transition to statehood, and ideological power thereafter, so in the nineteenth century did economic power become more important than either. 24

Despite his ‘emphatic’ denial elsewhere in the Treatise that societies ‘lend themselves either to lawlike synchronic generalisations or to unilinear evolutionary sequence’, this appears to be a ‘unilinear evolutionary sequence’ with a vengeance. 25 It says, first, that history does have a direction. And it says, second, that this direction consists in a systematic shift in the primary locus of social power as history moves on, from pre-state societies (in which the coercive dimension of power predominates as the basis of control), to premodern state societies (with an ideological basis), and finally to modern state societies (with an economic basis).

As if overcome to find himself venturing such a grand hypothesis, Runciman does however add immediately that:

. . . as always, the relation between the three dimensions [of power] is one of dependence, not reducibility, and the priority of one over the others is not to be presupposed in advance.

The conclusion is evidently two-fold: first, it is permissible, according to Runciman, to postulate directedness in history, but only if the direction is inferred from the historical record, and not ‘presupposed in advance’; second, that history’s direction is related as a matter of fact to a growing intensity in the use of material resources, and to systematic shifts in the primary locus for the exercise of power. Both of these conclusions are promisingly aligned with historical materialism, or at least a scientifically-oriented historical materialism, if I dare express the parallel in the latter terms. I will return to this connection after examining the other side of the equation of social evolution: the microfoundations of social reproduction and social change.

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24 Runciman 1989a, p. 164.
25 Runciman 1989a, p. 49.
An instrumental conception of power

The detailed dynamics of Runciman’s theory evidently hinge on the relationships among a handful of basic concepts: power, practices, roles, institutions and systacts. And little doubt is left in the reader’s mind that the most important of these is power. The scope of sociological enquiry more or less coincides for Runciman with the application of this concept, and the concept appears in at least three guises in the construction of the theory itself: in the descriptive content of social forms, as a cause of social change, and as a criterion of social reproductive success. It seems appropriate therefore to begin the analysis of Runciman’s theory with the definition of its central term:

I shall use power to stand for the capacity of persons to affect through either inducements or sanctions what is thought, felt, said or done by other persons, subject to that capacity deriving from the possession of institutional, not personal, attributes – institutions being defined in turn as sets of interrelated practices whose rules, which may or may not be either explicitly formulated or universally acknowledged, apply to specifiable groups or persons irrespective of those persons’ choice or consent.26

Notice that the concept of power is restricted in two ways by this definition. First, power is seen instrumentally, as confined to the exercise of ‘inducements’ or ‘sanctions’, which I take to be deployments of resources that affect a person’s welfare positively, in the case of inducements, and negatively, in the case of sanctions.27 This restriction apparently excludes cases such as the power of example, which might arise in connection with charismatic authority, or the power of persuasion, at least in the non-Mafia sense of persuasion by rational argument and/or the presentation of evidence. The latter consideration casts doubt incidentally on the term chosen to label the ideological dimension of social power: it seems that the mode of persuasion can only change if it is made worth their while for people to alter their views.

The exercise of power that interests Runciman sociologically is even further restricted however. What counts is an ability to induce or to sanction derived from ‘the possession of institutional, not personal, attributes’. The intention is evidently to uphold a distinction between the ‘institutional’ phenomena that belong to society, and the ‘personal’ phenomena that belong to mere

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26 Runciman 1989a, p. 2.
27 I leave aside further questions such as the distinction between the objective and the subjective dimensions of welfare, and thus the exercise of power (by this definition).
individuals, considered presumably as asocial, or perhaps non-public, beings. But we do not have to go far to see how difficult it may be to sustain this distinction. ‘Age-sets’ have been noted already in Runciman’s typology, but ‘hereditary . . . status’, ‘ethnicity, ascribed by birth’, ‘genealogical ranking’ and ‘charismatic rank-order according to exemplary personality and achievement’ also seem, on the face of it, to be ways of gaining status, and thus attaining ideological power, which rely on the possession of personal attributes.

Everything evidently turns on the definition of what makes something ‘institutional’ as opposed to ‘personal’. According to the definition cited above, institutions are ‘sets of interrelated practices’. Notice that we have now been pushed from a definition of power, or rather, a means of delimiting the kind of power dealt with by sociological theory, first to a definition of institutions, and thence to a definition of practices. And what are practices?

Practices [are] functionally defined units of reciprocal action informed by the mutually recognized intentions and beliefs of designated persons about their respective capacity to influence each other’s behaviour by virtue of their roles.28

So we have now been pushed a step further: to a definition of roles, as a way of (inter alia) defining practices. But what is a role?

roles [are] defined as positions embodying consistently recurring patterns of institutional behaviour informed by mutually shared beliefs and expectations about their incumbents’ capacity directly or indirectly to influence the behaviour of each other.29

So we are back at ‘institutional behaviour’, as a way of (inter alia) defining roles. Retracing the circle of definitions, we have: institutions are defined in terms of practices, which are defined in terms of roles, which are defined in terms of institutions.

The damage caused by this circularity can be limited initially by dropping the attempt to distinguish institutional from personal attributes, and the corresponding attempt to restrict the scope of the definition of power. Under this hygienic amendment, sociological theory will apply to every situation in which persons interact with mutual expectations about their respective

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28 Runciman 1989a, p. 41.
29 Runciman 1989a, p. 3.
capacities to influence each other’s behaviour, regardless of the source or nature of the influence-bearing capacities.\textsuperscript{30}

There then appear to be two elements of the mutual expectations that are especially significant for Runciman’s theory. There is a \textit{social rules} component, specifying what kinds of influence can be brought to bear in such situations, and there is a \textit{social recognition} component, designating a person as the kind of person who is expected or allowed to exert that kind of influence in that kind of situation. It is in the latter aspect, of a social actor’s unavoidable perception that a given social rule applies contextually to him or her, that Durkheim’s impact on Runciman’s theory is most evident.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{Practices, roles and institutions}

If the discussion of the previous section helps to locate the concept of power vis-à-vis the concepts of practice, role and institution, it remains to consider the relationships among the latter concepts themselves.

Returning to the ‘Compact Statement’, we find talk of ‘the roles and thereby institutions which [practices] constitute’. And we have also seen institutions described ‘as sets of interrelated practices’. These formulations establish a clear scaling of the three terms: practices are (in some sense) smaller than roles, which are in turn smaller (in some sense) than institutions. The thought is also encouraged that the relationships between the terms are those of set inclusion, in the manner of nested Russian dolls: a role is a set of practices, and an institution is a set of (interrelated) roles. Hence, an institution is ultimately a set of (interrelated) practices.

\textsuperscript{30} Paul Wetherly has suggested that the point being made in restricting the scope of sociology to the institutional domain is that power is more concentrated there than in the personal domain. If that is so, then the valuable point can still be retained as an empirical proposition without complicating the underlying definition of terms.

\textsuperscript{31} See, in this connection, the last clause of the definition of ‘institutions’ cited above. In the chapter of Runciman 2000 on the history of sociological thought, entitled ominously ‘A Catalogue of Errors’, Durkheim just sneaks into the pantheon alongside Marx and Weber. No sociologist active since \textit{circa} 1950 rates a positive mention, except C. Wright Mills, for his hatred of Talcott Parsons, whom Runciman regards as the preeminent ‘Platitude Merchant’. Anthony Giddens’s reported insistence that ‘there is no place at all in social theory for the concept of evolution’ is also given short shrift, and is said to be ‘about as sensible as insisting that there is no place in physical theory for the concept of gravity’ (p. 8). Runciman’s programmatic commitment to reshape social theory as an evolutionary synthesis-cum-transcendence of the best insights of both Weber and Marx is made explicit at Runciman 1989a, pp. 47–8.
We may accept provisionally the relationship thus implied between ‘institution’ and ‘role’. Runciman uses the terms institution and roles (in the plural) fairly interchangeably, and it is safe to regard the terms as addressing the same social reality from two different directions: from the social side qua institution and the individual side qua role.

The main problems arise in the relationship of the concept of ‘practice’ to the concept of ‘role’ (and therewith ‘institution’, according to the argument of the previous paragraph). The notion of practice seems to include both too much and too little to make it sensible to say that a role is a set of practices. It includes too much, because a practice is a ‘unit . . . of reciprocal action’, and the presumed reciprocity of the action entails that a practice is sustained by more than one person acting in role. Yet the action undertaken by the second (or third or fourth etc.) role incumbent (which is part of the practice) is obviously not to be counted within the scope of the first role, as it would have to be if reciprocal practices truly constituted roles.

To add a leaven of concreteness to the discussion, imagine a practice such as arrest. There is an Arresting Officer (‘Good Heavens, Officer, that is a colourful tie you are wearing!’) and an Arrested Suspect. But it would be obtuse to say that the practice of arrest is included in the Police Officer’s role (so that the practice of arrest partly constitutes the role), since that suggests that the Suspect’s response to arrest (which is part of the interactive practice) is also included in the Police Officer’s role. Carried to its logical conclusion, this interpretation would appear to imply that criminals are ipso facto members of the Police Force, where the latter is conceived (in the terms of Runciman’s explicit definition) as an institution constituted in part by the practice of arrest.

The obvious correction is to say that the Police Officer participates in the practice of arrest as part of the practice of his or her role. But the practice of arrest is not contained within the Police Officer’s role, or any of the other specific roles whose conjoint operation defines the practice. In this respect, a practice oversteps the boundary of any single role. And since it is therefore false to say that a role is a set of practices, it is also false to say (as Runciman

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32 The reason why the acceptance is only provisional is spelled out in n. 39.
33 This dreadful joke incites me to a worse. Attached to the Probation Service throughout the UK are Youth Offending Teams, composed of highly trained and dedicated professionals devoted to surprising teenagers in their lairs with cries such as ‘Why don’t you stop ordering pizzas and learn to cook a proper meal instead?’.
does) that an institution (which is a set of interrelated roles) is also a ‘set . . . of interrelated practices’.

But a practice is also smaller than a role, in two distinct respects. First, there is the commonsense consideration that roles typically involve a variety of activities, with consequent engagement in a number of different practices. A Police Officer may spend her time talking to schoolchildren about the dangers of drugs, in addition to arresting suspects. But there is a less obvious sense in which the practice may be smaller than the role, in which, in fact, any set of practices is smaller than the role. Recall that a practice is a ‘unit . . . of reciprocal action’, where the emphasis now lies on the action, rather than the reciprocity. The definition goes on to say immediately that the practice is not any old action, but an action ‘informed by the mutually recognized intentions and beliefs of designated persons about their respective capacity to influence each other’s behaviour by virtue of their roles’. This mouthful of a clause invites two remarks by way of initial clarification.

First, I propose to set aside the final phrase ‘by virtue of their roles’. This seems to add very little to the meaning of the clause, and the presence of this phrase supplies one of the links in the circle of definition-making noted above. The deletion of the superfluous phrase will thus serve the useful additional purpose of breaking the circularity.34

Second, the clause says that a practice is not an action informed by any old ‘mutually recognized intentions and beliefs of designated persons’ but specifically by the beliefs and intentions held by such persons ‘about their respective capacity to influence each other’s behaviour’. In view of the definition of power given by Runciman, the clause says, in effect, that a practice is a social interaction informed by a mutual recognition of the interactants’ social powers.35

With these clarifications in hand, I return to the issue of the relationship between a practice and a role, and the following query. We have seen that a practice is a unit of reciprocal action informed by power-oriented intentions and beliefs. But are these intentions and beliefs thereby included within the practice? If we take the definition of ‘practice’ literally, the answer must be

34 The effect of the deletion is to make ‘practice’ definitionally primitive in the theoretical system. Both roles and institutions are defined (partly) in terms of practices, but not vice versa.

35 Strictly speaking, this boils down even further, to a mutual recognition of the inducements or sanctions available to the respective interactants.
'No'. A practice is an action (or a series of actions), which has (or have) a purely behavioural manifestation. Intentions and beliefs are not behavioural items, so they cannot be part of a practice.

But are the power-oriented intentions and beliefs included within the roles of those who engage in the practice? Here, I shall give the other answer: ‘Yes’. The concept of the role includes the enactment of the relevant parts of the relevant practices. But it includes something else besides: one occupies a role as well as performs it. A role is a social position, and the positioning is given precisely by the web of social expectations that surrounds its performance. These include the beliefs and intentions concerning the powers attaching to the role. I conclude that the beliefs and intentions which Runciman says inform a practice (without becoming thereby part of the practice) do indeed help to constitute the roles of those who participate in the practice. Thus, a set of practices is always smaller than a role, since there is more to a role than is given even by an exhaustive description of the practices in which the role-incumbent engages.

For the sake of concreteness once more, let me check out these distinctions using the example of education, that is, teaching and learning. The activity of teaching involves a series of actions, such as conveying information, explaining points of difficulty, posing questions, commenting on answers, encouraging confidence, and so forth. The activity of learning involves the complementary actions: absorbing information, stating points of difficulty, receiving encouragement and so on. The practice of education now involves the reciprocal performance of the activities of teaching and learning, in any context in which teachers and learners recognise their mutual capacity to influence each other’s performances.

In view of the last stipulation, it is at least conceivable that educational activity can go on without rising to the level of educational practice. It is only where power enters the picture that practices come into being, sociology becomes relevant for the first time (at least in Runciman’s power-charged

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36 Note the corresponding ambiguity in the definition of roles as ‘positions embodying consistently recurring patterns of institutional behaviour’. ‘Position’ is an occupancy characteristic, which is said to ‘embody’ ‘behaviour’, which is a performance characteristic.

37 ‘By the use of inducements and/or sanctions’ should be added at the end of this formula, according to Runciman’s narrower instrumental definition of power. Writing as a former teacher, however, I would not wish to see educational practice reduced in this way to its instrumental dimensions.
construction of the discipline), and the concept of an educational role appears. Educational roles might be those of, say, teachers vis-à-vis pupils, parents vis-à-vis children, or indeed police officers vis-à-vis young persons exposed to the drug culture. To have the role of teacher, say, is both to perform the activity of teaching and to enjoy the powers attaching to the role. It is possible to have the powers without performing the activity (as a teacher relaxing during the tea-break, I guess), and it may also be possible to perform the activity without possessing the powers (as a teacher unrecognised as such). Under the interpretation introduced, it is not however possible to perform the practice of teaching without possessing the requisite powers, since practices are always framed by powers.\footnote{And the powers are social powers, it should be emphasised, not personal capabilities. A non-employed teacher may possess all the skills necessary for teaching, but not the social position enabling him or her to engage in the practice.} Educational institutions are finally comprised by a collection of interrelated educational roles, whose incumbents participate in various educational practices, framed by the powers attached to the relevant roles.\footnote{The treatment in this section leaves one issue of definition outstanding. It is tempting to define an institution as any collection of roles which participate in the same set of practices. But the example of arrest shows that this definition would be inadequate, since criminal suspects participate in the practice of arrest but are not part of the institutions of law enforcement. Another criterion is therefore required, but is not supplied here, in order to distinguish institutionalised from non-institutionalised collections of roles that are interrelated via practices.}

### The search for the social DNA

The reason for trying to be precise about the reference of these core concepts is that the meaning, and therefore the truth-value, of Runciman’s theoretical claims depend directly on the interpretation they are given. Consider as a prime example the insistence in the ‘Compact Statement’ that: ‘the units of selection are not roles or institutions but . . . practices’.

This stipulation is repeated throughout the Runciman œuvre, and its importance cannot be overemphasised.\footnote{See, for example, the emphatic re-assertions at Runciman 1989a, p. 41 and p. 61.} In the light of the neo-Darwinian analogy, the social practice is where the action is (no pun intended), because changes in practices are going to be the causal agent of changes in everything else. In particular, changes in practices are going to give rise to changes in roles and institutions, but not vice versa. In Runciman’s theoretical world,
practices are the engines of both social reproduction and social change, with ‘mutant and recombinant practices’ taking the place of mutating and recombining genes.

There are a number of reasons why this axiom of the Runciman system is, in my view, untenable.

The first point is straightforwardly empirical. It does not seem plausible to assert that social change occurs only when changing practices cause changes in roles. It seems equally possible that change occurs through the reverse process: when changing roles cause changes in practices. A legislature is, after all, a machine for allocating powers within a society, and thus creating or extending roles, whose incumbents will then engage in novel practices. A similar point applies whenever and wherever a new socially-recognised position (a ‘job’) is created by any organisation or social grouping.

The causal priority of practices over roles is cast into further doubt when the reproductive analogy is pressed home. According to the neo-Darwinian orthodoxy, the primacy of the gene, and the associated privilege of the gene’s eye view, derives from the fact that the gene is the replicator: the element that copies itself. The individual organism – the phenotype – is conceived from this perspective in the passive mode, as the vehicle that carries the replicator. Thus, the gene reproduces itself (best) by producing the vehicle that will carry it (best) into the next generation. This is the gist of Dawkins’s message concerning the selfish gene.

Do practices therefore copy themselves, as they must apparently do if they are to assume a position in Runciman’s world of theory analogous to the gene in Darwin’s world? The answer is a fairly decisive ‘No’. It might be remarked as an opening shot that we are trying to explain the recurrence of social behaviour: its enduring pattern. The idea of a ‘practice’ already incorporates this characteristic, since it is the very property of recurrence that seems to distinguish a practice from the isolated event of a mere action.\(^{41}\) So, we are asking, in effect, what brings social practices into existence, as distinct from a concatenation of mere actions. And ‘practices’ does not seem a very persuasive answer to the question ‘what brings practices into existence?’.

\(^{41}\) As in, ‘it was her practice to support Accrington Stanley’, which is not demonstrated by attendance at a single match. It is a bit odd in this connection that Runciman defines a practice as a ‘unit of reciprocal action’, since a unit seems to be the kind of thing that stands alone, and does not obviously recur. His definition of a role is closer to the mark in this respect, since it incorporates the idea of recurrent behaviour.
But there is a deeper problem with the idea that any set of actions could be a replicator, since actions do not generally seem to have the requisite properties of self-repetition. There are perhaps two classes of human behaviour that might form exceptions to this rule. On the one hand there are examples of behaviour such as yawning or panic-stricken flight that trigger contagious imitation in others. These are hardly promising candidates as the drivers of social reproduction, however, since the repeated behaviours appear to be founded on sub-social reflex response. And this class of phenomena does not seem to weigh heavily enough in the scales of human activity in any case: recall that we are setting out with the no doubt overweening ambition of establishing a theoretical system applicable to the whole of human history. Is history one long yawn?

On the other hand, there is a class of repeated behaviours connected with the satisfaction of needs, such as hunger, thirst, rest, eros, thanatos, and so on, in a list capable of much elaboration. These needs certainly do weigh heavily in the scales of human activity, and some large proportion of social life – its roles, practices and institutions – are organised around their satisfaction. Although the corresponding behaviours – the slaking of thirst, and so forth – are undoubtedly repeated, it is not however clear that they are self-repeating. It is not presumably a prior act of drinking that causes us to drink again, but the renewal of the underlying thirst. Thus, the drivers of reproduction are not the actions – the practices, as Runciman would have it – but the needs themselves. And these are suspect candidates as drivers of social evolution since, like contagious reflex responses, they are sub-social in provenance. Social evolution does not act to renew such desires, but it does apparently step in to imprint a social form on their satisfactions. It determines the historical ways in which these needs are satisfied, or just as importantly, the forms of their denial. So what must be explained historically is not the recurrence of the desires, but the persistence of the ways in which the recurrent desires are satisfied or denied. And neither the needs nor the actions themselves are plausible candidates for this explanatory task.

Where, then, are the replicators to be found that might salvage Runciman’s theory? What makes for repetition, and therefore continuity, within social life? The obvious answer is the role, or, more strictly, a person acting in role. A police officer who makes an arrest is liable to make another, in virtue of occupying the role. A professional criminal arrested once is liable to be arrested again, in virtue of the actions she performs in a professional capacity. It is
the existence of roles that leads to the reproduction of activities, and indeed to the existence of a social practice, where this is conceived as recommended above, as a recurrent behavioural pattern.

This conclusion is not without its irony. Runciman has insisted absolutely that the practice is the evolutionary driver, and that the role (and therefore the institution) is the driven. That order of precedence is here stood on its head. We are in the process of making the role the driver, and the practice the driven.

This turnabout was motivated by the thought that it is the occupancy of a role that causes the repetition of actions, and therefore the reproduction of social life. To be more precise, however, it is the social expectations built into the role that cause the repetition to occur. It is because everyone (including police officers) expects a police officer to make arrests that police officers tend to make arrests. It is because everyone likewise expects professional criminals to commit crimes that they become thereby ‘the usual suspects’.

So, the social expectations built into a role serve to reproduce practices. Does this make the role self-reproducing, in the manner of DNA? I am inclined to answer ‘more or less’. The key issue is whether participation in the practices that partly define the role lead to the reproduction of the background social assumptions that also define the role. But, now recall that Runciman construes the background assumptions almost exclusively in terms of social power. We can then rephrase the key issue as follows: does the enactment of the role serve to reproduce its power?

And the answer to that question would seem to be: usually ‘Yes’, but occasionally ‘No’. In the normal course of events, the enactment of the roles in a role-system will serve to confirm, and thus renew, the social assumptions on which the action takes place, including the distribution of social power. Everyone plays their part, and everything goes according to plan. But, from time to time, and whenever social change is at issue, the normal operation of existing roles, or an invasion by alternative roles, or some other set of circumstances yet to be determined, leads to a different result. The power-endoing social assumptions and norms are undermined or transformed instead of being conserved, with a concomitant impact on the distribution of social power. ‘At that point an era of social revolution begins’, as Marx once put it.\(^\text{42}\)

But this is exactly what one would expect of any theory modelled on a Darwinian process. I am inclined to call the relevant aspect of the process ‘Darwinnowing’. Social reproduction proposes, in that the conduct of social roles leads to the recurrent duplication of social activities. But social selection disposes, since the consequences of these activities feed back onto the preconditions for the conduct of the roles, thereby winnowing out the wheat from the chaff, the adaptively-favoured from the reproductively-challenged roles.

Practices are now seen as analogous not with biological genes, but with the *phenotypical traits* of organisms, in that engagements in practices that are better adapted to their social and/or material environments confer competitive advantages on the social expectations that cause the engagement. Roles prosper when their practices prove advantageous and roles wither when they do not. It is in this manner that social selection explains the observed distribution of roles in any society, satisfying thereby the primary aim of explanatory social theory.

**Social reproduction and social power**

Recall that, in contemporary evolutionary theory, reproductive success counts as ‘the efficiency with which the gene is transmitted to subsequent generations’.

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43 It is interesting that Runciman fluffs the point that it is the day-by-day repetition of activities by the same person in which first order social reproduction consists. The question of the transmission of roles from one person to another – the *problématique* of socialisation – is certainly important, but as a second-order effect. Runciman discusses social reproduction misleadingly in terms of socialisation alone at Runciman 1989a, p. 8 and p. 47. This is not an uncommon problem with the literature of social evolution, endemic for example in the otherwise valuable Boyd and Richerson 1985.

44 The question is often raised whether social evolution is Darwinian or Lamarckian. There is an uninteresting sense in which all theories of social evolution are Lamarckian, since they deal in the cultural transmission of characteristics acquired non-biologically. A more interesting question is whether a given theory of social evolution contains a principle analogous with the anti-Lamarckian dogma of Darwinian evolutionary biology, namely that there is no direct causal link from phenotype to genotype.

The answer evidently depends on the relationship between the items assigned by the given theory to the respective explanatory roles of genotype and phenotype. Under the construction of the theory proposed here, the issue involves the extent to which the experience of performing a role impacts directly on the commitments sustaining future performance. Individuals who go on performing the same routines regardless of the likelihood of future repetition appear to be at the Darwinian end of this particular spectrum, while those who are continuously adapting their role performance to its past reception are at the Lamarckian end. The general answer to the question would thus appear to be ‘a mixture of the two processes’: there is, typically, some combination of Lamarckian self-monitoring with Darwinian social feedback.

45 Patterson 1999, p. 38.
The technical measure of this success is *fitness*, defined as the propensity of any genetic variant (an allele) to reappear with higher frequency than its competitor variants (competing alleles) in the population of the next generation.\(^{46}\) Given that power is also a measure of some kind, it is tempting to conclude that power is the social analogue of the fitness concept: the amount of power a role possesses is a measure of its success in social reproduction. This view presupposes that power is the replicator, and that the distribution of power amongst persons is the analogue of the distribution of genes in the gene pool.\(^{47}\) But social life is not driven by a self-propelled impulse of power to reproduce itself. I decided in the previous section that the most plausible replicator is the set of social expectations that surround the performance of a role. If there is a power that is centrally relevant to social reproduction, it is, therefore, a highly specific one: the power to promulgate the social expectations necessary for the performance of a role.

It is true that the possession of power in general may help to deliver this power in particular. If the whole range of a power-holder’s economic, ideological and/or coercive resources is skilfully deployed, the effect may be to confirm or to extend the social expectations that underwrite the power. But this outcome is by no means a foregone conclusion, and the application of power can easily backfire, undermining rather than underwriting the conditions for its exercise. The ultimate test of reproductive success is not, therefore, the quantity of power available to the various roles, but the extent to which the exercise of power (of whatever amount) contributes to the spread of certain social expectations in competition with others.

It may help to go back to the most basic analogy. In biological evolution, genes are the replicators, and the concept of fitness counts the number of copies a gene makes of itself. In social evolution, social expectations are the **inclusive fitness**. The concept of inclusive fitness embraces the possibility that the genes in an organism can help themselves into the next generation partly by helping genetically-related organisms to reproduce into the next generation, even at some cost to the original organism’s own reproductive potential. The analogous issue here is the possibility of a certain kind of altruistic social sacrifice. This envisages in particular that a person’s actions will support the maintenance or spread of expectations concerning roles related to their own role, even at the expense of the expectations supporting their own role itself. An example might be a personal resignation designed to protect the reputation of a certain business or profession.

\(^{46}\) I think it is fair to attribute this view to Runciman on the basis of the passages cited above, and especially the explicit analogy that is drawn between the power-pool and the gene-pool in the quotation attached to n. 11.
replicators, so fitness will therefore consist in the number of copies the social expectations make of themselves. The expansion of the role is thus measured as a first approximation not by the size of the individual role (roughly speaking, its power), but by the number of people who carry the expectations necessary for its continuing performance, regardless of its size.

Yet this is a first approximation only, since it is not the number of copies per se, but their total effectivity that seems to be at issue, that is, their propensity to lead to the recurrence of the practices in which the relevant roles participate. It is not enough that the beliefs and expectations exist simply as semantic propositions to which persons might either give or withhold assent. They must play an active part in sustaining social action, and in directing it from one channel into another. We are looking, then, for some measure of the social weight of the relevant expectations compared with others. From the psychological side, this emerges as the extent of the practical commitments people make to one role-option rather than another. The space in which the competition for social reproduction goes on – the equivalent of the gene pool – is not the space of power and resources, but the space of social engagement, the sum total of possible commitments in a society, aggregated over the number of persons involved.

**Conclusion: W.G. Runciman and historical materialism**

This paper has advanced two principal lines of criticism of Runciman’s work. The first line of criticism questions his theory of the microfoundations of social change, his historical genetics. Here, Runciman mistakes the location of the social DNA, and hence the causal arrangement of the theory. It is the social role, or more accurately, the part of the social role containing social expectations, that is fundamental to an evolutionary social theory. Practices are more like biological traits than genes. They are causally derivative, although it is the feedback from practices to roles that ultimately shapes the role in a process of social selection, just as biological traits feed back on genes in natural selection.

But Runciman also misplaces the heart of the theory, by making it revolve almost exclusively around social power. It is not that social power is irrelevant. Far from it, the operation of power is probably the most important single factor affecting social development. But power is not quite at centre stage, and what is paramount theoretically is the relationship of social power to
social expectations and commitments, since it is the latter rather than the former which are the true drivers of social reproduction.

The second line of criticism concerns the macroscopic application of the theory of social change. It taxes Runciman with a reluctance to follow through in his own terms the historical analysis on whose brink he teeters. We have seen the *Treatise* set forth two major propositions of macroscopic social development:

(i) an assertion of the economic-cum-technological directedness of social evolution, implicit in the historical overview of long-run social change;
(ii) an explicit hypothesis concerning the historical sequence of forms of domination, from the coercive, to the ideological, to the economic.

It seems that Runciman has discovered in these two propositions a Weberian route back to the basic question posed by historical materialism: is it the level of material resources available to a society that somehow determines the forms of domination that occur within it? These suggestions cry out for a systematic examination as test cases for the explanatory theory, either separately, or as a combined hypothesis. But these examinations are curiously absent from the *Treatise*. It is as if all the lovingly-assembled machinery of explanation is left in the garage at the very moment it could have been wheeled into action.

In the case of the first proposition, the ingredient missing from Runciman’s account appears to be the doctrine of competitive primacy. This version of historical materialism offers an evolutionary analysis of historical change consistent with Runciman’s general approach. But the convergence of the two approaches goes beyond this general similarity of form. The doctrine of competitive primacy claims, in effect, that the historical correlations observed by Runciman between types of society and levels of material resources are not coincidental. Rephrased in his theoretical vocabulary, the doctrine asserts that systacts prosper historically when and because they avail themselves of economic productivity greater than that accessible to competing systacts. This is why the historical record exhibits the kind of technological directedness on which Runciman relies in his narrative of long-run historical change. If the level of material resource available to a systact is regarded as its class dimension, then the evolutionary thesis would be as follows: all history is the history of systactic contention, yet it is the class dimension of this contention that confers direction on the historical process. This is not exactly a classical-Marxist thesis, but it is a recognisable member of the extended family of such
theses. Here lies an offering from contemporary historical materialism, by way of focussing and strengthening Runciman’s account of long run historical change.

In return, Runciman can offer contemporary historical materialism first of all his empirical endorsement of a resource-oriented approach to long-run historical change. A more original contribution derives from his work on the microfoundations of evolutionary social change. The doctrine of competitive primacy is deficient in this respect, like Darwinism before Mendel. Competitive primacy asserts that syntactic formations exist because they have outperformed rivals in respect of economic productivity, but it does not specify how they have managed to do so. Runciman’s theory of microfoundations promises to fill this explanatory gap, once its internal deficiencies are repaired by shifting its centre of gravity from power to expectations.

This necessary repair sends out a general message, which needs to be heard at least as much within the Marxist tradition as beyond. Indeed, it may be that Runciman can be seen as a latter-day Leninist among Weberians, a co-inheritor of a 1960s preoccupation with social power, and an instrumentalist conception of social power at that. Displace the centre of the theory from the instrumental use of power to the reproduction of social expectations, and new prospects open up. The test questions for historical materialism and for Runciman’s hypothesis of progress take a subtly different form: why is it that the bearers of expectation-systems with access to enhanced levels of material resources tend to reproduce their social commitments with greater success? And why do the forces of social reproduction and social selection favour coercive outcomes in one historical epoch, and ideological or economic resolutions at other times? The political horizon changes too, for if social power is not the last word on social evolution, social power is not destined in the same way to reproduce itself forever.

References


Introduction

What place does the study and analysis of ‘discourse’ – that is, of the production and use of texts (spoken, written, etc) – have within the materialist conception of history? Can this conception take due account of the significance and role of ‘discursive’ phenomena in the processes of social change taking place today? These two questions form the main theme of this paper and will be addressed via a critique of ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ (CDA), a current of academic thought offering an interpretation of the role of discourse which, I will argue, runs counter to the principles and methodology of historical analysis from a materialist perspective.

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1 This paper is a revised version of Jones 1998. I would like to thank Norman Fairclough for his generous response to the earlier paper. I should stress that he bears absolutely no responsibility for the arguments presented here. I would also like to thank a number of colleagues and friends who have offered helpful criticism and/or encouragement at various stages in the writing of this paper: Martin Barker, Colin Barker, Keith Green, Karen Grainger, Chris Pawling, Sara Mills, Chik Collins, Andrew Brown. An earlier version (‘Discourse, Social Change and the Materialist Conception of History’) was also presented at the Conference of the International Society for Cultural Research and Activity Theory (ISCRAT) in Amsterdam, 2002. I am grateful to my fellow and sister co-presenters – Chik Collins, David Bakhurst, Katie Vann – for their help and comments and to those who attended for their reactions (both positive and negative).
There are a number of different approaches to CDA but, in this paper, I will concentrate on the version of CDA which has been developed over many years by the British scholar Norman Fairclough. While other scholars have taken issue with CDA aims and methodology from various angles, my exclusive concern here is the relationship between CDA as an approach to social change and historical materialism. I will begin with an outline of Fairclough’s CDA, identifying and discussing a number of issues which historical materialism has something to say about. This discussion will lead to a general critical evaluation of CDA and to some comments on the theme.

I should stress that the ideas presented below are not intended either as a definitive assessment of Fairclough’s CDA or as a definitive treatment of the theme. The paper, rather, is offered as a rather polemical invitation to further discussion and debate on the main theme and I hope that others with an interest in the theme, adherents as well as opponents of CDA, will contribute to the discussion.

Critical Discourse Analysis: influences and commitments

Norman Fairclough’s ‘critical’ approach to discourse is one member of a family of approaches known collectively as ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’. CDA looks upon language ‘as a form of social practice’ or as a ‘mode of action . . . as well as a mode of representation’, and the term ‘discourse’ refers to language conceptualised in this way.

CDA has an explicit political agenda. It is ‘engaged and committed’. It ‘intervenes on the side of dominated and oppressed groups and against dominating groups’ and ‘openly declares the emancipatory interests that motivate it’. This intervention revolves around the exposure of the ideological

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2 For a recent overview see Wodak and Meyer 2001.
4 Fairclough and Graham 2002 take the opposite approach to the one presented here, that is they look at some aspects of Marx’s work from a CDA perspective. I decided not to engage directly with this paper here since it merits a special response to itself. I refer to it again below.
5 Van Dijk 1993.
7 Fairclough 1989, p. 41.
8 Fairclough and Wodak 1997, p. 258.
effects that discourse has, notably in helping to ‘produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people’.

CDA presents itself as a critical discipline, one that is allied to critical work in social science on the grounds that the study of discourse along CDA lines offers a way of understanding the workings of society more generally. As Fairclough puts it, CDA is ‘a method for studying social change’. In practising CDA, then,

one is committing oneself not just to analyzing texts, nor just to analyzing the processes of production and interpretation, but to analyzing the relationship between texts, processes, and their social conditions, both the immediate conditions of the situational context and the more remote conditions of institutional and social structures.

This commitment to the study of the relationship between discourse and social conditions in the interests of emancipation clearly implies and presupposes an approach to the analysis of the social whole of which discourse is a part. This is, of course, what makes the CDA approach of interest from a historical-materialist perspective and prompts the obvious question: what intellectual traditions and methods inform the CDA approach to the social whole within which ‘discourse’ is located and functions?

As Fairclough and Fairclough and Wodak explain, CDA was developed in line with a general move within the social sciences towards a greater preoccupation with discourse, and, in this, it draws on, and justifies itself by, two distinct intellectual currents of thought in (a) the domains of economic and political theory, and (b) the domains of semiotic, linguistic and discourse theory. More specifically, these influences include:

(a) a trend within Western Marxism associated with Gramsci and Althusser and with the journal *Marxism Today* in Britain which, while claiming to accept some of the principles of orthodox Marxism, shifts attention from the economic and political to the cultural and ideological as the site of struggle in capitalist society.

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10 Ibid.
14 Fairclough and Wodak 1997.
(b) the poststructuralist and postmodernist traditions including, most importantly, the work of Foucault and Baudrillard but also that of Bourdieu and other discourse-oriented social theorists such as Pêcheux and Habermas. Fairclough has also drawn on the work of the Bakhtin circle, including that of Voloshinov, whose Marxism and the Philosophy of Language is regarded by many as an important contribution to a historical-materialist view of the role of language in the social process.

More recently, Fairclough’s work has absorbed a specific philosophical influence, namely that of critical realism. The significance and consequences of this influence will not be pursued further here, although the link to an avowedly realist philosophy underlines the fact that Fairclough’s CDA is certainly not a transparent form of what has come to be known as ‘discourse idealism’, despite the influence of Foucault and Baudrillard. Indeed, Fairclough has presented a detailed critique of some idealist aspects of Foucauldian discourse analysis.

Let us now turn to a critical examination of the main arguments for CDA in the light of these influences.

**Political and economic arguments**

Fairclough’s analysis of the fundamental social conditions within which discourse functions seems to have some affinity with a Marxist perspective in assigning a causal determination within capitalist society to the economic sphere:

> The way in which a society organizes its economic production, and the nature of the relationships established in production between social classes, are fundamental structural features which determine others.

Furthermore, Fairclough insists that ‘the relationship between discourse and social structures is dialectical’ in the sense that: ‘As well as being determined by social structures, discourse has effects upon social structures and contributes

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16 See, for example, Collins 2000 and also Jones 2000 for discussion.
17 See, for example, Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999.
19 As noted by de Goede 1996, p. 354, footnote.
20 Fairclough 1989, p. 32.
to the achievement of social continuity or social change’. 21 While there can
be little room for argument with these general claims, problems arise when
we begin to examine how this ‘dialectic’ is seen more concretely within CDA.

CDA, as noted above, sees itself as part of the turn to discourse within the
social sciences. This turn is justified by arguments that there have been
‘important shifts in the function of language in social life’ whereby discourse
has become ‘perhaps the primary medium of social control and power’. 22
These arguments rest on a number of claims about fundamental changes in
the mode of production. Fairclough and Wodak put it this way:

It is well known for instance that the balance of economic life has shifted
increasingly from production to consumption and from manufacturing
industries to service, culture and leisure industries. In many service contexts,
a key factor in the quality of the ‘goods’ produced and therefore in profitability
is the nature of the language that is used in ‘delivering’ services. 23

On these grounds, it is claimed that ‘language has become more salient and
more important in a range of social processes’ and that ‘the increased economic
importance of language is striking’. 24 I submit, however, that this scenario is
not very persuasive as a foundation for a new and distinctive theorisation of
the role of discourse in social life. Let us look closely at the claims.

First of all, the claim that ‘the balance of economic life has shifted from
production to consumption’ is nonsensical. If we consumed more than we
produced we would all soon die. If we (or at least some of us) are consuming
more than we used to, we must be producing more (or others must be
consuming less) since expansion in levels of consumption, or in the range
and diversity of commodities on sale, is made possible only by expansion in
production.

Other versions of the same scenario offer little in the way of further
enlightenment. Elsewhere, Fairclough defines ‘consumerism’ as ‘a shift in
ideological focus from economic production to economic consumption, and
an unprecedented level of impingement by the economy on people’s lives’. 25
Here, ‘the shift from production to consumption’ appears to be treated as
more about ‘ideological focus’ than actual productive activity, weakening the

22 Fairclough 1989, p. 3.
24 Ibid.
‘economic’ justification for the turn to discourse, while the phrase ‘an unprecedented level of impingement by the economy on people’s lives’ has no clear meaning at all.

However, the more important point here is that the emphasis on goods and services obscures the fact that individual consumption under capitalism, while a necessary precondition or constraint on social production, does not determine the character of the productive process itself, which is essentially the production of surplus-value. It is misleading to imply that ‘consumerism’ involves a radical shift within – still less, a break from – capitalist production relations, however much ‘consumerist’ ideology may be around. Instead of a concrete analysis of the economic and general social import of such phenomena, we are offered an economically inaccurate and impressionistic commentary which is as vague as it is far-reaching in its implications.

Let us now turn to the alleged shift from manufacturing to ‘service, culture and leisure industries’. The first problem here is the failure, and this despite CDA’s professed interest in ‘globalisation’, to examine the relationship between advanced capitalist countries and the world economic system as a whole. If the authors have in mind shifts in economic activity in Britain, Western Europe, and the USA (for example), and if we accept that there is some truth in what they say in relation to these economies viewed narrowly, the fact is that these economies are globally locked in to other economies where the ‘balance of economic life’ remains with or has shifted towards manufacturing. In any case, the authors do not substantiate or explore these claims but present them in order to imply a more general process in which material production is becoming increasingly displaced by non-material. The point is made explicitly by Fairclough:

> At the heart of the turn towards language in modern social life there is, I think, a change in the relationship between language and economy which goes deeper than the colonization of new domains by the discursive practices of the market. We might express this by saying that language has been economically penetrated, and economies have been linguistically penetrated. The point is that the economic shift towards consumption and service industries entails a shift in the nature of commodities. Commodities are increasingly cultural, semiotic, and therefore linguistic in nature; accordingly

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26 See, for example, Fairclough 2001.
language is increasingly commodified and shaped by economic calculation and intervention.\(^{27}\)

The passage bristles with confusions over the economic process and the nature of commodities. First of all, the human labour process, by its very nature and whatever the historical epoch, is ‘linguistically penetrated’, in the sense that it is necessarily mediated by language; by the same token, language is necessarily ‘economically penetrated’, in that it reflects and represents the activities involved in production. There has never been, nor could there ever be, a change in this relationship in the sense which Fairclough implies. Secondly, the claim about ‘a shift in the nature of commodities’ requires clarification. If Fairclough is suggesting that some commodities, such as those ‘linguistic in nature’, fall outside the economic process or escape the sway of the economic laws to which other commodities are subject, then this is simply not the case. A textbook, as a ‘linguistic’ commodity\(^{28}\) is a unity of value (represented in its price) and use-value (it is written in order to be read). Its value, like that of any commodity, is determined by the quantity of socially necessary labour time involved in its production, which includes the mental labour of its authors, designers, editors, as well as the mental and manual labour involved in making the paper, ink and glue into the finished product. The relative proportion of such commodities, coming under the general category of ‘non-material production’,\(^{29}\) may increase as much as one likes, but in all this there is absolutely no shift in the nature of commodities or in the laws of commodity production.

CDA’s economic arguments are intended to justify a view of capitalism today as a social form whose driving forces are less and less material and economic and increasingly ‘cultural’ and ‘ideological’.\(^{30}\) In keeping with its Western-Marxist origins, CDA is thereby attempting to justify the view that ideology is now a much more important, indeed perhaps the most important, factor in maintaining class rule. Thus, Fairclough claims that ‘the exercise of power, in modern society, is increasingly achieved through ideology, and

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\(^{27}\) Fairclough 1997, pp. 7–8.

\(^{28}\) Fairclough 1997, p. 8.

\(^{29}\) Marx 1976.

\(^{30}\) See the critique in Barker and Dale 1997, p. 2, of the position of ‘postmodernity’: ‘Where previously “material” questions were central in social conflict, now “post-material”, “symbolic” or “identity” issues are taking centre stage’. This paper deals in a much more detailed and subtle way with similar issues to those discussed here.
more particularly through the ideological workings of language'.\textsuperscript{31} Accordingly, ‘language has become perhaps the primary medium of social control and power’.\textsuperscript{32}

It should be said, first of all, that the implied comparison between the salience and importance of discourse today and discourse in the past is unsupported by empirical, comparative work.\textsuperscript{33} This point aside, what is most striking is the naiveté and superficiality of the view of capitalist society and the capitalist state. This is evident in the equation of ‘modern society’ with bourgeois-democratic states and in the failure to see the interconnection between apparently consensual forms of political domination in, say, Britain and directly coercive, violent forms of domination in others, as well as the violence meted out abroad by the British state itself (I write after the invasion and occupation of Iraq by US and UK military forces). In any case, this view of the effectiveness of ideology in the maintenance of class rule in countries such as Britain bears little relation to political reality. Periods of political and industrial conflict on a large scale, for example, the 1984–5 miners’ strike in Britain, the Clydeside work-in\textsuperscript{34} or, on a smaller scale, local protest campaigns such as the one against hospital closure discussed by Barker,\textsuperscript{35} show how quickly the discourse of those in power is discredited and rendered ineffective or counterproductive in the face of active resistance and, at the same time, how quickly non-consensual forms of political domination, including violence and imprisonment, emerge from behind the ‘democratic’ façade.

**Philosophical issues and CDA: discourse and reality**

We turn now to the CDA conception of the dialectical relationship between discourse and social structures referred to above. Fairclough sees discourse as both a reflection of real social processes, that is, those outside discourse, and as a factor which contributes to the creation and shaping of such social processes themselves:

On the one hand, discourse is shaped and constrained by social structure in the widest sense and at all levels: by class and other social relations at a

\textsuperscript{31} Fairclough 1989, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{32} Fairclough 1989, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{33} Stubbs 1997, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{34} See Collins 1999, Foster and Woolfson 1999.
\textsuperscript{35} Barker 1997.
societal level, by the relations specific to particular institutions such as law or education, by systems of classification, by various norms and conventions of both a discursive and a non-discursive nature, and so forth. . . . On the other hand, discourse is socially constitutive. This is the import of Foucault’s discussion of the discursive formation of objects, subjects and concepts. Discourse contributes to the constitution of all those dimensions of social structure which directly or indirectly shape and constrain it: its own norms and conventions, as well as the relations, identities and institutions which lie behind them. Discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning.36

This passage appears to be an attempt to frame CDA within something like a Marxist philosophical outlook, avoiding the failings of both ‘mechanistic’ or ‘economistic’ Marxism and the kind of subjective, idealistic position on discourse adopted by Foucault among others:

It is important that the relationship between discourse and social structure should be seen dialectically if we are to avoid the pitfalls of overemphasizing on the one hand the social determination of discourse, and on the other hand the construction of the social in discourse. The former turns discourse into a mere reflection of a deeper social reality, the latter idealistically represents discourse as the source of the social.37

While appearing to reject the idealist tendencies of the Foucauldian conception, Fairclough wishes to incorporate ‘the import’ of Foucauldian discourse analysis into CDA, an approach which requires examination. Foucault views discourse as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’.38 Accordingly, the central philosophical problem of correspondence between discourse and non-discursive ‘reality’, or in more prosaic terms, the question of the objective truth of symbolic representations is either rendered nonsensical or reduced to a vicious circularity within discourse itself. As Mills puts it:

Foucault is not interested in which discourse is a true or accurate representation of the ‘real’ . . . rather he is concerned with the mechanics whereby one becomes produced as the dominant discourse.39

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38 Mills 1997, p. 17.
Foucault’s problems with the Marxist concept of ideology, for example, were these:

The first is that . . . it is always in virtual opposition to something like the truth. . . . The second inconvenience is that it refers, necessarily I believe, to something like a subject. Thirdly, ideology is in a secondary position in relation to something which must function as the infra-structure or economic or material determinant of it.40

How, then, does Fairclough retain the ‘import’ of Foucault’s work? Firstly, he attempts to limit, qualify or constrain the process of discursive ‘formation’, ‘construction’ or ‘constitution’ of objects by locating that process within a material setting, arguing that discursive practices ‘are constrained by the fact that they inevitably take place within a constituted, material reality, with pre-constituted “objects” and preconstituted social subjects’.41 Thus, ‘the impact of discursive practice depends upon how it interacts with the preconstituted reality’.42 As a result:

the discursive constitution of society does not emanate from a free play of ideas in people’s heads but from a social practice which is firmly rooted in and oriented to real, material social structures.43

Secondly, Fairclough makes a distinction between two different functions of discourse: ‘Discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning’.44 Discourse both ‘includes reference to preconstituted objects’ and also involves ‘the creative and constitutive signification of objects’.45 In the first case, discourse is ‘in a passive relation to reality, with language merely referring to objects which are taken to be given in reality’ (‘representing the world’), in the second, discourse is ‘in an active relation to reality’ where ‘language signifies reality in the sense of constructing meaning for it’.46

Even if we accept this distinction between discourse which ‘represents’ and discourse which ‘signifies’, it is not clear what problem the distinction solves

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40 Foucault 1979, p. 36 quoted in Mills 1997, p. 32.
41 Fairclough 1992, p. 60.
42 Ibid.
43 Fairclough 1992, p. 66.
44 Fairclough 1992, p. 64.
45 Fairclough 1992, p. 66.
46 Fairclough 1992, p. 42.
or how this conception avoids the anti-materialist tendencies in Foucault’s approach. The constructing or constituting process, as Fairclough describes it, still seems to leave us within the realm of meaning; the problem of the transition between meaning and social reality – in other words, the ‘constructive’ or ‘constitutive’ effect of discourse on the real world remains unexplained and unresolved.

Fairclough wants to preserve the Foucauldian idea of the constitutive power and effects of discourse while holding onto the distinction between discourse and reality which the Foucauldian conception renders problematic. Now, while there can be no objection in principle to the idea that meaningful discourse and all other aspects of social reality are dialectically interrelated, which means, of course, that discourse has a positive, causal part to play in social processes and social change, these dialectical interrelations must be demonstrated, since they are a matter for empirical study and analysis. The difficulty with Fairclough’s CDA is that the assignation, at the outset, of a causal primacy or ‘constitutive’ role to discourse seems to have the effect that such interrelations can be assumed or claimed without the need for empirical confirmation. The result, as I shall attempt to demonstrate below, is a kind of hybrid framework which acknowledges the existence of the material social process outside discourse but, at the same time, assumes or takes for granted the shaping power and effects of discourse, in effect coming to see reality only through discursive spectacles.

On the more general issue of the possibility of distinguishing truth from falsehood, Fairclough has tried to avoid a position that seems straightforwardly idealist, drawing on critical-realist treatments of relativism:

We can actually distinguish two types of relativism (Bhaskar, 1986; Collier, 1994): epistemic relativism, according to which first, all discourses are positioned, i.e., generated out of and reflective of particular positions in social life, and second, reality is always discursively mediated – we have no access to reality except through discourses; and judgemental relativism, according to which all discourses are equally good or bad constructions of reality – there is no way of evaluating discourses in terms of their fit with reality. We have no problem with epistemic relativism, but we reject judgemental relativism. In our view the comparative strengths and limitations of different discourses are constantly being judged in the course of practice. We can think of this in terms of the articulation of the discourse moment within other moments of social practices – how good is this discourse for
thinking (perceiving, feeling, evaluating)? how good is it for acting materially? how good is it for relating socially (for collaborating, for getting others to do things, etc.)?  

Though many issues are raised in this passage, my commentary will be brief. Firstly, the authors do not seem to realise that this is not a realist (or materialist) view, but a fairly clear formulation of philosophical pragmatism, a form of idealism. Shifting the focus from truth to evaluation by practice does not solve the problem of the relation between ideas (or discourse) and reality, since it simply begs the philosophical question: what makes some discourses ‘good’ for practice and others ‘bad’? From a realist point of view, a statement like ‘the world is flat’ has proved to be ‘bad’ for the material practice of maritime navigation because it is false. Practice can only be the test of the ‘fit’ between discourse and reality if we have ‘access to reality’ not only, and not primarily, ‘through discourses’ but through practice itself. In any case, there would appear to be some rather awkward consequences for CDA from this version of ‘epistemic relativism’ since it seems to imply that ‘critical’ evaluation of discourse is entirely dependent upon and must follow an analysis and evaluation of practice.

**Illustrations**

In illustration of the critical points made above, I will examine three instances of the application of CDA to social or political phenomena: advertising discourse, ‘commodification’ in discourse, and the politics of New-Labour discourse.

*Advertising discourse*

Crucial to CDA work is the Foucauldian notion of ‘subject position’. A subject position is something that exists in discourse – it is a ‘role’ in discourse, a position occupied in discursive exchange, such as addressee or addressee. Advertising, Fairclough argues, constructs ‘subject positions for consumers
as members of consumption communities’;\textsuperscript{51} adverts ‘build the consumer’, and ‘build’ ‘consumption communities’.\textsuperscript{52} He explains:

Advertising has made people into consumers, i.e. has brought about a change in the way people are, in the sense that it has provided the most coherent and persistent models for consumer needs, values, tastes and behaviour. It has done this by addressing people as if they were all commonsensically already fully fledged consumers. The general point is that if people are obliged day-in day-out to occupy the subject position of consumer, there is a good chance that they will become consumers. What may begin as a sort of game, a suspicious experimentation for audience members, is likely through the sheer weight of habit to end up being for real.\textsuperscript{53}

I would suggest that this argument nicely illustrates the confusion discussed above between constituting ‘in discourse’ and constitution ‘in reality’. Fairclough claims that being in the ‘subject position’ of consumer (for example, watching an advert on TV) leads, through ‘sheer weight of habit’, to being a real consumer. This is a strange argument, since people are consumers not because of their ‘subject position’ but because of their position in life; they have no choice but to buy and consume commodities. The people addressed by advertising are, therefore, already fully-fledged consumers and are not made such by advertising. Perhaps Fairclough’s claim could be rephrased to be about the influence on potential consumers of adverts for particular products.

Now, it is possible to grant the influence of advertising as a shaper of the needs, values, tastes and behaviour of consumers to some degree. But Fairclough’s account of the mechanism and magnitude of this influence is problematic. On his account, the regular consumption of adverts is likely to condition us into consuming the products advertised. But the argument turns on the conflation of two distinct categories. The ‘subject position’ occupied by the viewer of an advert is not that of consumer \textit{of the product} but of consumer \textit{of the advert}. Through watching adverts we do, perhaps, become habitual and skilled advert consumers but this does not in itself turn us into consumers of the products advertised. Fairclough’s analysis jumps directly from ‘consumption’ of advertising discourse to real consumption. In doing so, it

\textsuperscript{51} Fairclough 1989, p. 206.
\textsuperscript{52} Fairclough 1989, p. 207.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
overlooks not only the whole complex system of mediations linking advertising discourse with the real processes of purchase and consumption by real consumers, who are, after all, constrained by their level of income (or lack of it), but also the real consumption process itself which gives us the experience of advertised products on which to base judgments about the reliability of particular advertisements and about advertisements in general. The function, significance and effects of advertising discourse, in Fairclough’s model, are simply taken for granted on the basis of the ‘subject position’ which they are considered to construct. On this basis, Fairclough ‘constructs’ a quite fantastic picture of the power of advertisements to bring about radical social change:

Advertising can show people lifestyles (and patterns of spending) which they might not otherwise meet, but also invite them to ‘join’, and to come to see their chosen consumption community . . . as one of their primary memberships. In the process, other memberships are likely to be diminished; the great loser has arguably been communities of production – the social classes, and particular fractions and sections of social classes (such as craft communities, or trade unions).\(^54\)

It is significant that no economic or political analysis is offered as evidence to support these claims. In order to explain the declining power and membership of trade unions throughout the 1980s, for example, one could and should look at the absolute and relative decline in Britain’s economic strength (resulting in financial crisis, industrial collapse, inflation and unemployment) plus the direct intervention of political and state power under successive Labour and Tory governments, and, not least, the politics and ideology of the labour movement itself.

**Commodification of discourse**

In attempting to justify his claim that language analysis may be used ‘as a method for studying social change’,\(^55\) Fairclough argues that it is ‘increasingly the case’ that ‘changes in language use are an important part of wider social and cultural changes’\(^56\) and, further, that ‘these social changes . . . are constituted to a significant extent by changes in language practices’.\(^57\) Fairclough identifies

\(^{54}\) Ibid.


\(^{56}\) Fairclough 1992, p. 5.

\(^{57}\) Fairclough 1992, p. 6.
three broad currents of discursive change which are active in constituting social change: ‘democratization’, ‘commodification’, and ‘technologization’ of discourse. Let us explore his treatment of ‘commodification of discourse’. Fairclough begins with a definition of commodification:

Commodification is the process whereby social domains and institutions, whose concern is not producing commodities in the narrower economic sense of goods for sale, come nevertheless to be organized and conceptualized in terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption. . . . Commodification is not a particularly new process, but it has recently gained new vigour and intensity as an aspect of the ‘enterprise culture’.58

He argues that ‘in many countries there has recently been an upsurge in the extension of the market to new areas of social life’ and cites ‘education, health care and the arts’ as examples of sectors which ‘have been required to restructure and reconceptualize their activities as the production and marketing of commodities for consumers’.59

By ‘commodification of discourse’ Fairclough means the ‘colonization of institutional orders of discourse, and more broadly of the societal order of discourse, by discourse types associated with commodity production’.60 He argues that

Marx himself noted the effects of commodification on language: referring to people as ‘hands’ in industrial contexts, for example, is part of seeing them as commodities useful for producing other commodities, as embodied labour power.61

Fairclough’s main argument is that ‘commodification in discourse’ constitutes (‘to a large extent’) the process of commodification in these sectors:

the metaphorical constitution of education and other services as markets is a potent element in the transformation not only of discourse, but also of thinking and practice, in these spheres.62

Such changes ‘have profoundly affected the activities, social relations, and social and professional identities of people working in such sectors’.63 In

58 Fairclough 1992, p. 64.
60 Fairclough 1992, p. 64.
61 Ibid.
higher education, for example, commodification of discourse contributes ‘to an attempt to restructure the practices of education on a market model, which may have . . . tangible effects on the design and teaching of courses, the effort and money put into marketing, and so on’.  

However, there is a problem in Fairclough’s treatment of commodification from the very outset. His initial claim is about ‘the extension of the market’, which is an economic fact, whereas the focus of his discussion is the symbolic ‘constitution’ of spheres of activity as markets, which is a fact of discourse. Whatever the connection between these two facts, they must be clearly distinguished. But Fairclough’s discussion does not clearly distinguish them, with the result that the economic nature and import of changes taking place in the relevant sectors and the discursive reformulations and reconceptualisations of activity in these spheres become confused. The processes of constitution in discourse and constitution in social reality appear to fall together. To the extent that changes in practice are informed and guided by discourse-mediated reconceptualisation, then it is certainly legitimate to acknowledge and study the shaping power of discourse. From this general point of view, there is no objection to Fairclough’s interest in the role of discursive ‘commodification’ in changes taking place in public- (and private-) sector institutions. The difficulty with Fairclough’s treatment, however, is that it takes the commodified discourse at face value and never satisfactorily addresses the key question: to what extent does ‘commodification in discourse’ contribute to (and, thereby, ‘constitute’ or help to constitute) a real commodification process in the relevant spheres of social activity?

Clearly, activities may be talked about (and thought about) as if they involve commodities (‘in the narrower economic sense’) whereas in fact they do not. The adoption of such forms of discourse, with the accompanying reconceptualisations, may even lead to all kinds of ‘changes in language practices’ of the sort Fairclough refers to without, in fact, changing anything fundamental to do with the activities within those spheres, with their economic function or their relation to the economy as a whole. Nor can changes in managerial and administrative practices in themselves constitute ‘organization in terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption’ in spheres where commodities are not being produced, although these changes in practice may

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64 Fairclough 1992, p. 208.
be objectionable on other grounds and become the source of challenge and resistance. In such cases, commodification in discourse may be purely and simply an ephemeral fad, a terminological matter whose ideological significance lies not in its bringing about commodification as such but in obscuring (to all concerned) the relationship of the relevant sphere of activity to the rest of the economy. It may well be, of course, that such terminological changes form part of a particular political strategy to soften up, as it were, particular institutions and social domains in order later to convert them into capitalist enterprises properly speaking (for example, through privatisation). But this makes it all the more important to be able to distinguish between ‘changes in language practices’ and real changes in economic structure and organisation.

In this connection, it is noteworthy that in a later discussion of ‘marketisation’ of universities, Fairclough is more circumspect about the social impact of commodified discourse:

The social identities and social relationships of universities have surely been affected, but it is not clear how much: these changes have been imposed from the top, and people often pay lip-service to them while resisting them in one way or another, if only ‘passively’. Moreover, there are grounds for looking more closely at Fairclough’s conception of ‘commodification’. While he implies that the phenomena of ‘commodification’ in education and the health service represent a continuation of a process noted and discussed by Marx, there are in fact quite different processes, related to different historical periods, involved. Marx noted that:

In capitalist production the tendency for all products to be commodities and all labour to be wage-labour, becomes absolute. A whole mass of functions and activities which formerly had an aura of sanctity about them, which passed as ends in themselves, which were performed for nothing or where payment was made in round-about ways (like all the professions, barristers, doctors, in England where the barrister and the physician neither could nor can sue for payment to this very day) – all these become directly converted into wage-labourers, however various their activities and payment may be.

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67 Fairclough 1997, p. 4.
68 Marx 1976, p. 1041.
Commodification and the accompanying conversion into wage-labourers of whole groups of ‘service providers’ was the inevitable consequence of the development of capitalist production and its dissolution and incorporation of social strata and economic processes of the precapitalist era. As all the necessities of life were increasingly produced as commodities, money was needed to purchase them and so, increasingly, the providers of services had to be paid in money and become ‘wage-labourers’ (although, as Marx is quick to point out, not necessarily ‘productive workers’ – in other words, there was a clear distinction between kinds of wage-labourer despite the common surface appearance). Fairclough’s ‘marketisation’ of higher education or the health service, on the other hand, involves something else. This is not the conversion of service providers into wage-labourers, nor is it a feature of the progressive extension of capitalist production relations. If, as Fairclough claims, it is connected, at least in Britain, with the promotion of ‘enterprise culture’, then it would perhaps be better to see it as part of, or as an echo of, a wider political strategy involving privatising previously nationalised industries and institutions. Such a strategy is quite different, in both economic and political terms, from the processes taking place in Marx’s day.

None of this, of course, is apparent from the discourse itself. Nor, therefore, is it something that CDA can tell us. In itself, the identification and study of the spread of discursive formulations from one sphere of activity to another does not, and cannot, get at the real processes taking place throughout the economic and political spheres. Indeed, the processes that are really taking place within the economy or society more generally may be quite different, or in fact exactly the opposite from the way in which they are ‘constructed’ in discourse. ‘Commodification’ is precisely an example of the way in which real economic processes are ‘constructed’ in discourse in a way which does not correspond to the real nature and significance of such processes. And Fairclough’s analysis of ‘commodification’ is an example of the way in which CDA ‘constructs’ a picture of the constitutive power of discourse without a concrete study of the relevant social process in all its complexity and contradictions. The study of commodified discourse gives us a very partial view of the ‘appearance’ in social consciousness of the economic, a view filtered through general ideological as well as narrowly political lenses, but does not and cannot penetrate to the ‘essence’ of the economic process itself. In fact, Chouliaraki and Fairclough appear to acknowledge this objection to CDA treatments:
Yet words can be ‘mere’ words and ‘empty’ words, and changes in discourse which appear to constitute changes in social practices can be no such thing. The only way of determining whether this is so is to analyze the relationship between discourse and other moments of social practices.\textsuperscript{69}

However, they do not then look critically at their own analyses in the light of this quite proper observation. Furthermore, they do not see that this point has much more far-reaching implications for CDA. If a ‘critical’ analysis of discourse is, as they appear to suggest, impossible independently of an analysis of the social practices within which discourse functions, then CDA cannot, strictly speaking, be ‘a method for studying social change’.\textsuperscript{70} Rather, discourse becomes, along with all other phenomena of social life, a source of evidence about social change but the identification, analysis, and estimation of social changes, and, along with that, a critical attitude towards discourse (one’s own as well as that of others’) is not the preserve of discourse analysis but of a discipline whose subject matter is social practice as a historically developing, integral whole.

Now, of course, the materialist conception of history necessarily embraces the idea that ideas, beliefs, and theories (expressed discursively as well as by other means) mediate the reproduction and transformation of social reality. With the help of language, we can create visions of states of affairs that have varying degrees of resemblance to actual or real states of affairs, we can develop theories which penetrate to the underlying laws of natural and social development, we can develop and present perspectives for changes in society. In this sense, we may ‘construct’ or ‘constitute’ a world in meaning. On the other hand, one must not assume that the real world itself is affected in any way by such ‘constitutive’ discourse. From the process of ‘constitution’ in meaning, no process of ‘constitution’ in or of material or social reality directly or immediately follows, if it follows at all. The assumption that the mere ‘constitution’ in meaning – for example, the formulation (with the help of discourse) of a particular idea, or view of the world – in and of itself shapes the social reality which it ‘signifies’, is counter to a materialist view. If we accept that social reality is primarily the reality of human \textit{practice}, then only to the extent that ‘discourse’ has a role in shaping the ideas, the ideals, the

\textsuperscript{69} Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, p. 23.

\textsuperscript{70} Fairclough 1992, p. 1.
goals which guide real practice does it contribute to the constitution, the construction of the real.\textsuperscript{71} To identify and understand that role, it is necessary to trace the logic, that is, the dialectic, of the movement through repeated cycles from real practices to ‘signifying practices’ and back to real practices again; to show how and to what extent the discursively developed meanings derive from practice, in what system of beliefs or theory such meanings find their place, to what extent such systemically derived meanings correspond to the real processes they represent, and then, on that basis to show their implications for practice, how they impact back upon social reality by guiding and directing practices, and how one may develop, along with the appropriate forms of discourse, practices of support or resistance. Such an approach, then, necessarily entails bringing the discourse up against the social reality outside of it in order to disclose not just the potential and actual shaping effect of discourse on reality but also the contradictions between them, the ways in which the world constructed in discourse runs up against the real social life process and is diverted by or comes to grief on it, however ‘dominant’ that discourse may be.

Although CDA at times may gesture towards an analysis of the economic and political conditions in which discourse functions, overall a materialist dialectic is not in evidence since, in actuality, the link between discourse and material practice is not explored. Rather, the distinction between constitution in meaning and constitution in reality is blurred, allowing the Foucauldian assumption that discursive constitution in and of itself brings forth the corresponding objects, processes and states. Change in discourse, therefore, is social change.\textsuperscript{72} All in all, the marriage of a Marxian social realism with a Foucauldian anti-realist discourse perspective is not a happy one.

\textit{The language and politics of New Labour}

Fairclough’s most ambitious attempt to develop and illustrate CDA is represented by his sustained critique of aspects of politics of the first ‘New

\textsuperscript{71} This is quite nicely put in Jackson 1994, p. 164: ‘however materialist cultural practices may be in themselves, they still maintain an essentially ideal, or referential relation to practical politics and the economy. That is to say, they are practices the main point of which is to be about other practices; they don’t directly change the other practices, but only change our understanding of those practices’.

\textsuperscript{72} A similar position is taken up in Lemke 1995, which is also heavily influenced by Foucault.
Labour’ government under Tony Blair. Fairclough presents this publication as ‘a book about politics and government that approaches them through language, as language’. The book certainly deserves a thorough critical examination, as much for the political positions it espouses as its approach to language, but I will restrict myself here to a few observations.

Fairclough’s examination of key New-Labour policy documents brings him to conclusions about New Labour which are no surprise to anybody on the left wing of politics, namely:

The crucial starting point for the politics of New Labour is acceptance of the new international economic liberalism – ‘the new global economy’ in its own terms – as an inevitable and unquestionable fact of life upon which politics and government are to be premised.

New Labour, he argues, is unswervingly committed to ‘the new international economic liberalism’ and, given that commitment, ‘the logic of modern capitalism . . . positions agents including the multinationals and governments in processes such that they will act, they have to act in certain ways’.

So far, so good. Now, if it is the case that New Labour, as an agency of ‘international economic liberalism’, must act in its interests, whatever the politicians might say and promise, the question naturally arises: what should our attitude be towards New Labour? Should we, for example, support or continue to support the Labour Party and Labour government in any way? Should we vote Labour? Should trade unionists continue to provide financial support for the Labour Party? Should we support other political parties in opposition to the Labour Party, or try to form a new party or parties? These are legitimate, indeed crucial, issues for the labour movement in Britain and should surely be of concern for anyone with an ‘emancipatory’ agenda.

However, Fairclough does not raise or address such issues. Rather, his proposals for what should be done in this situation are addressed as pieces of advice to the New Labour government itself! For the record, they are as follows:

1. Dialogue. Perhaps the most fundamental contribution New Labour could make is in taking measures to encourage and facilitate real dialogue and debate . . .

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73 Fairclough 2000.
74 Fairclough 2000, p. 5.
75 Fairclough 2000, p. 15.
76 Fairclough 2000, p. 29.
2. Difference. New Labour’s political discourse could be made more open to difference – by avoiding a language of consensus (such as a vague and bland ‘one-nation’ we) which disguises differences, by avoiding polar divisions which misrepresent people as divided neatly into two (for example, ‘Old Left’ and ‘New Right’), by acknowledging differences within the government. 3. Honesty. New Labour could shift away from designing its language quite so much on the basis of market research and focus groups, away from its preoccupation with ‘spin’ and with how to say things in ways that will win support, away from designing its leadership styles on the basis of calculations of effects. Long-term trust cannot be built on this basis. On the contrary, it results in contempt for politics. The Government can contribute to the long trek towards political health by recognising that trust is a two-way relation – by beginning to trust people with the truth as its members see it, warts and all.77

What, then, can we make of Fairclough’s description of his treatment of New Labour as ‘an approach to government and politics through language, as language’? The implication seems to be that that this treatment flows from facts about discourse in modern British society. But, in fact, Fairclough’s unsolicited advice to New Labour simply expresses a rather timid reformist view of politics in general and of the British Labour Party specifically. Thus, despite the trenchant and unequivocal characterisation of New Labour’s political orientation, Fairclough’s conclusions are developed from a political perspective which is entirely harmonious with the position of New Labour itself. On this evidence, the CDA approach to politics ‘as language’ is simply a new-fangled way of dressing up, and serving up, reformist politics. And, in fact, this reformism seems to follow logically from the CDA methodology: if discourse, as opposed to economic compulsion or coercive forms of state power, is where the action is nowadays, then our responses must be within the realm of discourse.

The book, it seems to me, encapsulates all the problems inherent in CDA as a ‘critical’ approach and, in particular, as one which advertises itself explicitly as ‘emancipatory’. After all, if the answer to Blair’s politics is an appeal for dialogue, difference and honesty, then what on earth was the question?

77 Fairclough 2000, pp. 159–60.
Critical Discourse Analysis and historical materialism

The overall evaluation of CDA which follows from the above discussion is not a positive one. The principles and methods of CDA are incompatible with the materialist conception of history in the following respects:

- CDA’s economic arguments for the primacy of discourse within processes of social change are based on misconceptions about the capitalist mode of production and on unsubstantiated claims about fundamental changes in the relations between the economic and political spheres. The point of such arguments is to justify and legitimate a practice of ‘analysing’ discourse without having to take the trouble to look concretely at the economic and political context of discourse. The ‘dialectic’ of discourse and social structure, as seen in CDA terms, is, therefore, one in which little more than lip service is paid to the real social process within which discourse exists.

- CDA’s empirical claims for the ‘constitutive’ effects of discourse on social practice and social relations are made in the absence of concrete analysis of the processes in question and tend to be based on presumptions about these effects rather than on attempts to demonstrate them. A case in point is the idea that ‘language has become perhaps the primary medium of social control and power’[78] which operates as a guiding assumption rather than as the outcome of empirically based historical analysis.

- The focus on politics ‘as language’ appears, at least in the case of New Labour, simply to justify an uncritical reformism in which the options for political action in response to Blairite policies are limited to an engagement with language.

My conclusion is that the CDA approach to language involves a mystification of the role of discourse in society. CDA itself, therefore, constitutes an ideological current. Its assumption of the primacy of the discursive in contemporary capitalist society and its method of analysing the role of discourse in social processes express an idealist inversion of the relationship between social being and social consciousness as understood in the historical-materialist sense.

Do the above arguments lead us to the view that the study of discourse is an irredeemably idealist activity or an irrelevant and fruitless enterprise? Not at all. These are arguments not against the study and analysis of discourse

[78] Fairclough 1989, p. 3.
but against the ‘exorbitation’ of discourse,\textsuperscript{79} against the upside-down view of the role of discourse in relation to the social process as a whole which we are offered in CDA. In effect, they are arguments that the whole project of developing a ‘critical discourse analysis’ in CDA terms and with CDA aims is misconceived.

The analysis – and not only the analysis, of course, but the creation, the production – of discourse was always an aspect of historical-materialist work and of Marxist political practice. But the analysis of discourse was never, and, by the nature of things, could never be elevated into a ‘theory’ of discourse or codified into a series of methodological rules or prescriptions which would attempt to fix some general systemic links between language and ideology, language and thinking, or language and social action. The best way to understand how Marx and Engels, the originators of the materialist conception, approached ‘discourse’ would be, therefore, to carefully examine their own theoretical and political work at particular conjunctures and in relation to particular problems. We could examine how they selected and used in analysis the relevant documentary materials – political speeches, theoretical texts, historical accounts, legal documents, media output, letters, and so on as well as such ‘discursive’ materials as voting statistics, lists of commodity prices, information on the fluctuation of rates of exchange of currency, and so forth. But such an examination, I submit, will not reveal a method of ‘discourse analysis’ but, rather, something quite different.

What today’s discourse analysts refer to as ‘discourse’ is usually referred to as ‘consciousness’ (or ‘social consciousness’) by Marx and Engels and they certainly paid the most sensitive and careful attention to this subject. As Engels put it: ‘Everything which sets men in motion must go through their minds; but what form it will take in the mind will depend very much upon the circumstances’.\textsuperscript{80}

An understanding of ‘what goes through the mind’, therefore, was a question of understanding the forms of social consciousness in their relations to the circumstances in which people are ‘set in motion’. This is a task which requires nothing less than the empirical study and critical understanding of great historical events as integral processes since it is only within such events that we can begin to properly see and examine the real connections between

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\textsuperscript{79} Anderson 1983.
\textsuperscript{80} Marx and Engels 1968, p. 368.
\end{flushleft}
practical action and the forms of consciousness in and through which people struggle to grasp what it is they have to do and find the material and spiritual means to carry it out:

When, therefore it is a question of investigating the driving powers which – consciously or unconsciously, and indeed very often unconsciously – lie behind the motives of men who act in history and which constitute the real ultimate driving forces of history, then it is not a question so much of the motives of single individuals, however eminent, as of those motives which set in motion great masses, whole peoples, and again whole classes of the people in each people, and this, too, not momentarily, for the transient flaring-up of a straw-fire which quickly dies down, but for a lasting action resulting in a great historical transformation. To ascertain the driving causes which here in the minds of acting masses and their leaders – the so-called great men – are reflected as conscious motives, clearly or unclearly, directly or in ideological, even glorified form – this is the only path which can put us on the track of the laws holding sway both in history as a whole, and at particular periods and in particular lands.81

It is, then, only the continual, critical engagement – both theoretical and practical – with historically unfolding human practice that allows us to make sense of discourses as forms of consciousness and to make our own positive contribution to the historical process.

And so I think it becomes clear that the dividing line between historical materialism and CDA goes deeper than the flagrant neglect of empirical context in Fairclough’s analyses of texts, and further than the validity of CDA claims about the ‘increasing prominence of discourse’ in contemporary social processes. Fairclough himself puts his finger on it when he talks about approaching politics ‘as language’. By contrast, Marx and Engels approached language as politics, or as political economy, or as philosophy; that is, they approached the different discourses of politics, political economy or philosophy as specific forms of social consciousness in and through which the real being of people was being expressed, reflected and diffracted in the most diverse and contradictory ways. To relate critically to these forms of social consciousness, then, is simply not possible without understanding that real being, without grasping those really-existing, historically-formed practical relations

in which people find themselves and which they try to make sense of in order to act.

However, the development of this understanding is not a matter of identifying, comparing and tracing the verbal forms (syntactic, lexical, semantic, and so forth), patterns and transmigrations of discourse, but of working out the forms – the categories and concepts – of knowledge of the object. The critique of political discourse, for example, requires an investigation and analysis of politics, of the forms, origins and dynamic of political practice in relation to the social whole, of political relations between people, including what they say and write to one another. Similarly, the critique of political economy requires an investigation and analysis of economic processes of production, distribution and exchange in their historical concreteness. At issue here is not the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ fit between discourse and particular practices. The ‘false consciousness’ of bourgeois ideology is, after all, ‘good’ for business. This is, instead, an issue of the truth of particular conceptions in relation to the historical movement as a whole, and establishing this truth is a matter for positive scientific work, a matter of scientific discovery, of theoretical analysis and the development, on that basis, of a view of where the thing is going and what we need to do about it.

There is, then, simply no method or procedure that can be applied to ‘discourse’ in general which can establish either its ideological function or its causal role in the social process. Only positive and integral knowledge of the historically developing practice of humanity and of the place of the alienated and fractured spheres of political, economic and other forms of activity within that practice will do as the foundation and premise for a concrete understanding of the import and implications of the relevant discourse. But, then, the ‘analysis of discourse’ in this sense is not an independent method but is simply part of the flexible and creative application of the method of analysis known as the materialist conception of history. As Thompson puts it so well:

\[82\] Fairclough and Graham 2002, p. 225 want to have this the other way around, arguing that ‘Marx was a discourse theorist avant la lettre’, and that he ‘put this dialectical view of discourse to work in his economic, political and historical analyses’ (although his work ‘does not obviously stand up well to contemporary expectations (in linguistics journal articles, for instance) of a sustained and systematic focus on language’. Indeed, they go on to say that ‘in one sense [Marx] was a better discourse analyst than many of us are now’ since his work does not ‘suffer from the reifying and idealizing consequences of abstracting language from the social process, if only to connect it back to the social process in analysis’. But, in saying this, they are, I suggest, making my point. Marx’s work did not suffer from these consequences because it was not ‘discourse analysis’, ‘critical’ or otherwise.
Historical materialism offers to study social process in its totality; that is, it offers to do this when it appears, not as another ‘sectoral’ history – as economic, political, intellectual history, as history of labour, or as ‘social history’ defined as yet another sector – but as a total history of society, in which all other sectoral histories are convened. It offers to show in what determinate ways each activity was related to the other, the logic of this process and the rationality of causation. We need only to state this claim to note two observations which must at once follow upon it. First, historical materialism must, in this sense, be the discipline in which all other human disciplines meet. It is the unitary discipline, which must always keep watch over the isolating premises of other disciplines (and the fictional stasis entailed by the freezing of process in yet others), but whose maturity can only consist in its openness towards and its summation of the findings of those other disciplines.\(^8\)

In Thompson’s terms, the subject matter of CDA as a discipline is discourse that has been frozen and isolated from the ‘logic of the process’ of history. When we thaw this subject matter out, CDA itself, as so much ideological encrustation, simply melts away.

Finally, we should note the emergence of a body of work by scholars who are opposed to CDA and who are trying, each in their different ways, to place linguistic or discourse-analytical terms and concepts at the service of concrete examination of the development of forms of social consciousness during particular historical events.\(^4\) These studies are very welcome and it is precisely this kind of work that is needed to evaluate the appropriateness and usefulness to historical analysis of insights from language study. Collins, for example, makes a strong case for ‘the potential methodological value of a critical reflection on linguistic processes to those who adhere to a historical materialist perspective’.\(^5\) However, this work merits special and proper consideration which is beyond the scope of this paper.

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\(^8\) Thompson 1978, p. 262.


\(^5\) Collins 1999, p. 6.
References


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We would ask whether it is not positively ridiculous to trumpet calls for revolution into the world this way, without sense or understanding, without knowledge or consideration of circumstances.

Marx and Engels\(^1\)

[The Third Period] is of extraordinary importance for us today. It illustrates and illuminates the whole problem of sectarianism – it is the only large scale example of a fundamental cleavage within the leadership. . . . It is, in short, a period rich in historical experience and one that must become part of the political heritage of all our activists. . . . The New Line as it developed was based upon the theory of ‘social-fascism’ – and the first necessity in the approach to these years must be an assessment of this theory.

John Saville\(^2\)

The summer 1999 issue of *Historical Materialism* included a review article by Matthew Worley in which he reflected on recent evaluations of the history of

\(^1\) Marx and Engels 1976, p. 294.

the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). In a journal with this title and the explanatory rubric ‘research in critical Marxist theory’, I anticipated an essay in socialist historiography. My expectations were encouraged by the quotation from Marx and the declaration from John Saville urging the necessity for Marxist politics and Marxist history which prefaced Worley’s piece. For those of us who still believe that, however difficult its realisation may be, ‘another world is possible’, meticulous assessment of the party of the Russian Revolution which engaged some of the best militants of the British working class in the intractable task of building a socialist Britain, is a matter of more than academic interest. Critical understanding of its political trajectory from its foundation in 1920 to its collapse seventy years later remains an indispensable part of educating new generations of workers in the immense and immensely varied problems of creating socialist organisations on both a national and international basis.

In seeking to contribute to this project, socialist historians strive to recover, evoke and explain the past to better help us comprehend the human condition, understand the present and construct the future. Perceiving history as ontological and political, they seek to educate, to inspire and instruct. In doing this, they bring not dogmatism but scholarship to their writing, to their use of sources, interpretations and assessments. If the extent to which we can learn direct, specific lessons from the very different circumstances of other times is questionable, the elusive, complex truths of the past can be weapons in the struggle today; they must be fought for forensically. But socialist historians bring socialist values to their interpretations and assessments. Without reducing the uniqueness of the past and its people, denying its difference or pillaging it for parables, they make judgements based on these values.

For my own part, the indispensable framework in which I locate the CPGB is that of the Russian Revolution and its degeneration. From my studies of British Communism, I conclude that what was fundamental in shaping the CPGB, its politics, culture and ethos was, despite the impact of very real national pressures, its relationship with the USSR. What was primary in its development was the hegemony of Russian politics – politics which came to reflect the isolation and subsequent undermining of the revolution and the

3 Worley 1999. Thanks to Ian Birchall and Alan Campbell for valuable comments on this essay.
gradual, evolutionary emergence and final ascendancy of Stalinism. Recent archival research affirms that successive phases of CPGB policy from the mid-1920s – the ‘Third Period’ of virulent sectarianism and social fascism which ran from 1928 to 1934, the Popular-Front politics of class collaboration from 1935, the support for the Hitler-Stalin pact in 1939, the move in 1941 to unconditional support for World War II, the 1947 turn to the left – all of these had their origins in the imperatives of ‘socialism in one country’. They flowed decisively from the policies and interests of the Russian state, not from the initiatives of the CPGB or from the requirements of the British working class, which, for the CPGB, remained enduringly subordinate to Stalinism. For socialists, the tragedy and the sin of the CPGB was that, in uncritically supporting Stalinism from 1929 into the 1960s, it failed to adequately foster the interests of workers in Britain or elsewhere in the world; and that it replaced the central idea of socialism as the emancipation of the working class by the working class, socialism as workers’ power and workers’ democracy, with the conception of socialism as national, bureaucratic dictatorship.4

It might seem to readers of Historical Materialism that much of this goes without saying. However, it found scarcely any resonance in Worley’s disappointing essay. Acknowledging constraints of space, his approach was typically assertive rather than argumentative: the work of a wide range of historians was confidently, but for those familiar with it controversially, labelled, lauded or dismissed with a paucity of supporting citation, explanation, evidence or quotation. There was, on the whole, a failure to engage with the arguments and interpretations of those he lavishly commended or alternatively cursorily despatched. Worley proved the worst kind of historiographical guide, one whose unsubstantiated verdicts on this literature have to be taken by his readers, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the texts in question, largely on trust. Moreover, the framework in which he judged recent work, the premises against which he measured it, were not made explicit.

They did, however, gradually emerge. In the first two pages of the article, we were treated inter alia to the astonishing conclusion that the first two volumes of the official history of the CPGB written for party purposes by the party propagandist and author of that peculiarly dishonest confection, From Trotsky to Tito, James Klugmann, while ‘partisan’ and ‘somewhat selective’,

4 A recent and very useful one-volume history is Eaden and Renton 2002.
constituted ‘a valid introduction to the history of the CPGB’. Yet, in contrast to Klugmann, the critical analysis of Trotskyist historians such as Brian Pearce, Michael Woodhouse and Hugo Dewar as well as the work of Al Richardson, the editor of Revolutionary History, was dismissed on the grounds that it ‘sought political advantage rather than historical integrity’. Similarly, in the writings of Ralph Darlington, Worley brashly insisted, ‘objective analysis is clouded by preconception’. Compared with these revolutionary-socialist writers, ‘independent “left” historians’ – and one wonders at Worley’s use of quotations around ‘left’ and his use of ‘independent’ for at least four of those listed were or had been CPGB members and several Labour Party members – were heartily commended for being ‘objective and thorough’.

Despite the dearth of argument or evidence, it was apparent that Worley was favourably inclined towards those sympathetic, albeit sometimes critically sympathetic, to the CPGB – on precisely what criteria remained unclear – and extremely unfavourable to the party’s more robust critics. And that he was greatly concerned with objectivity. Worley identified a powerfully critical stance with a corrosion of historical judgement. No such strictures were applied to those, like Worley himself, who adopted a more supportive approach. It was apparently only critics of the CPGB who experienced difficulties with integrity, preconceptions and objectivity. But, as creative thinkers about historiography have been at pains to assert, objectivity is not to be confused with neutrality, still less with a politically uncritical framework for evaluation of issues, events or institutions under consideration. Historians beyond the

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6 Worley 1999, p. 242, criticising inter alia Woodhouse and Pearce 1975, Dewar 1976, Bornstein and Richardson 1986. See the contrary view that Woodhouse and Pearce ‘provide a detailed and perceptive account of the role of the Comintern in the establishment and early years of the party’, Eaden and Renton 2002, p. xiii. And see the measured rebuttal of ferocious allegations made by Kevin Morgan that these writers deliberately mislead their readers mounted by Flewers 1991, pp. 50–1. Given this rash of jejune Trotsky phobia which, in somewhat passé emulation of high Stalinism, seeks to label radical anti-Stalinism almost in its entirety as ‘Trotskyist’, it should be pointed out that Revolutionary History is not, as Morgan asserts, a Trotskyist journal. It might also be observed in this context that Socialist History, which Morgan edits, is the descendant of the CPGB’s history journals.
8 Worley 1999, p. 242. Some of these historians, he tells us, ’had had contact with the CPGB’; ibid.
ranks of socialists bring political preoccupations to their work and to their interpretative frameworks, although sometimes they stubbornly refuse to recognise this. Others frankly acknowledge their commitment. For example, Pearce and Woodhouse were, when they wrote their book, members of the Socialist Labour League and Darlington is a member of the Socialist Workers’ Party. Inescapably and potentially beneficially, they bring their political values, their critique of capitalism, their quest for an alternative, to their historical work. So too does Worley, although he fails to tell us what these values are.

That is not the point in contention: that point is whether historians permit their political beliefs to override fidelity to rigorous historical method, whether they misread documents, ignore or misconstrue evidence, de-emphasise this finding or exaggerate or suppress that one to, consciously or unconsciously, illegitimately construct a history which accords with their preconceptions. The conscientious socialist historian, precisely because she is serious about socialism and history, will demonstrate that commitment does not entail bias or the tailoring of evidence to political preconceptions. It is possible to write self-consciously anti-Stalinist history – just as it is possible to write self-consciously anti-fascist history – without distortion. The allegations made by Worley demand detailed justification. Yet the only specific evidence he produced to bolster his accusations was all of half a sentence in which Ralph Darlington stated that the CPGB became ‘a completely loyal devotee to the Russian Stalinist leadership before any other’. Darlington went on to compare the conformity of the CPGB to Comintern decisions with the more critical approaches within the French, German and Polish parties. His judgement is substantiated in the literature and eminently reasonable. Its dismissal raises further questions as to Worley’s scholarship and the values he brings to his own work. On the evidence presented in his article, all his embrace of ‘objectivity’ amounts to in the end is the age-old, dubious debating technique, beloved of conservative historians: my history is apolitical, ‘objective’ and good, while those with whom I disagree are, in contrast, political, unobjective ‘axe-grinders’. This crudely partisan reductionism – your politics affect how you write history but mine do not – is a sorry pass for a socialist historian to come to.

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10 Whether the CPGB was the first party to become ‘a completely loyal devotee’ is arguable. That from its foundation it demonstrated such devotion and lay very much
Worley did, however, proceed to shed some light on where, in his estimation, these historians went wrong: ‘the broad argument made in such critiques that every move the CPGB made was determined by Stalin or the USSR is simply unsustainable’.\(^\text{11}\) Strangely for a socialist historian, he airbrushed Stalinism out of the picture. For Worley, the CPGB was not only, in ways he failed to define, a good thing. It was a significantly autonomous British organisation, relatively untainted by Stalin or Stalinism. ‘Many historians’, he claimed, have conceived the CPGB as ‘a puppet of the Comintern’ and ‘the Comintern itself as a tool of the Soviet state and subsequently Stalin. With the opening of the archives in Moscow (and Manchester), however, such assumptions have been challenged and fundamentally revised’.\(^\text{12}\)

We have to allow here for the use of the straw-man technique. CPGB members, Worley informed us, were not ‘puppets’, ‘automata’ or ‘slaves’, implying that those of us who accept that the politics of British Communism were dominated by Russian policy believe that they were exactly this. ‘Comintern resolutions were very rarely affirmed without a detailed discussion on the part of the CPGB’, he noted, adding, lest anybody suggests that the CPGB consisted of Trappist monks: ‘A prolonged debate preceded any change of line’.\(^\text{13}\) Worley was indulging in caricature. Of course Comintern directives were arrived at in Moscow after discussion, of course they were adopted in London after discussion, of course they had to be interpreted and of course they had to be applied in very different organisations and very different contexts across Britain. Nobody has ever written to the contrary. But directives were affirmed and lines were changed and the origins of each of these directives lay in the Kremlin, not in King Street.\(^\text{14}\)

Worley dealt in terminological inexactitude: he fudged matters. J.T. Murphy, the subject of Darlington’s biography, was, he informed us, ‘regularly in opposition to the prevailing line of both the CPGB and the CI’ (my emphasis).\(^\text{15}\)

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12 Worley 1999, p. 244. For Worley, ‘the process of “Bolshevisation” or “Stalinisation” undertaken by the CPGB . . . can be seen to contain particularly British characteristics’. Worley 1999, p. 245.
14 For a study of thirty-eight Comintern directives demonstrating CPGB acquiescence on all issues of primary and secondary importance, see McIlroy and Campbell 2002a.
Where did he get this from? He provided no evidence at all to corroborate such a sweeping claim. It is certainly not supported by the rich evidence assembled in Darlington’s book. What Worley was doing was conflating *disagreements* over how the line should be applied and *differences* over its organisation and operation with *dissent* from the line itself as accepted and understood in the party and *opposition* to it. Much of the revisionist writing on the CPGB which Worley enthusiastically endorses similarly constructs a distorted image of the party’s diversity and independence by means of this kind of imprecision and confusion of terms. Disagreement over interpretation or tactical implementation of the new or prevailing line was necessary and accepted as valid. Significant dissent once decisions had been made and disagreements laid to rest involved discipline, opposition to the line, as the Trotskyists discovered in 1932, entailed expulsion. Murphy only once, and then arguably, opposed the line: he resigned from the party in 1932 when the leadership demanded he publicly repudiate his view on the tactical question of British credits for the Soviet Union. From 1928 he was, as Darlington justifiably argued, a loyal Stalinist: his only problems fell into the category of disagreement not opposition. Darlington was correct. Worley was wrong. Murphy is vividly summed up in a 1926 incident. In Moscow, on behalf of the CPGB, he strongly objected to the publication of the Russian trade-union manifesto criticising the TUC left-wing leaders. Once Stalin spoke against him, Murphy quickly announced that he had now come round to Stalin’s point of view.¹⁶

It would be a mistake to simply emphasise Stalin, for without underestimating his personal role, thousands in the Russian, British, Brazilian and French parties set their hands to the making of Stalinism. Certainly, he was not interested in, still less involved in, every decision of the Comintern for which he had no great regard. Nonetheless, after 1930, the Comintern existed only as a dependency of the police state and the bureaucratic economy and society over which Stalin presided and his politics, based purely on Russian considerations and the appetites of the Russian bureaucracy whose interests in complex fashion he organised and reflected became the hegemonic politics of each national party. It did not seem to have occurred to Worley to inquire why, given the alleged pragmatism and relative autonomy of the CPGB, every single strategic phase of Comintern policy from the United Front

to the Cold War left turn, and every significant modulation within each phase, was initiated in Moscow and adopted and followed in all essentials not only in London but in Ankara, Athens, Buenos Aires, New York, Melbourne and Madras.\(^{17}\)

Perhaps it was coincidence. But, discounting for the language of exaggeration and caricature – ‘every move’ and so forth –, we can measure Worley’s assertions against the conclusions of researchers who unlike him have worked in the Moscow archives:

\[...\] Stalin maintained a decisive influence over the determination of the general strategies and, crucially, pronounced them irrevocable and universal. \[...\] It is clear that no major policy innovation was possible without his direct intervention or sanction. \[...\] It is axiomatic for most Western historians that the principle determinant of Comintern policy throughout the 1930s was Soviet \textit{raison d’état}. \[...\] The tension felt by foreign Communists attempting to balance fealty to Moscow with responsiveness to indigenous realities was invariably resolved in favour of the former.\(^{18}\)

Worley did not confront such judgements, still less contest them with argument and evidence. He did provide a brief hagiography as a substitute for critical analysis of the writings of two revisionist historians Nina Fishman and Andrew Thorpe, which artificially constructed a picture of British autonomy from the Kremlin. Such work – which, in common with Worley’s, suffers from a crippling lack of international perspective and comparison – has, however, been subjected to more probing scrutiny. Suffice it to note here that Fishman achieved a picture of insular self-sufficiency in the CPGB’s trade-union activity after 1933 simply by neglecting to examine the archival evidence confirming the indispensable role of the Comintern in formulating and directing policy; and

\(^{17}\) While I have not adopted E.H. Carr’s suggestion that we study the historian before we scrutinise her history, it has perhaps some relevance here. Some recent historians of British Communism possess negligible experience of how revolutionary organisations work, how lines are developed, imposed and operated. Their experience does give those such as Pearce, Woodhouse, Darlington, Eaden and Renton a certain insight into party dynamics. Further, compared with earlier writers, including Leslie Macfarlane and Walter Kendall, the experience of the labour movement in general of some recent commentators is limited. Needless to say, experience is, in itself, insufficient for writing good history.

by diminishing the ideological, political and organisational links which bound activists to the Party and the Party to the International, not least their identification with and faith in Stalin and the Russian state. Thorpe, who did utilise the evidence from the archives completely absent from Fishman’s text, interpreted it, as I have demonstrated in detail elsewhere, impressionistically and perversely, to suggest that the CPGB enjoyed a significant degree of political autonomy from Moscow – indeed, it was ‘the master of its own fate’, while its relationship with the Russians was one of partnership. If it was a partnership, then Thorpe’s own account confirms that it was a partnership in which only one partner took all the significant decisions.¹⁹

Strangely, for someone consciously writing history beneath the banner of Karl Marx and John Saville and delivering judgement on his fellow historians, presumably on Marxist criteria, Worley was not prepared to assess CPGB policy politically. Writing in a journal of critical Marxism, this was as near as he got to any such evaluation: ‘This is not to say that Comintern or CPGB policy was “correct”, rather that changes in policy and perspectives were not merely the consequence of political powerplay in the USSR’.²⁰ Here, in sharp contrast, is John Saville judging the same period, the troubled years 1927–32, in a journal of critical Marxism more than forty years ago:

The results of the New Line were disastrous. The very considerable potentialities of rallying the many thousands of honest socialists in the Labour Party against MacDonaldism disappeared beneath the waves of sectarianism. The results of the social-fascist policy were not just disastrous in the short run . . . it gravely worsened the relations between ourselves and the rest of the labour movement and the political effects are with us today.²¹

Unlike the historian he favourably quoted as pointing towards the necessity for a Marxist approach, Worley provided no political evaluation, rooted in its time, of the nature or practice of ‘social fascism’ or of the United Front or of the Popular Front. If Worley had any views on these matters, issues of central concern to the Marxist history which he explicitly espoused, they went completely unexplored in his contribution to *Historical Materialism*. All his

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²¹ Saville 1956, pp. 26–7. Although, particularly given the marginality of the CPGB, it is impossible to state that, had it not pursued the Third-Period line, things would have been radically different.
readers were offered was a one-sided, unevidenced, unjustified celebration of revisionist historians whose approach is entirely different to that of Marx or Saville; positive noises about the CPGB’s dubious history in its entirety; endorsement of the self-sacrifice of its activists; and the amorphous, pious, unexplained, unargued and evasive aspiration that the party should ‘at last gain the historical recognition that its dedicated members struggled so hard to deserve’.  

**Rewriting the Third Period**

In his own work, Worley has attempted a revision of conventional estimations of the Third Period. The majority of historians have seen the primary cause of the Comintern’s move towards a new line in 1928–9 as Stalin’s decision to break with the ‘socialism at a snail’s pace’ of his confederate Bukharin. Internally, this was influenced by the failing NEP, the threat from the countryside and the defeat of the opposition of Trotsky and Zinoviev; externally, by the failures of Russian policy in Britain and China and a deteriorating foreign situation. Breaking with the past, Stalin moved towards the Five-Year Plan, coercive collectivisation, the command economy, terror, dictatorship, ‘socialism in one country’. He took up, orchestrated and transformed the ideas of Trotsky and Bukharin. By mid-1929, the Comintern was Stalinised on the basis of an imagined social fascism and the fantasy of a deep, prerevolutionary international proletarian radicalisation. As the workers accelerated towards revolution, the leaders of the social-democratic parties and the unions simultaneously hurtled towards fascism in order to control the coming revolutionary wave. Adventurist prescription flowed from fanciful prognostication: Communists must break from critical support for and united-front work with reformist organisations, provide ‘independent leadership’, raise the slogan of ‘a revolutionary workers’ government’ and gather trade unionists around the revolutionary opposition to break the back of the social-fascist bureaucracy and establish revolutionary unions. Only the ‘united front from below’ – no united front at all, for it required reformist workers to break from their social-fascist leaders as a prerequisite for unity in action – was countenanced.  

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22 Worley 1999, p. 244.
The ultra-left politics of ‘class against class’ were developed gradually but remorselessly by the Kremlin from the Ninth Plenum of the Comintern Executive (ECCI) in February 1928, through the Sixth World Congress that summer to the Tenth Plenum in July 1929. Thereafter, they were kept under review by the Russian leadership. In Britain, those leaders who resisted were replaced by the Comintern, aided and abetted by British advocates of the millenarianism Stalin had unleashed. A new ultra-left leadership for a new ultra-left line was assembled around ‘the practical worker’ Harry Pollitt and the ‘theoretician’ Rajani Palme Dutt. Perhaps best exemplified by the public persecution of the CPGB miners’ leader Arthur Horner, a new Stalinist intolerance grimly unfolded. The results were lamentable: by 1932, the CPGB had become an ineffectual sect. Months later, in the context of the international prohibition of a united front with the social democrats, Hitler came to power.

As Saville suggests, a critical study of the Third Period still has much to teach us, so long as we relate it to a changing world and novel conjunctures. Centrally, perhaps, about fascism. We still need to reflect upon the appalling dangers of seeing fascism as simply a stage of capitalism, denying its essential difference from bourgeois democracy and pronouncing reformist and centrist leaders, who, after all, possess a material interest in opposing the iron heel, the main enemy, twins of fascism with whom no united front against barbarism is possible. Ultra-leftism and sectarianism still require pondering today as socialists in Britain continue to confront New Labour and the development of the Socialist Alliance. Thinking about domestic developments and the emergence of global ‘anticapitalism’, the united front as a fertile and flexible concept highly relevant to socialist renewal, obviously possesses more than historical significance. If we are unlikely to see any substantial reappearance of Stalinism per se, perverted versions of socialism still smoulder. Any resurgence of socialism and its practical success runs the risk of degeneration.24 Turning back to the history of the CPGB itself, initial opposition and ultimate acceptance of the bizarre pseudo-revolutionary politics of the Third Period, politics which bore little relationship to the situation in Britain, speaks volumes about a

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24 The present author’s first acquaintance with the paedagogic power of the Third Period came in the late 1960s when it proved to be a compelling means of understanding the sectarian catastrophism of the ersatz Trotskyist Socialist Labour League, see, for example, Germain 1967.
subordination to Stalinism which would endure, but which revisionist historians are determined to decentre and diminish.

In a series of recent articles explicitly advertised as a revision and reassessment, Worley firmly and characteristically eschewed political estimations, took no stock of Stalinism, decentred social fascism and scarcely mentioned, still less analysed, the ‘united front from below’. He concentrated rather on a sanitised examination of the causation and consequences of the Third Period. In confused fashion, he affirmed the role of the Comintern, denied the pivotal influence of Stalin and emphasised British factors in the initiation of the new line. We can no longer give credence, he authoritatively asserted, ‘to the argument that the “third period” was engineered by Stalin to facilitate his rise to power’. This view, he emphatically pronounced, ‘has long been discredited’.²⁵ Relying largely on a well-known article by Kozlov and Weitz, he urged that the key components of the new politics, particularly its central conception of economic crisis, were ingrained in Comintern thinking by Bukharin long before Stalin took a hand.²⁶ Moreover, ‘there were British precedents for the left turn of 1928’ and the new line ‘correlated to and was ratified by British determinants’.²⁷ Earlier accounts, Worley observed, had concluded that ‘Soviet considerations determined the turn’ while ‘a submissive CPGB yielded to Stalinist pressure and suffered as a consequence’. It would, he claimed, ‘be erroneous and historically naïve to accept such a hypothesis [sic] in total’.²⁸ Unable to muster any evidence to deny that the change of line came from the Comintern, he repeated that the reasons for innovation were based on the logic of events in Britain and the aspirations of CPGB members faced with intensified antagonism from the right in the aftermath of the General Strike. The new policy ‘emerged from very real determinants both British and international’.²⁹ Indeed, Worley went so far as to hazard that, had the Russian-dominated Comintern not moved to ultra-left sectarianism in 1928–9, ‘it is probable that the party would have been forced to consider a realignment similar to that proposed by the

²⁵ Worley 2000a, p. 358 and n. 16.
²⁶ Worley 2000b, p. 191, Kozlov and Weitz 1989. There are around a dozen references in total to social fascism in Worley 2000ab and only a handful to the ‘united front from below’. All are brief or incidental. There is no proper discussion or assessment of these concepts. This facilitates the reproduction of a sanitised leftism.
²⁷ Worley 1999, p. 248, our emphasis.
²⁹ Worley 2000a, p. 358.
ECCI [Comintern executive] once existing communist access to the wider labour movement had been effectively curtailed’.30 As it was, ‘Party members at a national and regional level were able to adapt Comintern policy to suit British conditions’. The Comintern, in this strange world in which attacks on the CPGB by labour-movement leaders and activists dictated an ultra-left response and in which social fascism could be ‘adapted to suit British conditions’, regularly backed ‘the more flexible approach of leaders such as Harry Pollitt’.31

Worley’s second claim was that previous historians had exaggerated the impact of the Third Period: it was not, as they had almost unanimously concluded, a ‘total disaster’.32 Following an article by Mike Squires, Worley insisted that the decline in CPGB membership was not as great as had been suggested. Unemployment, economic decline and union weakness were as important as politics in producing the party’s plight, while the CPGB maintained a powerful presence among unemployed workers. These objective factors also influenced the move to the new line. And, according to Worley, there were other significant achievements, notably, and here he is following the earlier arguments of Alun Howkins, the construction of a vibrant Communist culture in Britain.33 Moreover, traditional interpretations ‘of the Third Period as a homogeneous block’34 require correction. In reality, ‘...the Comintern line was relatively flexible, sensitive to national circumstances’ so long ‘as the theoretical formulations of the Comintern were adhered to’.35

As detailed responses to it have made clear, Worley’s unconvincing revisionism claims a novelty it does not possess. We may, to take one example of the latter point, compare Worley’s strictures on earlier writers who treated the Third Period as ‘a homogeneous block’, with the conclusion of a critical synthesis published some four years before his verdict: ‘... the Comintern line in the dramatic years 1929–33 was not a fixed entity’.36 He simply regurgitates earlier historians’ account of Bukharin’s theorising of a left line

30 Worley 2000b, p. 359.
34 Worley 2000b, p. 193.
35 Worley 2000b, p. 203, emphasis in original.
after 1926, originally observed long ago by Theodore Draper who correctly identified two different left turns. Bukharin’s ‘left turn’, his theorisation of the economic problems of capitalism and workers’ radicalisation is well-known. He never developed it into a politics which centred on social fascism and discarded the united front. The earlier flirtations of Stalin and Zinoviev with social fascism in 1924 and the Comintern’s toying with the united front from below in the left oscillations of that year are also well-known.37

Revolutionary organisations often exhibit left, right and centrist tendencies as, in the face of tremendous difficulties, their members struggle to understand a complex, ever-changing, capitalist world. There are a variety of leftisms and a range of different ways of turning left. One can envisage, in certain circumstances, a healthy left turn, one can envisage a turn to the left without the invocation of social fascism. What was historically specific about the transmutation of 1928–9 was the consolidation by Stalin and his faction, driven by the political and economic situation inside Russia and drawing inspiration from Trotsky’s ideas on industrialisation and Bukharin’s on world capitalism, of a concrete line, quite distinctive in relation to the hardening united-front perspective that preceded it from 1926 and from which it now broke, decisively and virulently. Historians deal in periodisation. This often has a certain arbitrariness which should be redeemed by relating what are defined as ruptures to what went before. We can typically discern components of new periods in their predecessors. But, in this case, we can concur with the contemporary Comintern and the CPGB that what was involved was political metamorphosis. While the 1926 General Strike presaged a waning of the united front, a new period opened in 1928: with all its continuities and cleavages, it was separated by a clear political divide from the united-front years.

In 1928, of course, there were British advocates, most notably Pollitt and Palme Dutt, of a new turn. But their advocacy did not determine the new line. The decision was taken not by the British or French but by the Russians. It was determined by Russian not by British, French or Venezuelan considerations. Had it been based on national considerations, then there would have been not one global new line but scores of different national new lines. As one authoritative study sensitive to national pressures concludes: ‘in the final analysis it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the strategies of the Third Period were devised in Moscow’.38 Further research in the archives may

illuminate more precisely the relationships between the position in Russia, the situation in Germany and Stalin’s fear of the social democrats and the turn to international ultra-leftism as well as how seriously Stalin took the new line in relation to some parts of the world. But Worley has provided no convincing reasons why we should revise the conclusions of current archival work which maintains that Third-Period politics were ‘firmly rooted in the continuing power struggle in the RCP [Russian Communist Party]. Stalin skilfully used them as a weapon to define and defeat his opponents’.  

In this context, Worley’s attempt to assert that significant factors determining the new line stemmed from the situation in Britain rather than the requirements of ‘socialism in one country’ is limping and inadequate. Inasmuch as the new line was determined by British factors, these related to the foreign policy of the British state and the perceived dangers it held for the Russians, not to the class struggle inside Britain and the predicament of British workers. We must not confuse causation and legitimization. The new line was not introduced because of unemployment in Britain, militancy in the textile industry, the collaborationist Mond-Turner talks or the economic and political crisis of 1931. It was legitimised, as it was in France, Norway or Australia, through distortion and amplification of indigenous factors, exaggeration of the level of militancy, magnification of Mondism into social fascism and aberrant attribution of revolutionary consciousness to reformist workers, creative processes which intimately involved not only Comintern potentates but also CPGB activists, processes underwritten by the implicit faith which British Communists placed in Stalin and the Comintern.  

Discounting for hindsight, it is apparent that, initially, a significant section of the leadership of the CPGB – Worley has too little to say about the cleavages here and the incremental formation by the Comintern of a new Stalinised cadre in a shaken, depleted party – and, endurally, a section of the rank and file, many of whom left the party, as well as the vast majority of socialists outside the CPGB, perceived that the new line bore ‘no relation whatsoever to the situation actually in evidence in Britain’. Yet the authority of Moscow, far from alien to the CPGB, and the liberating attraction for some militants of yielding to the excitements and self-affirmation of ultra-leftism, ensured that the new line was embraced, not imposed simpliciter, albeit by a shrunken sect.

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39 McDermott and Agnew 1996, p. 89.
41 Quoted in Branson 1985, p. 19.
Its residual members refused to accept, as most thinking socialists did, that strike statistics, studies of strikes, examination of developments in the unions and scrutiny of electoral trends culminating in the election of the MacDonald government in 1929, suggested that the working class was turning towards Labour not towards revolution. It was apparent that the trade union bureaucracy was moving towards right-wing labourism, not towards fascism. It was clear that the Labour Party remained in all essentials as it had been in 1920, based on the unions and structurally and politically susceptible to their influence. It was clear that the policies of a revolutionary workers’ government, social fascism and the ‘united front from below’, increasingly precluded or constrained the intervention of revolutionaries in the labour movement. And it was clear, as clear as it had been in 1920 when Lenin wrote *Left-Wing Communism* with the purpose of dissipating a more authentic sectarianism, that the infantilism embodied in Third-Period politics should be opposed by responsible revolutionaries, that the natural desire of militants to ‘have a go’ at the right wing should be curbed, countered and channelled by any revolutionary leadership worth its salt.\(^{42}\)

If we pursue Worley’s suggestion that the new line was adapted to British conditions, we find we are dealing once more with secondary matters of application not with primary principles of policy. What was of primary significance was the Comintern-ordained designation of the union bureaucracy as social fascists who could not be pushed into fighting capitalism. The fact that it was permissible in Britain to try to win the union branch – not the higher apparatus – given its proximity to the allegedly militant rank and file and the workplace, was a secondary issue, an issue of application rather than adaptation within what was primary, the Russian-crafted, ultra-left problematic. Again, Worley’s assertion that the Kremlin was sensitive to national circumstances so long as the ‘theoretical formulations’ of the Comintern were adhered to, is misleading. The Comintern did not simply deal in ‘theoretical formulations’, it dealt in detailed directives on the day-to-day practice of members of its national affiliates and it monitored them.\(^{43}\)


\(^{43}\) For example, ‘... steps should be taken to secure the sending of an Open Letter from the workers of large Soviet factories to particular enterprises in Britain (e.g. Woolwich Arsenal). Especially necessary is it to vigorously expose the whole activity of the Armstrong, Vickers, Co...’; *Directives to the CPGB on Preparations for August 1st* [1931], and: ‘... it is advisable to establish in all the pits anti-wage cut committees and to utilise this form of organising the workers for the struggle against wage cuts.
Turning to the impact of these policies on British Communism, it is obvious that we cannot gauge a party’s political weight from its membership figures, particularly when we are dealing with variations within the tiny or miniscule. Membership of the CPGB declined from 7,300 in 1927 to 5,000 in early 1928, when Worley tells us the line moved left. In September 1930, at the climax of sectarianism, membership bottomed at 2,300, the lowest figure before or after. Thereafter, there was recovery to 5,600, but the Party did not again reach the membership it had attained on the cusp of the Third Period until 1935. Research suggests there was high turnover, while for much of this period the majority of members were unemployed. The CPGB’s influence in the unions and in the Labour Party qualitatively diminished. The two breakaway, CPGB-controlled unions in the mines and the clothing industry were fiascos. The same verdict can be applied to the party’s performance in the general elections of 1929 and 1931.44

We can grant credence to Worley’s claims of CPGB influence in the unemployed workers’ movement (NUWM). Whether this compensated for its marginalisation inside the labour movement is questionable. Sectarianism in the unions and attempts to deny free speech to their social-fascist leaders dovetailed with attempts to transform the NUWM into ‘a revolutionary trade union’ and the Party’s attacks on the ‘legalism’ of its leader Wal Hannington, to impose limitations. The essentialist conception that the unemployed were inherently more radical than employed workers caused fundamental problems.45 The idea that the Party’s largely self-inflicted decline in political influence was in any way compensated for by cultural developments such as workers’ theatre and workers’ film societies would have surprised contemporary Communists. That inflation is at work in Worley’s articles is suggested by the fact that, at the height of the Third Period, the CPGB had around 500 active members. This figure puts the Party’s cultural endeavours into perspective, while many who did come into contact with them were excluded by their sectarianism.46 If, in Britain, the ‘united front from below’ never contributed to catastrophe on the German scale, it was nonetheless an abject

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44 McIlroy and Campbell 2002b, pp. 557–9, 551–3, 558–62.
45 See, for example, Croucher 1987, pp. 113–15, 126–8; Croucher 1995, pp. 23–43.
failure. The Third Period strengthened the right wing and weakened the CPGB immediately and in the long term. For, as Saville concluded in 1956: ‘... it gravely worsened the relations between ourselves and the rest of the labour movement, and the political effects are still with us today’.  

**The limits of revisionism**

Worley has now consolidated his work and provided more elaborate detail, which, however, adds little new to the argument, in a 300-page text, *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain Between the Wars*. After a short survey situating the CPGB, the succeeding seven chapters provide an extended account of the Third Period from 1927 to 1932. Three basic points will initially strike the discerning reader. First, the book’s title is a misnomer: this is not a history of the CPGB across the twenty interwar years, but rather a study of the five years of the Third Period. Second, the account of the deliberations of Comintern bodies and the CPGB leadership which form an important part of this book has to be considered in the light of Thorpe’s *British Communist Party and Moscow*, which covers the same ground as Worley across some 100 pages. Third, Worley confirms that, unlike Thorpe, he never set foot in the Moscow archives before writing this text, although he has repeatedly and emphatically pronounced on their importance for understanding the CPGB. Instead he has relied on notes made in those archives by James Klugmann, an extremely questionable procedure in terms of scholarly rigour, particularly when the original materials are themselves available, as well as the limited range of microfilmed documents from Moscow held in the Communist Party archive in Manchester.

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47 Saville 1956, p. 27.
48 Worley 2002.
50 Worley 2002, pp. 317–18. Worley also continues his unsubstantiated attacks on Trotskyists for ‘marginalized point-scoring ... overriding objective historical analysis’ (p. 13). Richard Hyman and James Hinton are criticised without supporting argument for concentrating on ‘the theoretical “correctness” of communist policy’ (p. 14). Franz Borkenau and Fernando Claudin are dismissed without evidence for depicting the period as one of ‘growing Stalinization and communist uniformity’. The late Duncan Hallas of the SWP is also implicated in this and specifically indicted for suggesting that Stalinist sectarianism may have contributed to Hitler’s success (p. 24, n. 46). Francis Beckett’s *The Enemy Within*, a lively, critical, journalistic study is written off as ‘prejudiced’ because its author ‘describes the “futility” of the New Line with barely disguised glee’ (p. 24, n. 51). Morgan’s attacks on Trotskyist writers are once more heartily recommended to readers by Worley (p. 24, n. 53).
Worley’s use of documents and his interpretation of them in this book is less than sure handed. An example is the persecution of Arthur Horner by the Party leadership in 1931 – an incident which does no credit to Pollitt and his comrades – for failing to practice independent leadership and succumbing to ‘trade union legalism’. Worley claims that the case against Horner was led by the Welsh CP leader Idris Cox, supported by the Comintern zealot Bill Rust and assorted ultra-left votaries while ‘... others such as Pollitt and [J.R.] Campbell sought to strike a balance by accepting Horner’s criticisms with regard to party organisation while similarly condemning his apparent “defeatism”’.

This is nonsense from start to finish. The point which emerges if we carefully read the minutes which Worley cites, as well as other confirmatory documents, is that the persecution was mounted not by Cox and sundry acolytes but by a united leadership firmly directed by Pollitt who was, in turn, vigorously supported by Campbell.

This is not simply an important correction of detail. In attempting to portray Pollitt and the majority of the leadership as moderate, pragmatic, unhappy with the new line, Worley and other revisionists simply ignore the evidence demonstrating that, as in this case, Pollitt and the entire leadership wholeheartedly supported and forcefully executed the policy. Responsibility lay with the CPGB leadership, not a handful of hotheads. The sectarian mania of ascendant Stalinism infected wide sections of the party, not just an isolated gaggle of Young Turks. Pollitt attempted to enforce democratic centralism, he did not discard it.

Again, in dealing with the Comintern’s trial of Horner in Moscow, Worley concludes that his Stalinist judges ‘resolved only to censure the miners’ leader for a tactical error as opposed to the more serious offence of acting in opposition to the Comintern line’. This is taken almost word for word from Nina Fishman’s earlier account of the affair. Fishman provides no source for her statement. Worley tells us that his source is the Klugmann papers. This is surprising, as the original Comintern document from the Russian archives is now on microfilm in the Manchester archives which Worley was using. The question arises as to why Worley did not read the original but, in violation of scholarly procedure, relied on Klugmann’s notes.

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But here, to slightly paraphrase Max Miller, is an even funnier thing. When we consult Klugmann’s papers, we discover that, for once, Klugmann got it right. His notes faithfully repeat the wording of the Comintern resolution. This resolution states explicitly and incontrovertibly that Horner was not, as Fishman and Worley mistakenly claim, convicted of a tactical error but of the more serious strategic offence of acting in opposition to the Comintern line. The Comintern Commission noted: ‘his line of trade union legalism and the surrender of the tasks of independent organisation of the masses unconditionally to the bureaucrats . . . has nothing in common with the line of the Comintern and the tasks of the party’. Klugmann repeats this. The question then arises why Worley tells us that he is following Klugmann, despite the fact that the original document Klugmann used was available to him. And why he then proceeds in practice to follow neither the original document nor Klugmann’s notes, preferring to miseducate his readers with a repeat of Fishman’s earlier, mistaken and unreferenced statement.

Despite retreats and qualifications which generally go unacknowledged, the book is essentially a rehash of Worley’s earlier work, thickened with additional detail. Once again, despite the ample space available, there is an evasion of political probing and political judgement. The Third Period, he reiterates, was ‘an understandable (though not necessarily “correct” or “successful”) response to contemporary events and attitudes’. He believes, without providing any justification, that ‘even by the tenth plenum’, when social fascism was consolidated, the Comintern’s politics ‘offered a cogent if wholly debateable interpretation of ongoing international developments’. The view that there was no real difference between MacDonald and Mussolini and the idea that ILP leaders such as Jimmy Maxton were even more dangerous, is pronounced convincing if open to debate. The belief that to propose a united front of the Communists and Social Democrats to combat Hitler would be to do Hitler’s work for him is pronounced compelling, although ‘not necessarily correct’. This is incoherent or casuistic. Worley is not writing a

56 Resolution on the Question of Comrade Horner, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester (LHASC), microfilm CI29; LHASC CP/IND/KLUG/05/04, Notes on Hornerism – Letters and Statements, my emphasis. It is worth noting that Worley’s mistaken interpretation substantially repeats that of Thorpe 2000, pp. 175–9, who in turn repeats that of Fishman 1995, p. 39, despite published correction of their mistakes: see McIlroy and Campbell 2001, pp. 116–17.

57 Worley 2002, p. 18

political treatise. But we are surely entitled to know, briefly, unobtrusively but precisely, from this socialist historian whether he is endorsing or rejecting, and why and in what measure, these sectarian politics. On pp. 234–5, he makes brief reference to the Comintern position on Germany, referring to its nuances and subtleties but omitting to mention the continuing political framework of social fascism and firm prohibition of the united front. Nowhere does he explain the CPGB’s disastrous, ultra-left position on Germany, which was clearly and forcefully expressed to the British working class in the pages of the *Daily Worker*:

> It is undoubtedly necessary to create working class unity against fascism but that must be unity between workers in the factories and in the streets and not between the Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party, which is not a working class Party. . . . For the Communist Party to unite with such a Party would be to become an accomplice in the drive to fascist dictatorship.59

The reader surely has the right to be informed whether a historian inspired by Marx and Saville is endorsing this approach as a compelling, convincing, ‘correct’ strategy for the working class. Or, whether, alternatively, he is rejecting it for the dangerous nonsense it not only proved to be but was perceived to be by those socialists whom the CPGB abused and attempted to silence at the time.60

Now, acknowledging the relevance of Stalin’s struggle for control of party and state for the Third Period, Worley evades its primacy in explaining change: ‘It was the interlocking of the various disputes within the Soviet Union and the Comintern that decisively influenced the political evolution of the Third Period’.61 This still neglects the fact that the struggle in the Comintern was itself the secondary product of the primary disputes within Russia and those disputes were carried into the Comintern by the dominant grouping in those disputes, the Stalin faction. Worley’s refusal to prioritise in causal explanation gives way to outright flight from precision into obfuscation: ‘Indeed the policies of the Third Period were very much within the Bolshevik tradition and related to the growing ideological breach within the international socialist

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59 *Daily Worker*, 13 August 1932.
60 Trotsky 1975 and see, for example, the documents from 1932 produced by the British Trotskyists in Groves 1974, pp. 80–107.
movement evident since at least the outbreak of the Great War’. The Bolshevik tradition indeed! One wonders whether he has ever read Lenin’s *Left-Wing Communism*. If Worley spares us the view that the Third Period began in 1914, his attempt to assert the importance of British factors touches its nadir when the Leeds Congress of late 1929, heavily orchestrated by the Comintern, and the CPGB’s practice in 1930, flowing directly from the Kremlin, planned directly from the Comintern, are depicted as robbing the inherently ‘cogent’ line of its ‘seriousness’. Once again and mistakenly, for Worley it is not the line itself which is sectarian, simply its practice.

This was a ‘difficult’ but not, Worley repeats, ‘a wholly negative time for the CPGB’. Perhaps not ‘wholly’. Assuredly, there are often tantalising glimpses of the positive in the most unprepossessingly grim circumstances. But it *was*, we repeat, largely, overall, on the whole, almost completely, ‘a negative time’. The assertions that a significant part of the CPGB’s decline was caused by changes in the economy and social structure rather than by its politics and compensated for by the creation of a Communist culture are again rehearsed. Yet the fact that while the CPGB membership was declining, individual Labour Party membership was increasing, from 215,000 in 1928 to 366,000 in 1933, and the fact that despite being emphasised by Worley as a factor in CPGB decline, union density fell by a mere 3 per cent between 1928 and 1933 compared with 17 per cent between 1920 and 1926 when CPGB membership increased, undermines his argument and suggests political factors were at work. Worley claims that he is employing a materialist analysis. What he is employing is, rather, a simplistic, apolitical determinism. Redundancies, closures, the devastation of communities cannot automatically be aligned, as they are in this text, with a decline in radicalism. Interpenetrated between job loss and demoralisation is a struggle for political meaning. Nor does the insertion of a sad, defensive sentence in conclusion: ‘That said, history cannot be determined solely by such factors and the question of human agency is obviously important’, negate the impact of the extended, one-sided argument that has preceded it.

In commending ‘the formation of a political culture central to the CPGB . . .

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62 Ibid.
64 Worley 2002, p. 18.
65 Pelling 1965, pp. 134–5; Bain 1983, Table 1.1.
the legacy of which was to benefit both Communists and non-Communists alike’, the qualification is now entered that such ‘cultural initiatives served to reinforce the Party’s divorce from the wider labour movement’. It is a very substantial qualification. If this cultural revolution – not a word, by the way, from Worley about similar developments in Russia – intensified the Party’s isolation, it is surely in order to question its quality, quite apart from the CPGB’s insistence that culture was ‘a weapon in the struggle’. We can certainly question its quantity. The report of a Comintern agent in 1931 pronounced the Workers’ Theatre Movement groups he observed ‘very weak’ and, by 1934, Comintern staff reflected of the British Workers’ Sports Federation, ‘It hardly exists at all’.

A good example of Worley’s method is the impressionism and inflation which informs his survey of CPGB education. He mentions a course run by the St Pancras branch in 1926, completed by only a single student, the six-months long Central Training School the same year, a four-day course in 1927 and eleven district schools and 72 study groups in 1930. In 1931, he states that 185 members were attending district schools and there were 74 study circles with 868 students. There was also a summer school and British students were sent to the Lenin School in Moscow which was conducted by the Comintern. If we take this sketch at face value, this was a distinctly patchy performance. My own reading of party documents suggests very real weaknesses in CPGB education, nowhere more manifest than in the Third Period. Nonetheless, Worley concludes, ‘. . . the educational opportunities that the party offered to the British workers [sic] must still be included among the finest achievements of the CPGB’.

The evidence assembled in this substantial and expensive book does not constitute a convincing reassessment of the Third Period. For this writer, it raises the question of why the politics of ‘class against class’ are important for Worley and his precise purpose in attempting a reinterpretation of them. At the end of his reflections, it is still an open question as to whether he writes, like Alun Howkins, as critical enthusiast of these politics or whether, like most other historians, he opposes them. It appears, despite his avowal

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of the necessity of Marxist history and Marxist politics, that his purposes are essentially academic. Academic in this dual sense: his investigations are minimally related to issues and problems of the class struggle yesterday and today, while playing to a professional culture in the universities which places a premium on innovation, revisionism and ‘objectivity’. In any terms, his text adds empirical detail but it provides no new framework and no new insights. If, at times, it transcends an institutional approach, its wealth of detail on what CPGB activists were doing falls short of conventional social history.

The evidence denies what Worley is at pains to assert: the CPGB was conformist in its subordination to the Russians. There was no significant deviation by CPGB activists from the Comintern line of crisis, social fascism and mass radicalisation. After 1929, no significant section of the Party opposed this analysis which was so disastrous in British conditions. The only tiny group who politically challenged the line, the only members who raised the issues of social fascism, the united front and the impending disaster in Germany inside the party were the Trotskyists. They were the only people arguing against sectarianism and for a united front in Britain and in Germany. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Worley, who is so exercised by contemporary Trotskyists, makes not the slightest mention of this, noting only Reg Groves’s ultra-left position on trade-union work. In November 1932, as Worley depicts the CPGB returning to health, the Trotskyists were finally expelled and labelled ‘fascist’ for their pains.70

CPGB activists swallowed a Russian line which many could initially see had slight relevance to Britain. They convinced themselves otherwise, conformed to Comintern policy, struggled to execute Stalin’s ultra-leftism to the best of their ability or simply dropped away. This is what is primary and fundamental for historians. It justifies the conclusion that the politics of the CPGB were in all essentials made in Russia. Of course, as the ultra-left dynamic developed, there was excess in applying a line which proposed excess: branch officials as well as union leaders were branded social fascists, some members refused to work in the fascist unions. This is, for serious historians, far from the significant point. Conscientious scholars possess a sense of proportion. Insignificant in itself, the slightest straying from the party line possesses, in contrast, exaggerated importance for revisionist historians who lack this

sense of perspective. They persist in magnifying evidence of Britishness, home-grown Communism, autonomy. They cherish small-scale, inessential, often trivial deviations as much as the central line itself. They inflate incidentals and blur and diminish essentials. They can no longer distinguish the wood from the trees. And, finally and crucially, they break the connections between understanding the socialist past and forging a socialist future.

References


This response will mainly concentrate on Marx’s approach to nationality and, as a necessary complement, also on his scientific method. Neil Davidson describes his own theoretical position as derived ‘not simply from sociologists like Gellner’ but from ‘an entire modernist tradition of which Marxism was part’. In this spirit, he makes frequent use of definitions drawn from writers in the Weberian school and it is largely from this source that Davidson takes his key assumption: that the nation is a capitalist phenomenon. We will start with scientific method.

**Weber and Marx: approaches and definitions**

It would be wrong to describe Max Weber’s methodology as simply positivistic. He defined his sociology as ‘that science which aims at the interpretative understanding of social behaviour in order to gain an understanding of its causes, its course and its effects. It will be called social behaviour only insofar as the person or persons involved engage in
some subjectively meaningful action’.¹ Weber laid particular stress on grasping subjective meaning in an empirically verifiable way: ‘rational proof can be supplied in the sphere of behaviour by a clear intellectual grasp of everything in its intended context of meaning’.² In this phrase, we find a recognition of the need to search out the complexity of meaning through a complete reconstruction of the subjective social context of behaviour. Such interpretative understanding was to be achieved in an almost dialectical way. It was to emerge by contrasting ‘actual conduct by a particular actor in a given historical context’ and the ‘conception of the “ideal type” of subjective meaning attributed to a hypothetical actor in a given type of conduct’.³ Echoes might almost be heard of Marx’s interplay of the abstract and the concrete. But, in fact, any such echoes are entirely illusory.

For Weber was not a Marxist and there remains a methodological gulf between his sociology and Marx’s method. Weber describes his conceptual endeavour thus: ‘to provide . . . terms with the necessary precision, sociology must design “pure” (“ideal”) types of corresponding forms of human behaviour which in each case involve the highest possible degree of logical integration because of their complete adequacy on the level of meaning’.⁴ These are tools, always sharp and precise – never to be blunted by confusion with actuality. Their scientific utility depends on their logical integration, their rational coherence as methodological instruments. Contrast this with Marx. Take his example of the ‘simplest economic category, e.g. exchange value’. This ‘presupposes population, population which produces under definite conditions, as well as a distinct type of family, or community or State etc. Exchange value cannot exist except as an abstract, one-sided relation of an already existing concrete living whole.’⁵ Abstract labour and the capitalist commodity, the basic elements of Marx’s analysis of capitalism, are the same. They emerge as a product of the historical development of capitalism. They take form, become actual, only at a particular moment as the consequence of the purposive actions of a class, actions that create the very special social conditions which make abstract labour and capitalist commodities possible. It is in the under-

¹ Weber 1962, p. 29.
³ Weber 1962, p. 29.
⁴ Weber 1962, p. 52.
⁵ Marx 1986, p. 38.
standing of these complex, contradictory and constantly changing interconnections that analysis, for Marx, becomes concrete.

Weber saw such dialectical analysis as unscientific precisely because it jumbled together concepts as instruments of analysis and the actuality they were seeking to investigate. To do so was historicist and metaphysical. Meaning and values were being projected on to human behaviour \textit{a priori} and from outside by the investigator. Claims that class consciousness, alienation and false consciousness were somehow immanent within the development of industrial society were precisely of this type. They involved assumptions about collectivities and their beliefs that were quite foreign to scientific sociology. Weber’s tight, precise, logically consistent definitions were the essential means by which he sought to avoid this trap and to extend the realm of scientific explanation, in Kant’s sense, beyond positivist social arithmetic to an understanding of the subjective meanings that drive and motivate human behaviour. His anger at Stammers’ ‘refutation’ of Marxism was because it sought, by the use of neo-Kantian assumptions, to close off and make illegitimate any such investigation.\(^6\)

It is a commonplace of Weberian sociology to claim that Marx failed to provide any satisfactory conceptual definition of class. For Weberians, such lack of conceptual clarity is the sociological equivalent of not brushing your teeth after breakfast. Davidson finds a similar problem with Marx’s lack of conceptual clarity on the nation – quoting Michael Löwy to this effect – and hence makes virtually no reference in his book to any of Marx’s writings on the nation or nationality.\(^7\) In his ‘Reply’ he brings himself to make some partial quotations from the \textit{Communist Manifesto} and somewhat more from the \textit{Critique of the Gotha Programme} to which we will return. However, he also repeats his claim that Marx’s use of the term nation lacked ‘rigour’.

Why did Marx not seek ‘logically consistent’ definitions? We have quoted earlier from Marx’s comments on the method of political economy where he distinguishes his use of dialectics from that of Hegel. ‘The concrete is concrete because it is a synthesis of many determinations, thus a unity of the diverse’.\(^8\) Marx then goes on to consider, but then reject, the possibility of some simple categories having, in Hegelian terms, an independent or natural existence.

\(^6\) Weber 1977 (see especially pp. 81–2 and Oakes’s introduction pp. 38–9).
\(^7\) Davidson 2000, p. 7.
\(^8\) Marx 1986, p. 38.
preceding that of the more concrete ones. He poses ‘ownership’ and notes that even this demands certain basic social conditions: the family, relations between master and servant. On the other hand, ‘possessions’ but not property might exist for tribal communities. The simpler category appears thus as a relation of simpler family or tribal associations with regard to property. In a society which has reached a higher stage the category appears as the simpler relation of a developed organisation.’ He goes on to add that, nevertheless, ‘the more concrete substratum underlying the relation of possession is however always presupposed’. He continues: ‘one may . . . say that the simple categories express relations or conditions in which the less developed concrete may have realised itself without as yet having posited the more complex connection or relation or conditions which is conceptually expressed in the more concrete category’. Abstract labour as a commodity will only exist in the concrete circumstances of capitalism. Labour-power, on the other hand, is fundamental to human social development, concretely understood, as it emerges at a certain stage of animal evolution. Categories, for Marx, had to be understood dialectically as they emerged within the historical process and not outside it.

For this reason, Marx saw dialectics as fundamental to the structure of Capital (‘this first attempt at applying dialectical method to political economy’) and was quite clear about his debt to Hegel. He described himself as ‘a pupil’ of that ‘mighty thinker’ who was the

[F]irst to present its [dialectics] general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. . . . In its rational form it is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehensive and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature no less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary.

He rejected the procedures of Kantian positivism precisely because they divorced concepts from reality, failed to understand their ‘inner connections’ and imposed static and thereby idealist categories on a changing material

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world. A generation later, Lenin provided a critique of this intellectual tradition – one within which Weber sat – in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

So, dialectics are something quite different from the ‘confidence trick of a shyster who can produce suitably “dialectical” definitions in conformity with the tactical requirements of the moment’. Dialectical method is about liberating our understanding of a constantly changing world from the imposed rigidity of *a priori* concepts. It does not demand an abandonment of definitions. It requires, instead, that definitions be used, understood and transformed dialectically in the process of the scientific analysis of the material world. As the great Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov put it, ‘the notion that cognition involves at first “pure” analysis producing numerous abstractions followed by just as “pure” synthesis, is the same kind of invention in metaphysical epistemology as the idea of induction without deduction’. By contrast, the central task of materialist dialectics is ‘the task of tracing the concrete reciprocal conditioning of phenomena creating, through interaction, a system that emerged and developed historically and still continues to develop new forms of its existence and internal interaction’. In this process: ‘the old opposition of deduction and induction is rationally sublated. . . . Deduction ceases to be a means of formal derivation of definitions contained a priori in the concept’. In this sublation, deduction and induction are themselves transformed: no longer ‘separate’ but ‘realised simultaneously as mutually assuming opposites resulting in a new and higher form of logical development – precisely through their reciprocal action’.

**Marx and Marxists on the nation**

Let us now look at how Marx applied dialectics to nationality and the nation – starting with his joint work with Engels of 1847, *The German Ideology*. This discusses nations thus:

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12 Marx 1987a, p. 390.
13 An eloquent development of this position is provided by Ilyenkov 1982, especially ‘Marx’s View of Scientific Cognition’, pp. 159–67.
14 Davidson 2002, p. 204.
17 Ilyenkov 1982, p. 162.
18 Ibid.
The relations of different nations among themselves depend upon the extent to which each has developed its productive forces, the division of labour and internal intercourse . . . the whole internal structure of the nation itself depends on the stage of development reached by its production. . . . The division of labour inside a nation leads at first to the separation of industrial and commercial from agricultural labour, and hence to the separation of town and country . . . the relative positions of these individual groups is determined by the methods employed in agriculture, industry and commerce (patriarchalism, slavery, estates, classes). These same relations are to be seen (given a more developed intercourse) in the relations of different nations to one another.19

In this section of *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels are asserting the primacy of forces and relations of production in human development. They associate the structure of a nation with the development of its productive forces and its internal division of labour, but, although treating the nation generally as a unit of politico-economic organisation, they make no specific link with capitalism as such. They next move on to discuss particular stages, patriarchal or tribal, the union of tribes, the emergence of slave society, of feudalism and the grouping of larger territories into feudal kingdoms – ‘a necessity for the feudal nobility as for the towns’.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, written later the same year, they talk of the ‘modern representative State’ as expressing the ‘exclusive political sway of the bourgeoisie’.20 They do not describe it as the ‘nation-state’ and, when they talk of nations, it is mainly in the context of old national boundaries and divisions being overcome by new productive forces of capitalism. ‘It compels nations on the pain of extinction to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves’.21 There is no suggestion that the nation is the exclusive creation of the bourgeoisie or capitalism.

The *Manifesto* also contains the famous sentence ‘the workers have no country’. This was cited in its full context in my original review. Davidson repeats the sentence in his reply and then, in place of the full quotation, 

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continues with his own indignant and sarcastic paraphrase of my own explanation. ‘Apparently’, he protests, ‘“the workers have no country” really means that the workers should have a country, that they would have one had they not been excluded from ownership by the bourgeoisie and they will have a country if they can lead the other social classes against the rulers’. The full quotation merits repetition: ‘[W]e cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is, so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word’. Davidson, who claims to write in ‘broadly Leninist categories’, should perhaps have known that Lenin also provided his own explanation of this passage:

It seems to me that you argue somehow in a somewhat one-sided and formalistic manner. You have taken one quotation from the *Communist Manifesto* (the working men have no country) and you seem to want to apply it without any reservation. The whole spirit of Marxism, its whole system, demands that each proposition should be considered a) only historically, b) only in connection with others, c) only in connection with the concrete experience of history. […] In the *Communist Manifesto* it is said that the working men have no country. Correct. But not only this is stated there. It is stated there also that when national states are being forced the role of the proletariat is somewhat special. To take the first proposition (the working men have no country) and forget its connection with the second (the workers are constituted as a class nationally, though not in the same sense as the bourgeoisie) will be exceptionally incorrect. Where, then, does the connection lie? In my opinion precisely in the fact that the democratic movement (at such a moment, in such concrete circumstances) the proletariat cannot refuse to support it (and consequent support defence of the fatherland in a national war). Marx and Engels said in the *Communist Manifesto* that working men have no country. But the same Marx called for a national war more than once. Were Marx and Engels muddlers who said one thing today and another thing tomorrow? No. In my view, admission of ‘defence of the fatherland’ in a national war fully answers the requirements of Marxism.²³

Davidson, by contrast, appears to believe that at this stage, in 1848, Marx and Engels were muddlers. He argues that, after the Paris Commune, Marx and Engels found it necessary to change their position on the nation-state. The *Manifesto*’s position had been to ‘[w]rest, by degrees all capital from the bourgeoisie . . . centralise all production in the hands of the state, i.e. of the proletariat organised as a ruling class’ and ‘only in the future’ (to use Davidson’s words) ‘destroying the state’. As expressed in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, their new position was, says Davidson, that the state should be destroyed immediately. And this, he argues, clinches the argument on the nation-state: to quote: ‘the shift from conquering to destroying the state also has implications for the “nation” prefix’.

Unfortunately, these comments only demonstrate the depth of Davidson’s own muddle. Marx and Engels changed their position on the state in the aftermath of 1848 not in the 1870s. Their new position was not that of destroying the state immediately – which would be a Bakuninist position – but smashing the bourgeois state *machine* immediately. This was the corollary of creating a new state, the proletariat organised as the ruling class, the essential instrument by which the working class would create the basis for socialism and communism. However, Davidson’s biggest muddle is over ‘the nation prefix’. The phrase ‘the national state’ as used in the *Critique* is not Marx’s own. It was the term used by the Lassallean drafters of the Gotha programme itself, a formulation to which Marx took the strongest exception. Marx himself never used the term ‘national state’ or nation-state either in the *Communist Manifesto* or in the *Critique*.

So, far from representing any shift on the nation, the *Critique*’s attack is on the Lassallean concept of ‘national state’. It reaffirms the long-held position of Marx and Engels on the need to smash the bourgeois state. It refutes Lasallean nationalism. But it also repeats and re-emphasises the 1848 position on the nation.

Marx’s formulations in the *Grundrisse* were examined in the review. All that needs to be said here is that at no point does the *Grundrisse* associate ‘nation’ exclusively with ‘capitalism’ or use the term ‘nation-state’. Marx’s texts on Poland and Ireland are also quite clear on this point and challenge

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26 Marx 1989, p. 89.
any thesis that makes nationhood and national consciousness a product of the development of a capitalist economy. Marx had no difficulty taking about an ‘Irish nation’ as existing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at a time when Ireland was overwhelmingly agrarian, had a semi- or pre-feudal landed structure and only a very small proletariat (if any), in terms of a working class decisively divorced from the land. The same would be true of Poland. But, for Marx, this did not negate their national status. ‘As long’, wrote Marx in For Poland in 1875, ‘as a viable people is fettered by a foreign conqueror, it must necessarily apply all its strength . . . against the enemy from without; for this length of time, then, its inner life remains paralysed, it remains unable to work for social emancipation. Ireland, Russia under Mongolian rule etc., provide striking proof of this thesis . . .’.

These texts also demonstrate another key aspect of Marx’s approach: his concern with the way different class forces impacted on the character of national movements. In a very detailed discussion of the eighteenth-century Irish Volunteer movement, he noted that, after 1795, ‘[t]he general popular, national and constitutional movement represented by [the Volunteers was] stripped of its merely national character and merged into a truly revolutionary movement’. Again, discussing the Fenian movement in the 1860s, Marx noted that what made it significant, in contradistinction to previous national movements in Ireland, was that it ‘“took root” only in the mass of the people, the lower orders’. In a very different context, Marx also summed up the achievement of the Paris Commune in terms strongly reminiscent of the Manifesto when he describes the Commune as ‘True representative of the healthy elements in French society and therefore the truly national government, it was at the same time as a working class government . . . emphatically international’.

It should also be noted that Marx’s correspondence both during the Commune and in the years immediately before make it abundantly clear that Marx was thoroughly contemptuous of those who dismissed the relevance of national issues on the basis of a bogus internationalism – whether under the banner of Proudhon or Bakunin.

27 Marx 1989, p. 57.
29 Marx 1985b, p. 194.
31 Marx 1987c, p. 287.
So, to sum up: as far as Marx was concerned, he saw no exclusive link between the nation and capitalism – in fact, far from it – and he did not himself use the term ‘national state’. Throughout his life, he used ‘nation’ as existing under a number of different modes of production; saw the character of any nation being inflected and transformed by its class direction; and class contradictions and nations themselves being destroyed, transformed or created in the revolutionary process of transition from one mode of production to another.

So where does Davidson’s concept of the exclusively capitalist nation come from? Kautsky is a possible candidate. He certainly used the term ‘nation-state’.

He also closely associated ‘the modern nation-state’ with capitalism as a mode of production and specifically argued that capitalist development stimulated the formation of national movements. On these grounds, he predicted the progressive break-up of multinational Tsarist and Habsburg empires. But Kautsky did not equate the nation as such with capitalism. On the contrary, he talks, as Marx did, of nations existing in precapitalist Europe and argued that national oppression occurs precisely where one nation-state prevents the further economic and social development of a pre-existing nation.

Otto Bauer might, in some respects, seem a more likely source. His 1907 work flirts with neo-Kantian methodology and begins with a section seeking to define ‘the concept of the nation’.

His ultimate definition adopts an explicitly Kantian concept of community and presents the formation of a nation as the product of such voluntary ‘community’ interactions taking place between individuals in civil society – outside and beyond state regulation – over long historic time periods. Such social and economic intercourse eventually sets up customary practices and cultures that come to be recognised as ‘national’. In so far as this definition stresses cultural and ethnographic features, and minimises the role of class forces, it was strongly criticised by both Kautsky and Lenin. Bauer – as another point of contact – was also the first Marxist to use the formulation of a ‘United States of Europe’. Bauer’s principal political thesis was that the ‘national question’ within the Habsburg empire could be resolved by the concession of cultural autonomy (rather than the right to national self-determination) and that such autonomy would indeed

permit – for a culturally defined nation – further development. With continuing internationalisation of productive forces, he sees such development on a European scale: ‘[t]his United States of Europe is not a dream but an ineluctable final outcome of the process by which nations will be brought together over a long period’.  

But, ultimately, Bauer will not do either. He saw nations as a developing over very long time periods – long before capitalism – and his approach is, in Löwy’s words, ‘strongly historicist’. Trotsky picked up the slogan of a ‘United States of Europe’ from Bauer and also draws on his culturalist concept of nationality. In *The War and the International* (1914), Trotsky argued that the War marked the end of nations. The War itself was the product of productive forces being internationalised beyond national boundaries, creating contradiction with existing state structures and therefore forcing states to seek to expand in step. The outcome would be a new political framework in which nations would only subsist as ‘cultural, ideological and psychological’ phenomena. Similarly, in ‘The Nation and the Economy’ (1915), he projects the slogan of a ‘republican United States of Europe’. This would be the postcapitalist political framework in which the national question would be resolved and nations co-exist on a non-antagonistic basis. But, again, Trotsky made no narrow equation between the nation and capitalism and largely adopted Bauer’s historicist approach to the formation of nations. Lenin savaged Trotsky’s slogan of a United States of Europe as imperialist economism.

From the standpoint of the economic conditions of – i.e., the export of capital and the division of the world by the ‘advanced’ and ‘civilised’ colonial powers – a United States of Europe, under capitalism, is either impossible or reactionary. . . . Of course, temporary agreements are possible between capitalists and states. In this sense a United States of Europe is possible as an agreement between the European capitalists . . . but to what end! Only for the purpose of jointly suppressing socialism in Europe, of jointly protecting colonial booty against America and Japan. . . . On the present economic basis, i.e. under capitalism, a united States of Europe would signify an organisation of reaction to retard America’s more rapid development.

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38 Lenin 1972b, pp. 339–43.
In place of cultural autonomy, Lenin championed the right of nations to self-determination. This, he argued, was the only consistent Marxist approach to the national question. Lenin certainly associated the nation-state with capitalism. Yet, he also saw nations as developing through precapitalist stages. Unlike Bauer and Trotsky, however, he – like Marx – gave a central role to class forces in the determination of national culture.\(^{39}\) The concrete historical analysis of this development was, for Lenin, a precondition for the political engagement of the working class with the national question.\(^{40}\) So Lenin is an even more unlikely candidate than Bauer or Trotsky. By default, we have to return to Weber.

The key characteristic of Davidson’s approach is his conceptualisation of the nation and nationhood as the exclusive product of capitalism. This conceptualisation is central to the Weberian school. Given Weber’s requirement for logically consistent definitions (and also his implicit value assumptions), he had no alternative but to draw a sharp distinction between the capitalist nation and anything that went before. His definition of capitalism was founded on rationality. Free relations between educated, rationally acting individuals was the prerequisite for resource accumulation and economic progress. Protestant values and the end of authoritarianism, customary practice and superstition were both the ideological complement and ultimate cause. At the same time, Weber saw the modern nation-state, as an ideal type, being the political apogee of such social development and the embodiment of these values. Implicitly, this was represented for Weber by the secular, developmental German state of the 1900s, shorn of its aristocratic trappings. To introduce ethnicity or any precapitalist type of nationality would be to break the logical consistency of these definitions. Ethnicity represented atavistic and pre-rational forms of social behaviour. For Weber, therefore, modern nationality had to be quite distinct. Gellner, Breuilly and Anderson all broadly share these presuppositions. In so far as modern nations do create their own precapitalist pedigrees, these are ‘imagined’ or artificial historical constructions.

Davidson clearly does not like being characterised as a Weberian. But, if he follows Weber’s methodology rather than Marx’s, if he seeks ‘rigorous’, non-dialectical definitions and if his definition of the nation matches the

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\(^{39}\) Lenin 1972a, p. 24.

\(^{40}\) Lenin, 1972c, especially ‘Marxism and Prudhonism on the National Question’, p. 149.
Weberian in all respects, then it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he is, on this matter, a Weberian. This is not to condemn his approach for this reason. Much valuable analysis has been contributed by the Weberian school. It is, however, to question Davidson’s assertion that, for a Marxist, there is no other legitimate approach. Our discussion of Marx’s own approach should have made it abundantly clear that he did not exclude the existence of nations prior to full capitalist development. And, correspondingly, there would seem to be no a priori reason why Marxists should preclude the existence of a Scottish nation before 1707.

The dialectics of history and one-sided approaches

In my review, tribute was paid to aspects of Davidson’s analysis of Scottish history in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – particularly his discussion of the Scottish involvement in empire and the changing relationship of the Highland population to the British state. Strong reservations were, however, expressed about his account of Scottish society before 1707 and his handling of economic and cultural development thereafter. In particular, exception was taken to his assertion that capitalism did not develop in Scotland until after 1745, and for this reason there was not, and could not have been, a truly ‘national’ consciousness before that date. Correspondingly, it was argued that Davidson was wrong to claim that the ‘historical account’ of a Scottish nation as existing before 1707 was the ‘imagined’ construction of the emergent bourgeois intelligentsia from the 1760s onwards.

The logic of Davidson’s position is indeed fully in accord with the Weberian ideal type. If there was no capitalism, there could be no nationhood. But it is exceedingly difficult to make this perspective match the evidence. Davidson himself seems to sense this when dealing with the events of 1707. In his first chapter he poses the question ‘If the Scottish nation didn’t exist before the Act of Union then what was it that was “united” with England?’. He responds:

the answer is, of course, the Scottish state – and historically, states have no more always embodied nations than nations have always sought to be embodied in states. . . . I will argue that a Scottish nation did not exist in 1320, nor in 1560, nor yet in 1707 . . . it follows then that the Scottish national consciousness we know today could not have been preserved by institutions carried over from the pre-Union period, but arose after the Union and a as a result of the Union.
But, then, on page 62, Davidson has to confront that evidence that much of the opposition to the Union came from the ordinary people of Edinburgh:

The crowds who rioted outside the Parliament during the ratification of the Treaty were provoked not by concern for the Scottish state which had failed them so badly but by a concern for the Scottish society in which they experienced not just oppression but also the things that made their lives half bearable. Their ‘nationalism’ was a reaction to the specific ways in which the Treaty threatened to weaken the social fabric.

However, previously on page 28, he presents us with a chronology for the development of national consciousness across Europe as a whole. According to the chronology, national consciousness originates within the ‘most advanced economic groups’ associated with the transition to capitalism up to 1688 in the Netherlands and England, is then subject to geographical extension in the period up to 1789 to new areas (such as France and the United States), and only after 1789 is it subject to social diffusion and ‘national consciousness begins to emerge in the social classes below the rulers of the new nation states’. To be fair to Davidson, he does previously admit that ‘the Lowlands were in the process of developing a sense of nationhood by the latter date [1707] but this was a process from which the Highlands were largely excluded and which was in any event cut short by the Treaty’. Nonetheless, even this caveat only magnifies the contradiction.

To stay with the Union for a moment. Davidson’s treatment of the historical evidence exemplifies another characteristic of his approach: this is his extreme selectivity. His thesis is that the main issue at stake in the negotiations was the preservation of the institutions of a feudal Scottish state – plus the fear by the Edinburgh ‘crowd’ that they would have to pay more for salt. He quotes one pamphleteer, James Hodge. He concedes that Hodge’s points on the Scottish Church convey ‘some sense of national identity based on cultural and social distinction’ but then argues that he talks about the Scottish nation in precisely the ‘ahistorical, racial terms with which we are familiar from both the Declaration of Arbroath and Stair’s Institutions’. This term ‘racial’ is important for Davidson because it fits the Weberian ideal type of atavistic ethnicity rather than rational nationhood.

But is it really appropriate? Hodge’s pamphlet was one of many written at the time and, at least as preserved in the Glasgow University Library, is bound together with Daniel Defoe’s series of six pamphlets on the Union
Treaty. Defoe wrote these anonymously as negotiations proceeded in Edinburgh in order to win over key sections of opinion. Defoe, who was funded for this purpose by the English government, dealt in sequence with the main opposition pamphlets as they were published and with the opposition debaters in Parliament. Davidson makes no mention of this material – although it would seem to be highly relevant to identifying the main issues in contention at the time. Nowhere does Defoe make any mention of the preservation of feudal dues – for Davidson, the key characteristic of the feudal and aristocratic Scottish state as incorporated in 1707. The great bulk of each pamphlet is taken up with three issues: civil government, the religious settlement and, above all, the advantages of trade to be derived from the Union. In his letters back to Robert Harley, his paymaster in London, Defoe mentions Hodge’s pamphlet as listing thirty-two conflicting interests. Defoe also stresses the intensity of the opposition and worries incessantly about the lack of sufficient military support. He sees the main hope for avoiding a military clash as an exploitation of the divisions between the Cameronians of the South and West and Episcopalian Jacobites in Edinburgh and the north and east – and the fact that the Scottish clergy, ‘hardened, refractory and terrible people’, would probably stop short of an open challenge. Yet, throughout, his main endeavour as a pamphleteer is to refute claims that an Incorporating Union would destroy trade and undermine employment. It would, on the contrary, Defoe told the Scottish people, promote the import of ‘general stores, building of ships, exporting your own growth and importing foreign goods and how many families will immediately follow such employments . . . the only way to redeem them from the poverty and misery the present want of trade has reduced them to . . .’ Six of Defoe’s pamphlets were issued as sequential parts of a work entitled ‘An Essay at Removing National Prejudice’.

The selectivity of Davidson’s approach continues, as far as the Act of Union is concerned, with his treatment of its intellectually most able opponent, Fletcher of Saltoun. He quotes Fletcher only once. This is on another issue altogether: the backwardness of the Highlands. Davidson makes no mention of why and how Fletcher opposed the Act of Security or the Act of Union. Fletcher was, in fact, not the slightest bit concerned with the preservation of

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41 Defoe 1706a, and 1706b.
43 Defoe 1706b, Part III, p. 35.
the privileges of aristocratic landlords. On the contrary, his objective was to create conditions for the full development of a commercial society – of which the break-up of large landed estates was one precondition. Fletcher spent a significant part of his life in Holland and France and was associated with English radical exiles of the 1680s. He opposed the concentration of power, stressed the Scottish tradition of the armed freeholder and took much of his political theory from Machiavelli – although, at points, his arguments are also strongly reminiscent of Spinoza and Mandeville. As one of the architects of the Darien project, Fletcher’s principal preoccupation was with the accumulation of capital and the use of state power to do so. His objection to the 1707 Union was that it would lead to the permanent subjection of Scottish trade and manufacture to English competitors.44

Davidson’s strangely selective use of evidence continues throughout his historical chapters. A key plank in Davidson’s argument against the existence of any form of national consciousness before 1707 is what he claims to be the division of the Scottish landmass into two socially and ethnically quite separate parts, the Highlands and the Lowlands. He does make reference to David Stevenson’s magisterial treatment of this subject, *Alasdair MacColla and the Highland Problem in the Seventeenth Century*.45 But he does not tell his readers the main thesis of this book. This is that the distinction between High- land and Lowland was historically a very recent phenomenon; that it largely arose from the crisis of the Scottish state over the previous century and that, even so, ‘in basic social structure the two parts of Scotland were surprisingly alike’.46 Similarly, Davidson draws evidence on the economic backwardness of seventeenth-century Scotland from Saville and Stevenson. But he only makes passing reference to the contention of both authors that this emphasis has been overdone, focuses too much on the economic crisis of the 1690s and ignores a culture of entrepreneurship and education that was not markedly inferior to that of England.47

In his discussion of the bourgeois creation of a Scottish history in the period after 1760, Davidson refers to the work of Kidd, Finlay and Brims.48 What he does not do is confront their contention that this invention of a bourgeois

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44 Robertson 1997.
45 Stevenson 1980.
46 Stevenson 1980, p. 16.
47 Stevenson 1997; Saville 1999.
history represented an attempt to combat an existing anti-bourgeois history – the popular understandings of national identity that were demotic and democratic, which justified rebellion and which, in a period of rapid proletarianisation, were becoming increasingly dangerous. Nor does he note the fact that the attempt to combat the plebeian tradition failed. Whether in terms of Scott’s romanticisation of an aristocratic Highland Scotland or the glorification of a Protestant, Teutonic Lowlands, the invented histories did not displace pre-existing popular understandings of Scottish history. In the same section, Davidson cites comments by James Hogg on a visit to the Highlands. He does so to demonstrate the prevalence of backward-looking Jacobite sympathies. But he makes no mention at all of Hogg’s greatest work, Confessions of a Justified Sinner. This was written specifically to challenge Scott’s artful and destructive caricature of the Covenanting and Cameronian tradition in Old Mortality. It relies for its effect precisely on this existing historical knowledge and its ability to play out the contradictions of the two traditions: the douce, élitist rationalism of the bourgeoisie and the wild, eccentric rebellion of the disenfranchised.  

Perhaps the strangest example of Davidson’s selectivity is more conceptual. He refers at some length in his discussion of the development of nation-states to the sequential crises of feudal society in the fourteenth and again, in different form, in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He does so generally for Europe. But Scotland’s experience is not considered. In these crises, populations fell by as much as forty per cent and whole regions suffered radical de-urbanisation and severe economic retrogression. In some cases, such as northern Italy, Flanders and Bohemia, this retrogression was focussed on areas that had previously moved closest to capitalist forms of production and where the struggle between different class forces was most acute. Scotland was never remotely in this category. It was, however, as I have argued elsewhere, powerfully affected by its peripheral position within these processes. It was, in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, second only to England in terms of the proportionate conversion of its agriculture to the production of wool as a cash crop – a process which Marx saw as of great significance for the break-up of the feudal order. Scotland did not move on, as England did, to the manufacture of cloth using quasi-free labour. Nor did it experience anything like the same level of rural proletarianisation. Yet aspects of its social

development were transformed. The relative size of the east coast towns, the wealth of their merchant élites, the transformation of land tenure in the south and west, the introduction of Roman law, the very early creation of universities, the density of contact with the commercial centres of northern Europe and the vigour of the Renaissance and Reformation intellectual activity – Buchanan, Melville, Napier – all stand witness. None of this protected Scottish society from the progressive collapse of European markets from the late sixteenth century and through the seventeenth. But it does explain the extraordinarily contradictory character of the political responses in the seventeenth century. The temporary ability of socially radical Presbyterian forces to seize the political initiative several times between the 1560s and the 1650s is inexplicable unless one analyses the far-reaching but incomplete and unsustainable transformation of the material base of Scottish society. Davidon minimises these developments. He focuses on the impoverishment and depopulation of the 1690s, the relative resurgence of landowner power and – as in some other parts of Europe – the tendency to feudal absolutism. His intent, no doubt, is to fit Scotland into the procrustean bed of Weberian categories. No capitalism, no nation. It is, however, an endeavour that, for Marxists, is quite unnecessary.

Does it matter?

My disagreement with Davidson might seem simply semantic – especially as both Davidson and myself agree that current calls for an independent Scotland, though quite legitimate, do not reflect the wider class interests of working people in either Scotland or Britain. Does it matter, therefore, if Davidson wants to describe as Marxist an approach that is actually Weberian? Or if, by applying it, he claims that a Scottish nation did not exist before 1707?

In practice, it does matter. A great deal. The two approaches have quite different consequences for the effectiveness, direction and success of working-class politics in the current world. The present phase of far more active imperialist aggression makes the national character of the working-class response of vital importance – both in terms of creating alliances to block US imperial dominance and avoiding the redevelopment of chauvinist national politics at the same time. Nationalism remains a potent and potentially destructive

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50 This is explored further in Foster 1980, pp. 19–62.
force. The question of how national politics relate to working-class politics is therefore a critical one.

Davidson’s approach allows no scope for an analysis of the interconnections. For him, ‘working-class consciousness’ and ‘national consciousness’ are conceptually totally separate and opposed. Nationhood embodies the economic, political and social needs of a capitalist economy. In terms of subjective meaning, national consciousness involves the worker in identifying in non-class terms, as a citizen, with a ‘neutral’ state that is therefore totally imbued with bourgeois class values. As such, national consciousness denies class consciousness and is, in turn, a device by which workers are actively divided, nationally and internationally, and mobilised politically for the ends of the capitalist class.\textsuperscript{51} For Davidson, the lessons for today are clear. In his reply, he talks of a past internationalism ‘lost with the formation of national labour movements’ which is currently being ‘rebuilt in double-sided rejection of the market order’. On the one hand, this is being reforged by international trade-union solidarity with workers in one country supporting those in another under the same multinational firm. On the other, ‘the wave of demonstrations against the institutions of global capital in Seattle, Washington, Melbourne, Prague . . . show the rebirth of a movement which sees international capitalism as the enemy and organises on an international basis to oppose it’.

Yet, Davidson’s ‘double-sided’ understanding of internationalism is, in fact, single-sided. It is solely those actions that are organised across national boundaries against ‘global’ or ‘international capitalism’ that merit the term ‘international’. Lenin put the other side of the equation in 1916: ‘He is not an internationalist who vows and swears by internationalism. Only he is an internationalist who in a really internationalist way combats his own bourgeoisie, his own social chauvinists’.\textsuperscript{52} And, again, in 1917: ‘[t]here is one, and only one, kind of internationalism and this is – working wholeheartedly for the development of the revolutionary movement and the revolutionary struggle \textit{in one’s own country} . . .’.\textsuperscript{53} That, of course, was ninety years ago, and Davidson would doubtless object that, since then, the internationalisation of capitalist forces of production has moved on to a qualitatively new level. But any analysis of the opposition to war in 2003 teaches the same lessons. What

\textsuperscript{51} Davidson 2000.
\textsuperscript{52} Lenin 1972d, p. 206.
\textsuperscript{53} Lenin 1972e, p. 75.
mattered was the purchase which opponents secured within ‘their own’ political systems and the way the balance of forces in each country impacted in particular governments. Nowhere was this more so than in Britain. Everything depended on how far the political base of the pro-imperialist governing clique could be eroded and destroyed by mobilisation within the trade-union movement and the Labour Party. In the short run, this was not enough, by roughly thirty parliamentary votes, to change policies – although it might have been had the Left previously given as much attention to the Labour Party and trade-union structures as had the agencies of the British state. In the long run, however, the development of anti-imperialism inside the labour movement will be of profound importance for working-class politics in Britain. Davidson’s internationalism by-passes this national level of struggle. The consequence, in 2003 no less than 1916, is to weaken and not strengthen the international front against imperialist aggression.

So what is the alternative? The views of Marx and Lenin have been cited earlier. For them, it was critically important to make a concrete and historical analysis of how particular class forces moulded national cultures and institutions. Only in this way was it possible to expose and combat reactionary and anti-democratic trends and draw upon progressive elements. The significance of the work of Bromley in the 1960s was to reassert and develop this analysis after a long period in which the one-sided formulations of Stalin had been dominant. Bromley’s perspective is not to see ‘the nation’ as existing indestructibly and unchanged across history. It is, on the contrary, to see ethnic/national formations as being constantly re-created and modified (and on occasion destroyed) as modes of production change and as different class forces strive for primacy. It exemplifies a dialectical understanding of historical processes – one which Davidson clearly finds incompatible with his implicit and possibly unconscious Weberian procedures.54

As we have noted, Davidson sees any form of national identity as an obstacle to working-class consciousness. His study of Scottish nationhood seeks to demonstrate that any espousal of Scottish separatism is for socialists a diversion which has no historical justification. But, for Davidson, the residual British identity is no better. Because it represents the actual, historically-based

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54 Bromley 1974; the discussion of Bromley’s work is developed further in Foster 1989, and Foster 2002.
embodiment of capitalist national values, it is also the main barrier to internationalism and genuine class consciousness. In sum, Davidson’s position comes down to a variant of a very familiar slogan: neither Edinburgh nor Westminster but international solidarity. This formalistic approach is, in fact, profoundly disabling. It obscures the key contradictions facing the British ruling class and the specific national tasks which arise for the working-class movement today.

This is not the place to examine these contradictions in detail, but it is nonetheless necessary to examine their implications for the national question. To summarise rather drastically, the contradictions derive from the weakness of British finance capital: the weakness of its productive base, its external dependence on other imperialist powers, notably the United States and, most of all, its political weakness. This is the key change. The clearest indicator is the speed with which radically different styles of rule have been tried and abandoned over the past thirty years. In the process, the Conservative Party has been largely wrecked as a vehicle for electoral mobilisation and, already, New Labour appears badly damaged. In objective terms, these difficulties go back directly to economic weakness. In its fight for international survival, British finance capital has been forced to attack salaried employees as much as manual workers – rapidly eroding its main pre-existing social base. It is the realisation that this process can only intensify that has brought finance capital to do something of profound significance for the character of the British state. This is to effectively repudiate the democratic content conceded to parliamentary institutions eighty years ago. The process has a number of different aspects – including the strengthening of an already highly centralised governmental executive and an increase in the level of formal and informal interpenetration with finance capital. However, its central characteristic is a new type of involvement with the European Union that decisively limits Britain’s democracy.

In this process, the appearance of democracy remains: a House of Commons elected by democratic suffrage. What is lost is the content. In terms of the class essence of the democracy fought for prior to 1918, parliament loses the legal ability to limit the freedom of capital and to legislate for the types of macro-economic and industrial intervention that had formed the basis of previous left alliances. The changes are, naturally, not presented in these terms. They are explained as the economically inevitable product of globalisation, a characteristic of late modernity and the ‘hollowing out’ of the nation-state. In fact, what is being hollowed out is not the nation-state. It is
its democratic content – precisely in order to strengthen the grip of the capitalist state at the level of the nation. Power is not being transferred in any direct way. The role of the European Union (EU) is essentially negative: to block certain types of policy. For Britain’s transnational banks and companies, HSBC, British Petroleum, Shell, British Aerospace, British state power remains the indispensable basis for their operations. The EU serves to insulate it from democratic challenge and remove the political focus for any anti-monopoly mobilisation.\footnote{Griffiths 2003.}

Nonetheless, as a stratagem for maintaining capitalist rule, it is also very risky. Any attack on democracy threatens to expose the inherently contradictory relationship within bourgeois democracy between democratic institutions and the capitalist state apparatus. Worse still, it does so in a way that engages with national identity in class terms. It attacks a core element of progressive national identity: what has been achieved by working people in Britain, collectively, in securing some measure of democratic control over their society and its economy. And it does so, visibly, to strengthen the grip of the British state as an instrument of capitalist and imperialist exploitation. This is why the question of redefining Britain’s identity has also become a critical issue for those who rule on behalf of finance capital. The Conservatives, who initiated the key EU treaties (and who have been known to boast that they outlaw socialist policies), have encouraged a chauvinist redefinition of ‘British’ values against those of other imperialist powers in Europe. New Labour’s ‘Cool Britannia’ represents Britain in Europe ‘with the United States’ re-invigorated as a world power. And, in the slipstream of these reassertions of an imperialist British identity, come even more dangerous racist and fascist variants.

Hence, the issue of national identity at British level is one that the working-class movement has to take up – otherwise others will certainly do it for them. And, in opposing such chauvinist identities, the working-class movement has to combine two areas of historical understanding. One is a class understanding of the British state: that in acting as an instrument for the ruling class it oppresses many component nationalities and ethnicities. The other is a knowledge of how this oppression has been resisted: both specifically within particular nationalities and collectively on a class basis. Only by combining the two can the working class in Britain become ‘national, though not in the
bourgeois sense of the word’ and equip itself to defeat British imperialism on its own territory. This is why materialist history is important. There has to be a class analysis of the experience of each national component that exposes its relationship to capitalist and imperialist exploitation and its traditions of resistance and revolt. Each experience will be specific. Each will be anchored in real memories – and each will need to be argued against versions that block wider class involvement and understanding. In sum, the development of a socialist and democratic identity at a British level is indissolubly tied to a class understanding of oppression at the level of component nationalities. And, correspondingly, action to defend the class content of democracy at British level, and defeat the strengthening grip of finance capital, is a precondition for overcoming those oppressions. As was noted in the review of Davidson, there are some analogies to the theoretical approach sketched out by Hoffman and Mzala in 1990 in analysing the national tasks then facing the liberation movement in an imperialist, racist and ethnicised South Africa. No national or ethnic tradition could be ignored. To do so would be to place weapons in the hands of the enemy. But their real history had to be told – however difficult the challenges.

In establishing the real history of the Scottish people, much of the material that Davidson has uncovered will be of value. But his theoretical approach will not. It denies the class dimension of national identity – and, in its application, cripples the telling of the story.

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Reviewed by Paul Wetherly

Debating the Third Way

What, if anything, does the ‘Third Way’ offer that is of interest or value to the Left? The answer to the question is complicated by the fact that, despite (or, perhaps, because of) its recent origins, the ‘Third Way’ comprises ‘not one road but many’.

1 In his introduction to The Global Third Way Debate, Giddens refers to the ‘Third Way’ not as a single model but ‘a much more generic series of endeavours . . . to restructure leftist doctrines’ and ‘a broad ideological stream with several tributaries owing into it’ (p. 2). In Where Now for New Labour?, Giddens similarly acknowledges that ‘there are a variety of Third Ways rather than a single one, since countries have different political traditions . . . ’ (p. 4). The variety within the ‘Third Way’ can be approached analytically in terms of ‘competing philosophical positions’,

2 but it also stems from there being different national and party variants. Giddens claims that the ‘Third-Way’ debate ‘is a worldwide phenomenon . . . [and] . . . almost all centre-left parties have restructured their doctrines in response to it’ (Where Now?, p. 3) and emphasises both the global reach of the ‘Third Way’ and its ideological coherence. However, both of these claims are open to question. It is certainly true that rethinking and repositioning among centre-left parties has been something of a worldwide phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s, and the ‘Third-Way’ debate has been marked by some high-level international summits and declarations (notably the Blair-Schröder joint declaration, 1999). However,

1 White 1998.
it is less clear that ‘there is an overall political orientation and policy programme emerging’ as Giddens claims (Debate, p. 3), that is a coherent ideological framework or narrow conception of the ‘Third Way’. Rather, the common aim to ‘restructure leftist doctrines’ seems to involve a rather broad concept. Further, many centre-left parties in Europe never embraced the ‘Third Way’ (although Giddens suggests they have done so under different labels) and, in any event, the political landscape of Europe, has shifted again since the ‘magical return of social democracy’ in the 1990s (Cuperus & Kandel, quoted in Where Now?, p. 7). Today, the ‘Third Way’ is most closely associated with the thinking and policies of New Labour in the UK, whose second term Blair declared as ‘Third Way, Phase Two’. Giddens’s own work, closely associated with New Labour, is foremost among attempts to set out a coherent framework for the ‘Third Way’. This article reviews some central aspects of the debate on the ‘Third Way’ within the Left, using as a starting point Giddens’s most recent books and Callinicos’s forceful critique Against the Third Way.

According to Giddens, the ‘Third Way’ is an updated version of social democracy that remains ‘unequivocally a politics of the left’ on account of the core values it upholds. In particular, ‘to be on the left is to . . . have a commitment to equality’ (Debate, p. 5). It is an updated version of social democracy because it embraces new means to realise these values. The defining claim of the ‘Third Way’ is that ‘Leftist parties are being forced to pioneer something new, since the core doctrines of socialism are no longer applicable’ (Debate, p. 2), that is, they no longer work. More specifically, the ‘death of socialism’ (the ‘first way’ in both its variants – old-style social democracy and the planned economies) is characterised in terms of its failure as ‘a theory of the managed economy’ (Debate, p. 2) and ‘system of economic management’. Since socialism has passed away, the new means must recognise as a fundamental constraint that there are no alternatives to capitalism. The underlying problem for socialism, and the reason its ‘core doctrines’ will not work any longer, is that it has been left behind by social change. ‘Third way politics is about how left of centre parties should respond to . . . transformations which are altering the landscape of politics – globalization, the emergence of the knowledge economy, and profound changes in people’s everyday lives’ (Debate, p. 3). Thus, a full critical assessment of the ‘Third Way’ needs to examine these three elements and the connections between them: (i) a theory of social change; (ii) the identification of means appropriate to the new social conditions that we encounter; and (iii) the values that the means are intended to realise. These elements are connected in the following formula: constancy in values in the face of radically altered social conditions requires novelty in means.

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Critical reactions to the ‘Third Way’ on the Left fall into three rough categories. Each rejects the claim of the ‘Third Way’ to represent a genuine overhaul and updating of social democracy, but suggests a different appraisal of its real political character. First, the idea of a ‘Third Way’ may be rejected on the basis, as Callinicos puts it, that it is ‘so vague and slippery’ (pp. 3-4). The extreme version of this view is that it is not worthwhile debating the ‘Third Way’ since it lacks substance and coherence. The second view argues that the rhetoric of modernisation conceals more-or-less the ‘same old story’ of right-wing Labour politics. What is different in the current situation is that the Right has been able to strengthen its position in the party and the Left has been marginalised. The third view is that the ‘Third Way’ does represent a genuine break with the past, but in the form of a betrayal rather than updating of social democracy. It is not just new means that are at stake but, crucially, values as well. In other words, the ‘Third Way’ rejects the whole programme of social democracy and the idea of the ‘good society’ for which it stands. As Giddens acknowledges, the most common version of this critique is that the ‘Third Way’ represents, not a move beyond Left and Right, but a straightforward shift to the right and, more specifically, a continuation of neoliberalism. It should be added that these interpretations of the political character of the ‘Third Way’ – ‘same old story’ or ‘shift to the right’ – are compatible with quite diverse views as to the nature and impact of processes of social and economic change.

Callinicos’s argument Against the Third Way rejects all of its central planks – a new world, the death of socialism, and updated social democracy. Central aspects of the theory of social change are accepted by Callinicos – particularly that globalisation has increased (p. 23) – but he rejects the claim that we are, consequently, living in a new world. The world has not changed in fundamental respects and this means, most importantly, that it is still shaped by a capitalist economy. In this context, the principal purpose of Callinicos’s book is to reassert the relevance in today’s world of an anticapitalist perspective. This is a perspective that not only has criticisms of capitalism but holds out the prospect of its transformation. Hence, Callinicos rejects ‘a political project that amounts to the abandonment of any challenge to global capitalism’ (p. viii) and its basic premise – the death of socialism. Finally, Callinicos rejects the claim of the ‘Third Way’ to update social democracy, or to offer anything of value to the Left (p. 121). The affirmation of socialist values is dismissed as ‘a kind of . . . “caring” veneer’ that conceals the ‘inner truth’ of the ‘Third Way’ (p. 65). This inner truth is that the ‘Third Way’ is, in Perry Anderson’s phrase, ‘the best ideological shell of neoliberalism today’ (p. 8), standing for ‘the relentless commodification of the world’ (p. 65) and thus merely ‘an ideological façade behind which capitalism continues on its brutal and destructive path’ (p. 120).

Callinicos’s criticisms of the ‘Third Way’ are essentially correct but overstated. The ‘Third Way’ may be seen as a degeneration rather than a renewal of social democracy,
but it is not just a continuation of neoliberalism. Callinicos’s assessment points up one side of the ‘Third Way’, but a more nuanced assessment is called for. The embrace of markets is certainly a fundamental aspect of the ‘Third Way’ – and where the neoliberal tag gets its purchase – and the core social-democratic aspiration to ‘tame’ capitalism and subordinate the market to the collective assertion of the common good is consequently profoundly weakened. Still, the ‘Third Way’ is not, in fact, a free-market ideology and it maintains criticisms of capitalism that distinguish it from neoliberalism. Related to this, there is more to the debate on values within the ‘Third Way’ than Callinicos acknowledges. Again, this is not to say that the values are not substantially weakened – they are – but they do amount to more than a veneer or façade.

Callinicos’s dismissal of the ‘Third Way’ is, of course, fuelled by his reassertion of a revolutionary-socialist perspective. The belief that the transformation of capitalism is not only necessary but also feasible leaves little point or interest in a more mixed or balanced assessment of the ‘Third Way’. But, here too, Callinicos’s case is overstated. Giddens and Callinicos both tend to polarise the debate about the nature and potential of socialist politics. For Giddens, the death of socialism in both its revolutionary and classical social-democratic guises leaves the ‘Third Way’ as the only way forward. Against this, socialists do need to criticise the deformities of the ‘Third Way’ (such as its market zeal) and argue for alternative and more authentic forms of socialist politics. Callinicos, on the other hand, polarises the debate by rejecting all forms of reformist politics in favour of a revolutionary anticapitalist commitment. Indeed, although the ‘Third Way’ is rejected as an abandonment of social democracy in favour of neoliberalism (p. 123), it is not clear that a more authentic social democracy would much interest Callinicos. For, although ‘the bankruptcy of the Third Way is not . . . equivalent to the death of social democracy’ (p. 124) nevertheless ‘reformism of a more traditional kind’ (p. 123) does not have any prospect of a fulfilled life. This is because ‘confronted by . . . limits [set by the imperatives of capitalist reproduction], the movement will have to choose between abandoning its attempt to achieve a fairer and more humane world or seeking the removal of the system itself’ (p. 124). But, if the removal of the system is not in fact feasible in the foreseeable future, or within a timescale that is relevant to those currently living who are suffering capitalism’s brutal and destructive effects, then a more active exploration of the achievements made possible by traditional reformism is necessary. In the present situation, this should include identifying and seeking to strengthen those aspects of ‘Third-Way’ thought that do maintain a link with social democracy, and building on the ‘more bencent measures’ that are acknowledged in passing but not elaborated by Callinicos.

The main focus of Callinicos’s argument is ‘the theory and practice of New Labour in Britain’ (p. 10). This includes not only the speeches and pronouncements of UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and senior ministers, but also New-Labour intellectuals
such as, in particular, Giddens. This focus is justified by the very explicit and ‘aggressive’ promotion of the ‘Third Way’, coupled with New Labour’s dominance of parliament. ‘The case of New Labour thus offers an opportunity to analyse the purported renewal of social democracy in a chemically pure form’ (p. 10). However, although it is correct to see New Labour as the exemplar of the ‘Third Way’, it is also important not to overemphasise the unity and coherence involved but to recognise some of the tensions and inconsistencies. Some of these tensions arise within the government and the Party from the fact that the ‘Third Way’ remains contested. But others arise from the manner in which governments are always pushed and pulled from their professed ideological anchors by external pressures. This means that New Labour in practice must be distinguished from the ‘Third Way’ in theory. Finally, Blair’s statements of the ‘Third Way’ are not in all respects in line with those of Giddens. In some ways, Giddens’s thought remains closer to classical social democracy than Blair’s. The tensions within ‘Third-Way’ thought can be shown briefly in relation to the analysis of capitalism and its class divisions, and the idea of equality. In both cases, it can be seen that the ‘Third Way’ is not a simple continuation of neoliberalism.

Giddens argues that socialism has ‘passed away’ and, in consequence, that there is no alternative to capitalism. These claims provide the underlying rationale for the Third Way, but they are put forward by Giddens in a rather peremptory manner as though self-evidently true. Callinicos refutes these claims, but his arguments, too, are rather limited. A discussion of Giddens’s claims can begin by noting that there is some ambiguity in the meaning of the term socialism and of its passing away. Socialism may refer to a set of values and/or a socio-economic system. When Giddens declares socialism is no more he means ‘socialism’ as an alternative form of society to capitalism, yet it lives on as a set of values that the Third Way is supposed to uphold. The death of socialism refers to the two dominant variants that were attempted and failed in the last century – social democracy in the West and Communism in the East. (More strictly, Giddens’s argument is that these variants did work in their own time, that is the epoch of simple modernisation, but cannot work in the new conditions of recentive modernisation). This argument is misapplied to the social-democratic variant since this was never really conceived as a wholesale alternative to capitalism (except in the indefinite long haul) but more as an alternative model of capitalism. It was supposed to realise socialist values within an essentially capitalist economy, which is precisely what the ‘Third Way’ is supposed to be trying to do. So ‘social democracy’ has not passed away but is capable of being ‘renewed’. Whether the values are intact remains to be considered.

But it is as an alternative form of society to capitalism that socialism has, says Giddens, passed away. No alternative is available either in the sense of being able to specify what the contours of such an alternative might be or, more especially, in the sense of there being a political movement capable of bringing it into existence. These
two aspects are closely related in that the alternative society, socialism, arises from a political movement based on the interests of the working class. Thus, in Giddens’s analysis, the decline of the working class is an essential claim (though, even if the working class had not declined, Giddens’s argument is that the socialist alternative to capitalism is no longer workable in second-phase modernisation). Put simply, there is no longer a class interest around which a viable socialist politics can be constructed. This applies not only to revolutionary socialism but to old-style social democracy – ‘social democratic parties no longer have a consistent “class bloc”’.

Giddens’s discussion of the class structure is remarkably brief given its importance within his overall argument. The central claim is that ‘now that its traditional base of support, the working class, has shrunk so much, to come even close to government any left-of-centre party must appeal to a wide cross-class constituency’ (Where Now?, p. 11). This means that sticking to an ‘old left’ agenda is no longer compatible with achieving electoral success. In Giddens’s analysis, this claim is closely connected to two others that are logically distinct: that ‘the majority of voters in all Western democracies are now politically “dealigned”’ – they have no clear and continuing commitment to any party’ (Where Now?, p. 12), and the emergence of post-materialist values and ‘life politics’ associated with ‘new individualism’. These claims raise big theoretical and empirical questions that are beyond the scope of this review, but some untangling can be achieved.

There are essentially two, related, issues in the decline of class thesis: the character of capitalism as a class society with an enduring class division between capitalists and workers, and the salience of class division for political mobilisation and support. The claim that the working class has ‘shrunk so much’ is, of course, based on the conventional concept of blue-collar, or manual, occupations concentrated in the manufacturing sector (Debate, p. 4). This shift does matter to the extent that, as Giddens observes, the blue-collar working class ‘has been the main focus of traditional leftist politics’ (Giddens, Debate, p. 4). But the decline of a particular, historically rooted, idea and experience of the working class is not the same as the decline of the working class per se. As Callinicos argues, the distinction between manual and non-manual, or manufacturing and service, occupations ‘is of little use analytically because it does not register differences in . . . the relations of production . . . [in the form of] . . . different positions in the structure of economic power at work and on the labour market’ (pp. 31–2). In this Marxist sense, class remains the basic organising principle of capitalist societies, in conditions of ‘re-exive modernisation’ as much as in ‘simple modernisation’. Indeed capitalist relations of production have been extended through globalisation and neoliberal policies of re-commodification. From this it follows that there is still a class interest around which a viable socialist politics might be constructed.

7 Giddens 1998, p. 23.
8 See also Giddens 1998, p. 20; 2000, p. 43.
It is clear that parties and movements of the Left that were historically rooted in particular class formations have found it difficult to adjust to the rapid recomposition of the class structure in recent decades. And it might be true that changes in the labour market and class structure have created conditions intrinsically less favourable to socialist politics. But adjustment, however difficult and uncertain in outcome, is not the same as the demise of class, and there are substantial reasons to think that class will continue to provide a basis for political mobilisation.

Not the least of these reasons is growing inequality, which is largely related to changes in the labour market, that is, to the underlying class relationship of a capitalist economy. Giddens does not offer much analysis of the causes of rising inequality, and is generally rather evasive or ambivalent about the connection with capitalism. In his earlier work, Giddens identified global poverty and inequality – or ‘economic polarization’ – as a ‘high consequence risk’ associated with capitalism, stating that ‘there can be little doubt that capitalistic markets do often have a polarizing effect on distributions of wealth and income’. However, this connection is not followed through explicitly in the writings on the ‘Third Way’. One of the most explicit statements is that, on the contrary, ‘markets do not always increase inequality, but can sometimes be the means of overcoming it’. Giddens does not explain how markets sometimes have this desirable effect but, in any case, the point is that the predominant tendency of markets is to increase inequality. This evasiveness allows Giddens to detach the discussion of inequality from the discussion of class, whereas they are, in fact, intimately connected.

However, inequality is not the only ‘risk’ associated with the operation of markets (capitalist class relations). It is not clear that the decline of class thesis would be supported by answers to the following questions. Does work, on the whole and for the many, offer: greater opportunities for the exercise of skill and creativity? Greater autonomy or control? Or, higher levels of security? Here, Giddens relies on a particular dimension of second-phase modernisation – the rise of a ‘knowledge economy’. As the blue-collar working class declines, ‘it is skilled workers, especially “symbolic workers”, who are in demand in the knowledge economy, not unskilled workers, who are in fact threatened with marginality’ (Debate, p. 4). But, again, this distinction between skilled and unskilled jobs is of little use analytically. The categories ‘working-class’ and ‘skilled’ are not mutually exclusive, so the increase in demand for skills is not tantamount to a decline of the working class. In fact, Giddens might observe that the skilled working class has had quite a prominent role in ‘traditional leftist politics’. Further, a general increase in the demand for skills does not imply that gradations or disparities in levels of skill and associated rewards will diminish. Indeed, the increase

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9 Giddens 1994, p. 98.
10 Giddens 2000, p. 33.
in demand for skilled jobs appears to have corresponded with the widening gap between the highest-paid and lowest-paid workers. Finally, the vision of an ever-expanding non-working-class of skilled workers is simply not tenable, for there are in fact plenty of ‘routinized service occupations or “Mcjobs”’ (Debate, p. 4). According to Esping-Andersen in the same volume, ‘the service economy is tendentially dualistic, combining knowledge-intensive professional and technical jobs with low-end, low value-added, and labour intensive servicing’ (p. 143). Because the problem of ‘crap jobs’ is in fact systemic, Giddens’s fallback argument is that this is not really a problem since ‘even low-level service occupations can provide an avenue of mobility into better-paid jobs in a way blue-collar work by and large did not’ (Debate, p. 4). But this is an overly optimistic view of social mobility. Somebody has to do these jobs and it is not plausible that they are all done temporarily by people as a prelude to moving on and up to better things. It would follow that there must be a sizeable problem of what Esping-Andersen calls ‘entrapment’ from which the avenue of upward mobility is rather narrow, and such upward mobility would have to be matched by people coming back down the avenue.

All of this means that the working class has not disappeared, and class will continue to provide a potential basis for political mobilisation. If the working class is defined, as by Giddens, in terms of manual occupations, then it follows, of course, that a left-of-centre party must appeal to a ‘wide cross-class constituency’. But why should an ‘old left’ or socialist agenda be incompatible with the success of such an appeal? Giddens relies on the historical experience that such parties did depend on manual workers for electoral support in the past. As there are fewer of them, this source of support is drying up, hence an appeal must be made to non-manual strata. But Giddens is also relying on an unargued assumption that there is an inherent incompatibility between socialist politics and what he presumably sees as an expanding ‘middle class’. But we have already seen that this is a highly dubious criterion for locating a class boundary. And, even if there were a meaningful distinction between a manual working class and non-manual middle class, it seems worth pointing out the assumption that this middle class and socialism do not go together is a form of economism as crude as anything the ‘Old Left’ might be accused of.

For these reasons, Giddens’s argument that working class politics and, more specifically, socialism are anachronistic does not succeed. In this vein, Callinicos correctly insists that ‘collective working class organization and action are [not] obsolete’ (p. 115). Nevertheless, this is a distinctly limited claim, far short of the belief that a socialist movement based on a united majoritarian working class is likely or even possible in the foreseeable future. Working-class organisation and action not being obsolete is one thing, but flourishing is something quite different. The irony here is that the modesty (and realism) of Callinicos’s claim places him closer to the ‘Third Way’ than he acknowledges. Further, in searching then for a plausible form of political agency, Callinicos turns to the very same social forces highlighted by Giddens – the
new social movements. The major difference is that, whereas Giddens tends to see ‘new individualism’ and the politics of life-style replacing the politics of class and life chances, Callinicos sees convergence between organised labour and social movements. The basic claim here is that there is a growing perception that global capitalism is the common enemy. In this context, Callinicos turns Giddens’s argument about ‘life politics’ on its head – far from being the basis of a new kind of politics that is ‘beyond Left and Right’ Callinicos argues that ‘“life politics” today can only be anti-capitalist politics’ (p. 118). There is, then, a growing anticapitalist movement. And this movement will provide the solution to the problem of specifying an alternative form of society – in other words, socialism. For, although the anticapitalist movement is diverse and ‘incoherent’, and is likely to produce a variety of alternative models that may be incompatible, it is through this process that ‘we are likely to develop a much clearer sense of how we can transcend capitalism’ (p. 119). These points are important correctives to the ‘Third Way’, which does exaggerate both the decline of the working class and the disconnection between the ‘new’ politics of life-style and the ‘old’ politics of life chances. The ‘death of socialism’ is an absurd generalisation from the particular experience of the collapse of the ‘command economies’. As Callinicos points out, this generalisation illegitimately closes down debate about alternatives as though ‘really existing’ socialism is the only possible form. However, reliance on a convergence between the working class and social movements to generate a viable model of socialism and to constitute a movement capable of bringing it into existence seems speculative and overoptimistic. Although it is right to argue that the future is more open than Giddens allows and includes a possibility of socialism, right now socialism is not on the agenda – although not extinct, it is, in effect, dormant. In this more limited sense, there is indeed no alternative to capitalism.

From this, it follows that we need to ‘test where the limits of reform . . . lie’ (Against, p. 114). In this endeavour, neither Giddens nor Callinicos will be useful as guides, as already indicated. Callinicos maintains that his ‘analysis does not imply that it is futile to seek reforms’ (p. 114), yet he does not set out a more radical reformist agenda and argues that, in the end, reformism can make little headway. In this vein, Callinicos rejects Giddens’s assertion that the ‘Third Way’ shares with old-style socialism a ‘humanising’ mission – to create ‘a more humane capitalist society’. But Callinicos’s stark assessment that ‘capitalism cannot be humanized’ (p. 5) reveals, again, his rejection of reformism of all types. It is true that there is a real tension between the nature of capitalism and the socialist conception of human nature in terms of needs and capacities. Yet this does not mean that capitalism cannot be more or less dehumanising. It follows that humanising capitalism is a proper characterisation of the purpose of reformist politics.

However, although Giddens talks a good reformist game, the rhetoric conceals limited ambitions. The ‘Third Way’ certainly has no interest in testing the limits of reform, for it is indeed clear that ‘its policies operate well within the limits set by the
requirements of capitalist reproduction’ (*Against*, p. 114). The fundamental break that the ‘Third Way’ makes with social democracy is that capitalism is no longer regarded as a system to which we are opposed but within which we have to work pragmatically while pushing reforms as far as possible. Rather, the general thrust of Giddens’s writing is to downgrade the role of the state and upgrade that of the market. Government is talked down and the market is talked up. Giddens asserts that ‘a fundamental theme of third way politics is rediscovering an activist role for government, restoring and refurbishing public institutions’ (*Debate*, p. 6). This sounds classically social-democratic. Yet, on closer inspection, though there is not the same hostility to the state or the same notion of self-reliant individuals as in neoliberalism, this active state is subject to a host of qualifications and limits. There is a clear shift in the balance between the state and the market or the state and the individual from the former to the latter. For example, old-style social democracy is criticised for its strategy of ‘putting more and more tasks into the hands of the state’ (*Debate*, p. 6) and its tendency to ‘tax and overspend’ (*Where Now?*, p. 15). Reform of the state, apparently to ‘renew and enhance’ public institutions and services, is actually driven by problems of government failure. ‘State agencies do not promote the public interest wherever they are too unwieldy, bureaucratic, driven by producer interests, or operate with soft budget constraints’ (*Where Now?*, p. 15). Thus, the ‘new social democratic politics’ makes large concessions to neoliberalism in its criticisms and downgrading of the state. In a rather equivocal formula of ‘Third-Way’ politics, ‘the state should not dominate either markets or civil society’ (*Debate*, p. 6). Instead, each element should be contained or checked so that there is not ‘too much’ of any one but a balance between them.

The state is similarly downgraded in relation to individuals, again showing the concessions made to neoliberal ideology. Thus, ‘having abandoned collectivism, third way politics looks for a new relationship between the individual and the community, a recognition of rights and responsibilities. . . . With expanding individualism should come an extension of individual obligations . . . [such as] . . . the obligation to look actively for work’ in return for unemployment benefits.\(^{11}\)

However, although the Third Way clearly makes large concessions to neoliberalism, might not parts of the ‘humanising mission’ remain intact, elements of continuity with social democracy that are of value to the Left? Equality, as Callinicos remarks, provides a ‘litmus test’ of the ‘Third-Way’ claim to be renewing the Left, and Giddens acknowledges as much when he says that ‘the idea of equality or social justice is basic to the outlook of the left’.\(^{12}\)

One of the hallmarks of left-wing political thought is to highlight the basic conflict between equality, as well as other socialist values such as community, and the operation

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\(^{11}\) Giddens 1998, p. 65.

of a market or capitalist economy. The tendency of capitalist markets is to increase inequalities of income and wealth. And, although the market appears consistent with a limited notion of equality of opportunity – since it is rational (efficient) to allocate positions and rewards according to merit – the fundamental class division and the inequalities generated by the operation of the labour market ridicule the idea of equal starting points. The individualistic motives fostered by the market also go against the idea of community understood in terms of reciprocity. Thus, the ‘Third Way’ may be said to contain a massive internal contradiction in simultaneously championing the market and maintaining a commitment to equality. What conception of equality does the ‘Third Way’ stand for?

A conventional way of framing this debate is in terms of equality of outcome versus equality of opportunity. It is in these terms, as an abandonment of the former ‘true’ socialist version of equality in favour of the latter, that the Third Way is often rejected by critics on the Left. It is quite clear that the ‘Third Way’ does advocate ‘a new approach to inequality, placing the emphasis upon equality of opportunity’ (Where Now?, p. 16), and rejecting ‘egalitarianism at all costs’. However, it is false to counterpose equality defined in terms of opportunity to that in terms of outcome, for a number of reasons. For one, ‘equality of outcome is pretty much a red herring’ in the sense of ‘placing everyone in precisely the same material situation’ (Against, p. 47) since nobody on the Left really advocates this concept. The same could be said of ‘egalitarianism at all costs’ since nobody on the Left really regards equality as a value to be pursued regardless of the trade-offs that are involved. But this does not mean that inequalities of outcome do not matter – rather, reducing the gap between rich and poor must be a defining goal of the Left. As a good in itself, the desirable extent of any reduction in inequalities of outcome needs to be judged against potential trade-offs, such as efficiency. Second, equalities of opportunity and of outcome are not simple alternatives. Although there are tensions between them, equalising opportunities in the competition for advantage is consistent with reducing the unequal distribution of advantages that accrue. Indeed, this is arguably precisely the stance adopted by ‘old-style’ social democracy. Third, there is more than one version of equality of opportunity, and some are of more interest to the Left than others.

The turn to a version of equality of opportunity in ‘Third-Way’ politics is related to the ‘expanding individualism’ which is believed to characterise second-phase modernisation. Thus, in emphasising equality of opportunity, Giddens argues that this entails accepting ‘its correlates – that incentives are necessary to encourage those of talent to progress and that equality of opportunity typically creates higher rather than lower inequalities of outcome’ (Debate, p. 178). These ‘correlates’ are, however, not as close as Giddens suggests. It is a commonplace argument that incentives go

against equality of outcome, since exceptional talent and effort will not be brought forward unless it is differentially rewarded. But it is an obvious reply that financial reward is not the only motivation of effort and talent, and that expectations and demands in relation to financial rewards are open to cultural and political influence. It follows, in principle, that the extent of equality of opportunity to attain positions within an occupational structure tells us nothing about the extent of inequality in the rewards to different occupations within the structure. It also follows that higher inequality of outcome is not a necessary correlate of equality of opportunity. (Within Giddens’s own thought, there appears to be a tension between this conception of equality of opportunity and the ideas of a ‘post-scarcity society’ and of ‘new individualism’. For this is a context where ‘post-materialist values’ gain ground, and ‘where in the domains of life politics individuals or groups take lifestyle decisions that limit, or actively go against, maximizing economic returns’.)

Giddens’s commitment to equality of opportunity and his view of its ‘correlates’ naturally conditions his approach to redistribution. Although the traditional social-democratic approach of taking from the rich and giving to the poor via progressive taxation can and should be applied today, it is severely hedged around with qualifications (Debate, p. 184). Thus, the alleged need for incentives severely limits the scope for redistribution, as expressed in the remarkable statement that ‘the possibility of becoming very wealthy is presumably not something that should be denied to people, since it may motivate exceptional talent’ (Debate, p. 184). One of the main roles for redistribution is to cater for the (presumably small) minority of ‘people for whom opportunities will necessarily be limited, or who are left behind when others do well’ (Debate, p. 180). But redistribution to improve the position of those at the bottom is, of course, quite different from redistribution conceived as challenging the basic structure of rewards produced by a capitalist market society. In effect, the moral argument for redistribution is subordinated to the need to allow incentives to operate and talented individuals to progress.

This narrow focus on improving the position of the poor to the neglect of the wider context of inequality and the gap between rich and poor is based on the belief that ‘equality and inequality revolve around self-realization’ (Debate, p. 179). This is an individualistic way of thinking about inequality. The implication is that, so long as all individuals have the resources and opportunities they need for self-realisation, or for social inclusion, it does not really matter that other individuals have much greater resources and opportunities and can therefore realise much more ambitious conceptions of the self. This approach is clearly reflected in New-Labour rhetoric and policies. Thus, Blair resists the view that a widening gap (never mind the existing gap) between

rich and poor is a problem, preferring the not-distinctly-left-wing position that ‘it is not acceptable for poor people not to be given the chances they need in life’.  

The criticism of this approach is certainly not that policies to improve the position of the poor are not worthwhile, but that they are too timid. Indeed, improving the position of the poor is surely the morally most urgent or compelling aspect of inequality, but the wider structure of inequality also needs to be seen as unacceptable from a left-wing point of view. The ‘Third Way’ clearly involves a retreat from the aspiration to reduce the gap between rich and poor. However, if it stands for effective policies to ‘give poor people the chances they need in life’, these are surely the ‘more benevolent measures’ merely alluded to by Callinicos but which require to be given due weight in a balanced assessment of the ‘Third Way’. Thus, Levitas has shown that Budget measures during the first term were ‘mildly redistributive’. Although there is a limited effect on overall inequality, because the poor have not gained at the expense of the rich, ‘the incomes of the poorest tenth should have risen on average by 13 per cent’ (although this figure assumes all benefits are taken up, and conceals gainers – especially pensioners and families with children – and losers among the poorest tenth). The 2002 budget continued this modest redistribution. The establishment of a minimum wage, though set at a level that is too low, represents the victory of an important principle that the state should intervene directly in the labour market to establish a floor for the wage system. Finally, if it is achieved, the bold commitment to abolish child poverty within twenty years would represent a major alteration to the landscape of inequality in Britain. These and other measures and commitments clearly do not go far enough, but the direction is certainly social-democratic.

The focus on improving the life chances of the poor is directly connected to the emphasis placed upon equality of opportunity in ‘Third-Way’ politics. An effective equality strategy requires measures concerned with both opportunities and outcomes and, as already indicated, the neglect of the latter is a fundamental weakness of the ‘Third Way’. But what of the concept of equality of opportunity itself – does the ‘Third Way’ contain a distinctive approach that is of interest to the Left? The fundamental objection to any concept of equality of opportunity is that, by itself, it is at best a way of equalising access to advantage. An equal starting point is compatible with highly unequal results, maybe even, as Giddens suggests, higher rather than lower inequalities of outcome. A standard defence of equality of opportunity is the claim that such unequal outcomes are not unjust since they result from choices made by individuals for which they are responsible. This defence can never fully succeed for a number of reasons. First, the difficulty of distinguishing between genuine choices and differential capacities and inclinations for which individuals are not responsible. Second, in a

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15 As stated in a pre-election interview on BBC TV Newsnight.
capitalist society, the unequal outcomes can never be attributed purely to individual choices and actions (irrespective of whether these are the responsibility of individuals) since they reflect a structured pattern of inequality that is largely driven by decisions concerning the organisation of production and the labour process. In other words, certain jobs pay more than others and there are only so many of these jobs so not everyone can get one. Of course, the demand and supply sides within the labour market interact, so that widening access to skills and capabilities will have some influence on the pattern of demand for labour. But it will not fundamentally alter the structure of rewards, and that is why measures to reduce inequalities of outcome are necessary. Third, inequalities of outcome tend to be cumulative both within and between generations. The ‘starting gate’ concept, at its simplest, suggests that life chances are conceived in terms of a race with only one heat, or a game with only one round. Whereas, in reality, there are several rounds and performances in the early rounds gives participants advantages in those that come later. Perhaps more importantly, the next generation of participants enters the game with advantages handed on from the previous generation.

However, these points certainly do not render equality of opportunity redundant. Equality of opportunity will always be relevant since, for example, there will always be a question of fairness concerning how individuals are allocated to positions in a social division of labour, even if inequalities in financial rewards, status and so on are reduced or even eliminated. Rather, the concept of equal opportunity needs to be pushed as far as possible in order to minimise the impact of these criticisms. That provides a good test of equality of opportunity from a left-wing standpoint. In this respect, the ‘Third Way’ may have more going for it than Callinicos allows. Three aspects in particular are of interest: equality of opportunity as ‘social capability’; measures to limit the cumulative aspect of inequalities of outcome; and, measures to limit élite opt-out.

Giddens characterises the ‘Third-Way’ approach to inequality in terms of the ‘redistribution of possibilities’ or ‘asset-based egalitarianism’, contrasted with passive redistribution. The basic idea is to ensure that individuals have the necessary capabilities to pursue their own well-being rather than merely compensating them for their poverty. This approach has also been associated with Sen’s concept of ‘social capability’ (Debate, p. 179). A similar conception is advocated by the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, expressed as ‘the equal right to realise potential’ and contrasted with both a ‘narrow view of equality of opportunity’ and ‘an unrealisable equality of outcome’.

This is, then, a beefed-up version of equality of opportunity. Callinicos allows that ‘a charitable reading’ of Brown’s conception ‘would treat it as... a version of... what Stuart White calls “endowment egalitarianism”’. However, Brown’s approach

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17 Quoted in a UK newspaper, see Brown 1997.
is criticised on the grounds that ‘it is access to only one productive endowment that is to be made more equal – namely skills, through improved education and training’ (pp. 47–8). Callinicos is right to criticise the overemphasis on paid work as the solution to poverty in New Labour policy, but wrong to dismiss the underlying conception of equality of opportunity on this basis. Indeed, Brown’s elaboration suggests a more wide-ranging ‘capability set’, a view of equality of opportunity that is ‘recurrent, life-long and comprehensive: employment, educational and economic opportunities for all, as well as political and cultural opportunities too, with an obligation on government to pursue them relentlessly’. A better response would be to push the ‘Third Way’ along more radical lines implicit in its concept of equality of opportunity, and to match its policies more closely to its rhetoric.

Brown’s concept may go some way to limit the cumulative aspect of inequalities of outcome within generations through recurrent opportunities to acquire productive endowments. This could be likened to a series of starting gates at which the life-chances of disadvantaged groups may be improved. However, again, this focus on the poor needs to be coupled to measures to minimise the gap between these groups and the already advantaged, that is to tackle the wider context of inequalities of outcome. Without such measures, it is not possible to prevent such cumulative inequalities being passed from one generation to the next, since much of this transmission occurs on the basis of differences in family circumstances and resources during childhood. However, Giddens does acknowledge that ‘life chances must be re-allocated across the generations’ (Debate, p. 180) via redistribution of wealth in the form of inheritance tax (p. 187). This would be a welcome strengthening of New Labour’s agenda.

The ‘Third-Way’ conception of equality of opportunity is closely linked to the formula ‘no rights without responsibilities’. In practice, this has tended to focus on the rights and responsibilities of the poor and has involved a somewhat punitive approach, but, in principle, a more radical version can be developed emphasising the responsibilities of the rich. In the guise of welfare-to-work policies, rights have effectively been reinterpreted as opportunities for individuals to participate in the labour market. Thus, the onus is placed on the individual to seize these opportunities, with the threat of sanctions in the event of failure to do so. On the one hand, to the extent that opportunities involve developing ‘social capability’, there is a progressive dimension to ‘active welfare’ policies. This is certainly to be distinguished from a neoliberal ‘sink-or-swim’ individualism. On the other hand, the notion of social rights is weakened by emphasising accompanying obligations, or the responsibilities owed by individuals to the community. And the responsibilities owed by the community to the individual via the state are weakened by the rejection of economic management to secure full employment (the right to work) and the acceptance of the neoliberal concept of a natural rate of unemployment. However, tackling social exclusion also includes, for Giddens, minimising or preventing élite opt-out. This is an important principle since,
although it does not entail redistribution and therefore does not tackle inequalities of outcome directly, it does go some way to reducing the harmful consequences of inequality for social cohesion. The idea of rights and responsibilities can also be employed by the Left to shift the political agenda on to the wider structure of inequality and patterns of power and privilege. Giddens says that the idea that responsibilities accompany rights ‘must apply to all individuals and groups, rich and poor, powerful and less powerful. For élites . . . [it] means accepting social and moral obligations, including fiscal ones. So far as corporations go, the principle shades over into a more general framework of corporate responsibilities’ (Debate, p. 8). This is a minor theme in ‘Third-Way’ politics, and certainly in the practice of New Labour. But, if taken seriously, this principle could be used to push the ‘Third Way’ in a more radical direction.

References
The recently translated works of Alain Badiou support the emergence of an anti-phenomenological paradigm of metaphysical philosophy which owes much in inspiration to the work of the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. Let us recall the central tenets of Althusser’s ‘theoretical anti-humanism’ first, for this is arguably the impetus behind Badiou’s more recent attempts to combine something like a Marxist politics on the one hand, and a scientific ontology comparable to Althusser’s most innovative work in Reading Capital on the other.

Althusser’s concept of history, and of historical materialism, relies on Marx’s statement in The Eighteenth Brumaire that men make their own history in circumstances not chosen by themselves. Written and published in 1852, according to Althusser Marx’s famous statement belongs to the so-called ‘transitional’ phase of Marx’s writings, by which time Marx himself had outgrown his youthful, humanist conception of the ‘essence of man’, and had begun to conceive ‘man’ as a product of the historical forces and relations of production. Moreover, man, or rather bourgeois man, is ‘conceived’ in capitalist society not just as a specific effect of ideological practice, but also as a complex

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1 The case against phenomenology in recent French philosophy is made by Alliez 1995.
(overdetermined) arrangement of theoretical, economic and political practices which comprise the totality of the historical conjuncture.

The most groundbreaking aspect of Althusser’s theoretical anti-humanism was, and remains, (i) the specificity of the concept of man (like Foucault, Althusserian materialism is founded on the transient, symptomatic status of ‘man’ in the ‘history’ of science) and (ii) of the concept of specificity in general. Yet it also remains the most inconsistent and potentially self-destructive aspect of any would-be Marxist philosophy to relegate ‘man’ and ‘history’ to the status of scientific variables in the development of a problematic whose Theory, Althusser reminds us, does not (yet) exist. For Althusser, moreover, ‘Marxist philosophy’ would effectively be a non-philosophy in everything but name.

Extending Althusser’s anti-humanism to its logical extremes, the work of Alain Badiou has, since his early Maoist writings of the 1970s, consistently refused any confusion of the political realm proper to revolutionary Marxist activism, and the scientific realm, which excludes any historical interpretation whatsoever. Indeed, we can say that Badiou goes one stage further than Althusser, much like Gilles Deleuze, not just in evacuating the human from the field of scientific analysis, but also in denying any meaning to the phenomena of consciousness. Unlike Althusser, Badiou is certainly not afraid of the potentially disastrous consequences for Marxism of relinquishing the phenomenological sense [Sinn] of terms like ‘man’ and ‘history’. This dual anti-humanist and anti-phenomenological break with the history of Marxism, and with history per se, is rather anticipated by Badiou as the condition of re-injecting both philosophy and politics (and certainly against the current of contemporary political philosophy) with an urgent dose of iconoclasm.

Perhaps it may seem strange, then, that Badiou should single out Plato for this task, a philosopher whose theory of ideas was widely regarded as too backward by the Althusserian school (hence prompting its turn to Spinoza), or famously denigrated as ‘totalitarian’ by the ‘new philosophers’ in France. In Badiou’s Manifesto for Philosophy, the legacy of Plato appears more than worthy of defence. Not, that is, as a political philosophy. For Badiou, there is no confusion to be had between philosophy in itself, and politics. To criticise political philosophy – which he does elsewhere with a vengeance³ – is not to criticise philosophy per se. What is philosophy for, then, if not diplomatic reflection on the raw demands of politics?

[Philosophy] does not exist within all historic configurations; its way of being is discontinuity in time as in space. It must thus be presupposed that it requires particular conditions. . . . The conditions of philosophy are

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³ See Badiou 1998.
transversal. They are uniform procedures recognizable from a far, whose relation to thought is relatively invariant. The name of this invariance is clear: it is the name ‘truth’. (p. 33)

Philosophy, one might say, relates to particular non-philosophical conditions, since they do not always ensure philosophy’s existence, yet nonetheless ‘whose relation to thought is relatively invariant’. They are four in number, and bear the unmistakable mark of Plato: politics, love, science, and art. In the case of politics, as in the case of all the others, Badiou asserts that each remains thinkable from within a ‘generic procedure’ into truth: a kind of temporal aftershock of the ‘event’ upon which truth becomes suspended, and in pursuit of which a ‘subject’ takes shape. For Badiou, the generic procedure provides the place where the subject metes out the gap as interval between things and names, between a political event (the Russian Revolution of 1917, say) and its possible nomination as such. Crucially, whether or not the event is denied or deemed impossible is irrelevant as far as philosophy is concerned, whose task is to ‘seize’, rather than to reflect upon, the truths which lie dormant at the heart of the political process, yet which silently condition philosophy.

According to Badiou, the ‘political process’ is itself conditional, predicated not on ‘society’ or on the ‘community’ as such, but on the immanent possibility that such terms are capable of generating ‘fidelity’ to the event on the part of the subject. For example, was it not precisely the lack of a society as a composite totality of communal relations that induced the Russian Revolution of 1917? This is the crucial and defining aspect of Badiou’s anti-phenomenology, which he sets out in his landmark work of 1988, *Being and the Event*. Being is, in essence, void; it attests to the inherent meaninglessness and objective randomness of historical events. Truth of any kind, be it political, artistic, scientific or amorous, simply demands the kind of ‘suspension of disbelief’ peculiar to the selfless pursuit of a spontaneously unfolding event. But such involuntary calls to arms need hardly be ‘meaningful’ in order to occur. On the contrary, the fact that truth bores a hole through all knowledge and common sense inflects truth with its revolutionary capacity to change the world – or to subtract meaning from ‘the world’ as it is.

From Badiou’s perspective, if there is a historical dimension to philosophy then it emerges only at the point where the so-called ‘compossibility’ of truths is thrown out of joint – ‘blocked’ – by one of its generic procedures. Badiou employs the Lacanian term ‘suture’ to describe this placing of philosophy in suspense. Consider, for example, Marx’s suturing of philosophy to politics, as confirmed in his famous *Theses on Feuerbach* of 1845, that the philosophers had so far only interpreted the world when the point

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4 See Badiou 1988.
5 Badiou 1988, p. 361.
was to change it. Or the positivist suture which dominated for much of the nineteenth century and heralded science as the condition of resolving the antinomies of history (pp. 62–3). Much as these sutures are politically or scientifically (or artistically or amorously) justified for their time, Badiou is clear that their effects always turn out to be detrimental to the overall systematicity of philosophy. Postmodernism provides the dominant example of the ‘morose sentiment’, voiced by the likes of Lacoue-Labarthe and Lyotard, of the alleged impossibility of doing philosophy. ‘This is the avowal that [philosophy] is not impossible at all, but hindered by the historic network of sutures’ (p. 65).

So what, for Badiou, is ‘doing philosophy’? Firstly, the act of de-suturing philosophy from any destinal or ritualistic attachment to any of its own conditions. Although a truth is part of a generic procedure into the possibility of presenting this truth as such, we must not make the mistake of believing that any such truth is by itself philosophical. Nothing is more important for Badiou in establishing the radically ‘subtractive’ dimension of his ontology than the distinction between Truth and truths:

The philosophical category of Truth is by itself void. It operates but presents nothing. Philosophy is not a production of truth, but an operation from truths, an operation which disposes the ‘there is’ and epochal compoisibility of truths. (p. 124)

Philosophy is the apparatus for the seizure of truths, poised to expose the (void) gap or distance which separates philosophy from any appeal to transcendence. Badiou’s categorical example is Heidegger’s ‘excessive’ faith in the ‘age of the poets’, which begins with Hölderlin and ends with Paul Celan, and which Heidegger employs, against the modern reign of technology, in order to revive the poetic language of the Greeks to the ‘historical’ advantage of the German people. The consequences of any such historicism – to the exclusion of politics, science or love – are, in Badiou’s language, ‘disastrous’ for obvious reasons. In ontological terms, the disaster consists in filling the void, of papering over the gap which separates any truth procedure from philosophy itself. For Badiou, being is not full. Philosophy for its part must therefore ensure that it does not partake of any such representational fiction. It is, moreover, something akin to a classical Renaissance which Badiou has in mind for thought, in asserting this harmonious conjunction of four events which must remain, at the same time, ‘heterogeneous, and [which] cannot be aligned’. These events, strangely privileged by Badiou, are: the mathematician Paul Cohen’s generic theory of sets, Lacan’s theory of love, the historic sequence of politics between 1965 and 1980, and the poetry of Paul Celan. ‘Our duty is to produce the conceptual configuration liable to greet them, as little named, indeed located, as they may still be’ (p. 88).

Now, in singling out these ‘unnamable’ events for renewed investigation and therefore distancing himself from the visible truths of the present, Badiou is adhering
to a variety of Platonism. Not, that is, a Platonism of the One where truth is held to be transcendent; but a ‘Platonism of the multiple’ where truth is held to be ‘generic’. The dialectic of One/multiple is, for Badiou, eclipsed by the dialectic of multiple/void. Such is the lesson of Plato’s Parmenides where, confronted by Parmenides’s devastating series of deductions, Socrates is left to ponder the impossibility of the One, and the apparent absurdity of the being of the void.6 For Badiou, it is the multiplicity of the void, without unity or limit, and which Plato retrieves from the thought of the pre-Socratics, which provides the uncompromising venue of truth. But how can truth operate without the foundation of the One? Badiou’s response – and his ultimate wager in Being and the Event – is that it can, but only as a retroactive fiction: the logical function as opposed to the ontological concept of pure multiplicity itself:

A truth can only be the singular production of a multiple. The whole point is that this multiple will be subtracted from the authority of language. It will be indiscernible, or rather: it will have been indiscernible. (p. 104)

A truth is always under condition of its adequate presentation as what would or ‘will have been’ true after the event. Nevertheless, we are, as subjects in rare instances, at liberty to experience such truths first hand, even if the condition of such real experience is the subtraction of knowledge, or its displacement into the future anterior of a situation. For example, was it not in the midst of the apparent turmoil of May 1968 that a new type of politics was being practised in various parts of the world which challenged the then (and still largely now) traditional, nominal significations of ‘party’, ‘class’, and ‘revolution’? For Badiou, the generic implications of this post-Leninist truth procedure for politics are today far from having been fully exhausted, let alone explored. Indeed, the ‘future of politics’ remains on this basis entirely open to question.

It was inevitable that multiplicity would sooner or later bring Badiou into some sort of dialogue with Gilles Deleuze. The encounter between them, put off in life, Badiou explains, and conducted by correspondence in the years leading up to Deleuze’s death, had the makings of a ‘mobile divergence’ ever since the publication of Badiou’s Being and the Event, a book which, as he claims in Deleuze: The Clamor of Being, ‘sealed – for [Badiou] – the definitive entry into [his] new period’ (p. 3). The time of politics as the philosophical ‘structure in dominance’ was over; the time of ontology had now begun.

So, then, to Deleuze: The Clamor of Being, a book which, in the absence of any joint discussion, provides Badiou with an opportunity to place Deleuze’s ontology under the microscope. The immediate difficulty with this book is undoubtedly its method. Deleuze’s philosophy was never concerned with conjunctures as such, and Badiou’s

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6 See Plato 1996.
reliance, as a point of narrative reference, on the terms of a ‘debate’ which had previously taken place between them would no doubt have Deleuze turning in his grave. For Deleuze, philosophy strenuously avoids the kind of Platonic dialogue which seeks to commit any group of adversaries to relatively fixed and identifiable subject positions. For him, it is the virtual, not the actual world, where the event takes place, and where its effects are stretched out along a ‘plane of immanence’ where fictional, ‘conceptual personae’ attain their chaotic momentum. Undaunted despite all this, Badiou’s question in Deleuze may be summarised as follows: Is Deleuze’s overturning of Platonism really as anti-Platonic as Deleuze would like?

One is tempted to respond immediately in ‘typically’ Deleuzean fashion: ‘How anti-Platonic is that, then?’, since it is far from clear, in a work like Difference and Repetition – one of Badiou’s canonical reference points – precisely what any presumed ‘overturning of Platonism’ would entail ‘for Deleuze’. How, we may ask, does Badiou hope to pin Deleuze down on the question of what is – ‘for Deleuze’ – this highly ambivalent and unreliable object called ‘Platonism’? It is a question of ‘Which Plato?’ – and yet also, since it is allegedly Deleuze’s Plato in question here, ‘Which Deleuze?’ What such questions bring into play to begin with is a collision between two mutually exclusive methods: a philosophy of the virtual ‘versus’ a science of the actual. Consider, for example, the case of Plato’s Meno, in which Socrates demonstrates the capacity of a mere slave to learn geometry. Since Badiou’s ontology equates with the formal logic of mathematics (that is, set theory), the quality of Socrates’s demonstration will have no bearing on the slave’s success in memorising it. What Badiou’s ontology takes no account of are the specific qualities which make a situation in which geometry is being taught different from one in which, say, algebra is. For Badiou, the object of mathematics does not vary between arithmetic and geometry. Badiou’s mathematical objectives are, instead, to appropriate the form, rather than the content, of the pure multiple. Deleuze, renowned as a philosopher of Stoicism, will, for his part, refuse to entertain any hint of scientific reductionism where multiplicity is concerned. This explains his constant objection to Badiou’s alleged confusion of ‘multiple’ and ‘number’ (pp. 4, 47). Here, quite simply, is our dualism: the axiomatic equality of Badiou and the stylistic difference of Deleuze.

However, the question for Badiou remains as to whether an effective comparison can be made and, if so, by what possible means? Otherwise put: How to synthesise a hybrid of Badiou and Deleuze? The Deleuzean answer to this question tends to be immanent to the work in progress, and is a matter of a semi-fortuitous series of events from which two elements are intuitively selected and brought together in a state of continuous variation. It is certainly correct to say, as the translator reminds us, that Deleuze’s thought forces the encounter with philosophical rivals to engender a monstrous and disquieting offspring. This is precisely what Badiou sets out to achieve in Deleuze: The Clamor of Being, and, in this respect, the issue of whether or not Badiou
has departed from the ‘conventional’ image of Deleuze is simply beside the point. Badiou has in effect remained faithful to the unknown and somewhat impossible disposition of a Deleuze. Indeed, Badiou has himself made the most of his opportunity by seeking to annihilate the conventional image of Deleuze altogether:

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\ldots [C]ontrary to the commonly accepted image (Deleuze as liberating the anarchic multiple of desires and errant drifts), contrary even to the apparent indications of his work that play on the opposition multiple/multiplicities \ldots \] it is the occurrence of the One – renamed by Deleuze the One-All – that forms the supreme destination of thought and to which thought is accordingly consecrated. (p. 11)
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Drawing on a key extract from *Difference and Repetition*, Badiou observes how the equivocity of multiplicity is in fact only a formal, and nominal, expression of the univocal Being as One (p. 20) (here, Badiou is glossing over Deleuze’s contrary reputation for rejecting both the multiple and the one).\(^7\) However, not content to let things rest here, Badiou then goes on to claim for Deleuze the unlikely ‘sobriety’ of an ‘aristocratic’ thinker. Once this strange portrait is finally unveiled, it follows that Badiou can have all sorts of fun and wreak all sorts of havoc with this image in playing Deleuze at exactly his own game. Deleuze is reputedly the philosopher of simulacra and – along with those French ‘postmodernists’ (Baudrillard, Derrida, Lyotard) with whom he has all too often and all too conveniently been lumped together – famous for un-grounding any form of philosophical foundationalism. Why, then, should Badiou not endeavour to overhaul, in the spirit of Deleuze himself, the notion of overturning Plato’s notion of ground ordinarily attributed to Deleuze? Would this type of effort not affirm, against the notion of un-grounding, a renewed notion of ground? After all, in order to un-ground something, there must first be a ground to un-ground. The same goes for Plato, Badiou declares, and the thoughtless portrayal of the simulacrum as having somehow defeated the natural hierarchy that exists between the model and the copy. Marxists too will be equally sensitive to the ‘long perpetuation of Hegelianism’ which followed Marx’s efforts to turn Hegel ‘right side up’ (p. 45) (but was this not Althusser’s great obsession?).\(^8\) This ‘un-grounding’ certainly did not result in any chaotic or nonsensical Deleuzean inversion of the real relations between them. On the contrary, it brought the relational hierarchy ever more sharply into focus. Indeed, the connection between Hegel’s *Science of Logic* and Marx’s final, triumphant application of its method in *Capital* would succeed in bringing to light the ‘sense’ of capitalist social relations grounded in nothing more than complete and

\(^7\) See Deleuze 1988 and Deleuze and Parnet 1987.
\(^8\) See Althusser 1996, p. 91.
utter ‘nonsense’. How else are we to understand the chicanery and anthropomorphic tomfoolery (but are they his?) that animate Marx’s descriptions in the pages of Capital, of linen ‘recognising’ its value in a coat which is ‘a splendid kindred soul, the soul of value?’ This is where the science of logic leads us, Marx appears to be saying; this is the absurd price to be paid for following ‘logic’ to the letter in a society of unparalleled extremes of commodified wealth and exploitation.

Now, this level of sobriety, as unfamiliar as it may sound ‘for Deleuze’, is all very well. But why should this yield anything approaching a consistent theoretical position on Deleuze’s part? When Badiou casually remarks on the ‘supreme destination’ of Deleuze’s thought, one is inclined to respond with a quotation from Deleuze’s Nietzsche and Philosophy where he (but who?) poses the question ‘what does the one who seeks the truth want?’ The militant of truth will have his answer, and that answer will be no more truthful than the eternally recurring, Nietzsche-inspired ‘dramatisation’ of the ‘will to truth’. On closer inspection, it appears that there are no grounds which would permit an actual encounter with Deleuze (personally demonstrated by the ‘actual’ circumstances of Badiou’s failure to meet Deleuze in life), since ‘for Deleuze’ and his multiple fledgling selves, any underlying ground will only ever yield the true falsehood of a virtual identity. To his credit, the consequence Badiou continues to draw from this anti-systematic anti-foundationalism is Deleuze’s membership of that other, dominated tradition of philosophy – ‘The Stoics, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, as well as Deleuze himself’ – who are often distant, though never entirely divorced from the dominant, classical tradition of philosophy from Plato to Hegel. Against the overturning of Platonism, then, Badiou will conclude that it is anti-Platonism which Deleuze has in fact, against his will, overturned. ‘Plato has to be restored,’ Badiou insists

... and first of all by the deconstruction of ‘Platonism’ – that common figure, montage of opinion, or configuration that circulates from Heidegger to Deleuze, from Nietzsche to Bergson, but also from Marxists to positivists, and is still used by the counterrevolutionary New Philosophers (Plato as the first of the totalitarian ‘master thinkers’) as well as by neo-Kantian moralists. (pp. 101–2)

To his discredit, the error which Badiou commits here, somewhat in the manner of a negative dialectician, is to hold fast to the belief that, by being dominated, one affirms ever more profoundly, albeit involuntarily, the hierarchy one seeks to overcome.¹¹ Let

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¹⁰ Deleuze 1983, p. 94.
¹¹ At such moments, Badiou bears an uncanny resemblance to Adorno when the latter describes his method thus: ‘Interpretation of the unintentional through a juxtaposition of the analytically
us venture to say that nothing in Deleuze’s eyes better exemplifies the ‘weight of negative premises, the spirit of revenge, the power of ressentiment’ than this kind of invention of the heroic slave or ‘good wretch’. While it may be true that the virtual touches only the surface of things and changes nothing in depth, this may equally apply to any rival hierarchy or power assemblage whatever, which is forever implied in its eternal return on a plane of immanence. In light of this, is there really that much originality to Badiou’s thesis that Deleuze belongs, without realising it, to the tradition of classical philosophy which he only ‘superficially’ manages to reject? With Deleuze, we might say that his superficial rejection is the whole point. But Badiou seems to think it amounts to something more profound.

This brings us lastly to Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil, a book in which Badiou aims to supply his logical principles with a politico-ethical content, and whose title promises yet another confrontation with the Nietzscheans. Not that there is much room for dispute to begin with, since Nietzsche’s description of nihilism as the ‘will to nothingness’ sums up very well the ‘blind necessity’ masquerading as the honest pragmatism of Western liberal governments in their attempts to promote ethical policy against a backdrop of unprincipled globalisation (pp. 30–1). Ethics played out in this shadow theatre of egalitarian democracy merely serves to balance the all-inclusive, scientific management of opinion against any particular call for human rights or social justice. What philosophy has to say today in response to this blind necessity is pitifully weak and banal, although crucially, in Ethics, this deficiency serves as the inverse measure of a militant project which Badiou names an ‘ethic of truths’. Here, Badiou demands serious attention as a philosopher with the courage and conviction to think the abstract universal, even if such thought carries with it certain risks.

Firstly, Badiou diagnoses ‘the rights of man’ as a symptom of ‘the collapse of revolutionary Marxism, and of all the forms of progressive engagement that it inspired’ (p. 4). Compared with Foucault’s declaration of the death of Man, or Althusser’s ‘process without a subject’, or Lacan’s shattering of the imaginary Ego-ideal, the discourse of ‘human rights’ marks a lamentable disengagement with philosophy. What Dominique Lecourt has more recently termed the ‘mediocracy’ of French philosophy since the mid-1970s clearly strikes a powerful chord with Badiou, who also singles out the ‘New Philosophers’ (André Glucksmann chief among them) as having been partly responsible for the premature collapse of more progressive discourses. In their place, the touchstone of ethics today at the ‘end of ideologies’ is once again Kant. With its a priori, categorical imperative for the understanding of Evil, the amenability

isolated elements, and illumination of the real by the power of such interpretation’ (Adorno 1977, p. 127).
of Kantianism to ‘international law’ and the prosecution of the so-called ‘crimes against humanity’ is self-evident. At the same time, it is equally clear that any number of ‘humanitarian interventions’ from the Middle East to the former Yugoslavia uphold no principle of universal rights. On the contrary, more a case of a local power struggle being read as the sign of a counterhegemonic provocation which throws police logic out of kilter, thereby providing the superpowers with legitimate grounds for repression. Humanitarianism, in offering itself up as the defender of universal human rights, effectively negates the experimental nature of politics a priori.

Faced with this ethical minefield, the temptation is to settle for some form of scaled-down, sectarian exercise in political correctness, an ethics which remains sensitive, if not to the rights of man, then at least to the risks of offending the other. But we must dispel this misguided impulse immediately, Badiou warns us, especially if we are to avoid converting ethics into a ‘pious discourse’ of the ‘Altogether-Other’ (God), where recognition transcends real human experience and relations (pp. 21–3). Equally, it will be necessary to do away with the reverse side of this diffuse, Lévinasian religiosity – ‘a cultural sociology preached, in line with the new-style sermons, in lieu of the late class struggle’ (p. 23). There is no ethical principle to be drawn from the cultural logic of late capitalism, where the consumer-friendly notion of ‘difference’ presents itself as the supplement – the only ‘realistic’ one – to real politics. Such ‘difference’, invariably grounded in the common sense of linguistic pragmatism or the tourist’s fascination for the other’s identity, lacks the measure of true difference. What true difference describes instead, according to the communist principle, is the situation which is positively in-different to differences: “‘From each according to his powers, to each according to his needs’.”

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A logic of the Same, then, against any normative logic of difference, is the starting point for a genuine ethic of truths. Only the differential element or subject which evades police logic, and which therefore cannot be named, can support this ethical equality. True ethical engagement will first of all depend on the identification of a certain unknown precondition or event. This extra-being we might regard as the a priori of judgement, the supplement which compels the subject to pursue logically the novelty and generic integrity of the truth-event. However, let us repeat that there is no genuinely ethical possibility of adhering to a minimum of categorical judgement in advance apart from the absolute singularity of the truth-event, whose truth it is the newly emergent subject’s task to interrogate. For example, the current controversy surrounding euthanasia and the ‘right to life’, the question of precisely what constitutes a life and who has the right to decide – and in what circumstances – what constitutes a ‘dignified death’, perfectly attest to this a-Kantian, ethical imperative (pp. 35–8).

‘There is only a particular kind of animal, convoked by certain circumstances to become a subject – or rather, to enter into the composing of a subject’ (p. 40). The subject’s task is therefore to bring into being, in the process of itself being actualised, any set of generic circumstances for Good, while simultaneously combating the immanent possibility – ‘immanent’ because ‘there is no heaven of truths’ (p. 43) – of Evil.

Badiou’s ethics displays its fair share of militant ambition in aiming to revive the generic politics of the masses (Badiou’s blueprint in this regard remains the Chinese Cultural Revolution and May 1968 in France), and it is worth noting that Badiou’s emphasis on the real of concrete situations extends to his active participation in the Organisation Politique, a group of political activists engaged in fighting for workers’ and immigrants’ rights (pp. 95–116). Nevertheless, the most striking objection to Badiou’s ethic of truths will concern the apparent ambivalence of any presumed value judgement. What prevents a subject who, in striving to overcome an injustice ‘for Good’, lacks adequate understanding – since truth is only knowable after the event – of his possible proximity to Evil? The human animal’s ‘natural’ innocence when confronted by Good and Evil has certainly provided the impetus, on more than one ‘historic’ occasion, for the subject’s transcendence of these ‘all too human’ categories (p. 59). As a self-proclaimed ‘immanentist’, Badiou is alert to the potentially perilous, ontological neutrality which composes a situation in which Good is forever on the brink of passing over into its opposite, and, for this reason, Badiou draws up an outline for the avoidance of Evil. The outline draws a key distinction in Badiou’s philosophy between ontology and logic. For example, consider the Nazis’ instigation of the National-Socialist ‘revolution’ in Germany between the wars. Although this ‘event’ might superficially bear resemblance, in its language and symbolism, to the situations of mass uprisings – the French and Russian Revolutions – what disqualifies it as a true event is its denial of universal belonging. In grounding its political agenda in the particularity of race and nationalism, and the imagined destiny of a privileged part of the people to re-present the whole, the Nazis contrived to transform the randomness of a historical supplement into the natural substance of a community (pp. 72–3). This is not to say that the Nazi ‘event’ would have been justified under a ‘more rational’ set of circumstances – although, of course, this kind of perverse sentiment is always to be expected from the revisionists. On the contrary, the inherent dangers of such ethical sophistry are precisely what guide the subject in its struggle against Evil.

Here, it is crucial to reaffirm Badiou’s distinction between the logical seizure of a truth – which will always induce the subject’s active resistance, even and especially against overwhelming oppression – and the ontological situation of truth.15 It is by

15 See Badiou 1992, p. 70.
domesticating the (void) situation that the subject (i) becomes seduced by the terror of a simulacrum (the ‘real’ Germany of *Heimat*); (ii) betrays its fidelity to a truth for the sake of prudence (the sceptical attitude of ‘good citizens’ towards the alleged Holocaust); and (iii) risks forcing the total re-ordering of the language of common sense in the process (consider the journalistic platitudes which enigmatically claim that the Holocaust is today thoroughly unspeakable, beyond rational understanding etc., rather than the result of a set of politically-motivated acts with enduring social implications) (pp. 72–87).

In conclusion, we can see that Badiou’s politico-ethical intervention, supported by a renewed philosophical commitment to the concept of truth, opens up the possibility of taking ‘one more step’ in the modern, as Badiou claims in *Manifesto for Philosophy* (p. 79). It is particularly noteworthy that Badiou’s preferred means of achieving this ultra-Althusserian move does not, unlike Althusser’s other ‘ex-philosophical’ supporters, require any break with Marxism. For example, whereas Jacques Rancière’s post-Althusserian work might best be understood as a reaction against the bourgeois élitism of Althusser’s spontaneous philosophy of science, and in more recent works like *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, as a utopian return of the repressed intellect, Badiou will refuse to give way on the principle of equality, which for him remains quite immune to questions of power and domination. No amount of *laissez-faire* in the conduct or regulation of revolutionary political or scientific movements will persuade Badiou that such movements are unethical or socially irresponsible. This holds equally well for the relation of political movements to the state, which is, at best, indifferent, at worst repressive, towards the prospect of genuine political organisation. Reform of the state apparatuses is not an option for Badiou. The only political ‘purpose’ of the state is, rather, to concede to the direct action of local campaigns for social justice, such as the fight for workers’ rights or the naturalisation of asylum seekers.

The advance on Althusser’s concept of Marxist politics – which, in fact, was less neo-Marxist than orthodox-Leninist – emerges when we learn that the strategy of the Organisation Politique for conducting these campaigns goes by the name of ‘politics without party’, a slogan which Badiou defends by recalling the ‘flexibility’ of Marx and Engels’s vision for the Communist Party in the *Manifesto* of 1848:

> [Marx’s] definition of the party refers purely to the historical mobility, whose communist consciousness ensures both the international dimension and the direction of its global movement. The party thus names, not a compact and bound fraction of the working class – what Stalin will call a ‘detachment’ –, but an unfixable omnipresence, whose proper function is less to represent

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class than to de-limit it in ensuring it is equal to everything that history proposes as being improbable and excessive in respect of the rigidity of material and national interests.\textsuperscript{17}

For Badiou, the principle of equality must be taken to the organisational extreme of \textit{actively breaking away} from any centralised or hierarchical party apparatus. In the act of separation, or the ‘party split’, the communist subject emerges. The ‘unfixable omnipresence’ of the party is not, however, to be mistaken for any support for spontaneism (what Althusser criticises as ‘philosophy in practice’).\textsuperscript{18} Rather, the discipline of political organisation is vouchsafed by the reductionist logic of Badiou’s ontology. The detail of this logic, introduced in \textit{Being and the Event}, cannot be adequately presented here. We must simply recognise that, partly in anticipation of the usual criticisms of the role of intellectuals in the class struggle, Badiou’s logical conviction is that the dialectical synthesis of theory and practice no longer has any relevance for politics today. Why? Because, for Badiou, this represents a false dichotomy, both in relation to ‘thought’ on the one hand, and the ‘being’ of politics on the other. It is unarguably in keeping with the spirit – if not the ‘logic’ – of Gramsci’s writings to regard the concept of ‘intellectual’ as no more than an organic function of the class struggle. For Badiou, following Rousseau, there is nothing in the \textit{true} nature of the class struggle which divorces the general interest of ‘intellectual’ from that of ‘manual worker’.

The question we are left with, however – even if we accept, for argument’s sake, the transparency (nay, equality) of political practice to logical deduction – ironically leaves Badiou on virtually the same terrain as Althusser. For both, the return to the ‘real’ Marx – the scientific Marx of \textit{Capital} in Althusser’s case, the political Marx of the \textit{Manifesto} in Badiou’s – is the condition of a pure, unadulterated political practice; and unadulterated for being separated from what Althusser condemned as ‘anarchosyndicalism’, that is ‘attributing to economic practice all the active and even explosive virtues of politics’.\textsuperscript{19} But this explosively virtuous vision of political activism, a key strategy of Saint-Just, in which the Hegelian ‘sphere of needs’ would have been seen to degrade the integrity and self-sufficiency of the Republic which ‘does not need’,\textsuperscript{20} is ethically hazardous. Moreover, the idea that the economy, as the realm of the merely ‘given’, governs human needs falls back on the crude anthropology of man which Althusser, in one of his defining gestures, correctly eliminated from Marxist scholarship.\textsuperscript{21}

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\textsuperscript{17} Badiou 1998, p. 84. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Althusser and Balibar 1979, p. 138. \\
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{20} Badiou 2002, p. 6. \\
\textsuperscript{21} Althusser and Balibar 1979, p. 162.
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It is ironic that Badiou’s interest in Marxism extends only as far as the ‘political’ Marx of 1848, for, had he read on, he would have encountered the *Grundrisse*, where Marx shows us the ways in which needs are historically created. It is only in the passage from the realm of natural needs to historical needs, Marx observes, that the global market finally consolidates itself. The fact that the true extent of the development of the productive forces in our present era of globalisation is uncertain suggests that Badiou’s indifference to the fortunes of political economy is somewhat premature.

References


Socialist Darwinism in Germany: 1875–1914

Richard Weikart aims to answer two related questions in his comprehensive analysis of the relationship between socialism and Darwinism in Wilhelmine Germany, Socialist Darwinism: Evolution in German Socialist Thought from Marx to Bernstein: first, how was the connection between historical materialism and Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection understood by nineteenth-century German Marxists; second, in the half-century up to the outbreak of the First World War, did the socialist Darwinism of the intellectual leadership of German Social Democracy entail the Party’s rightward political trajectory?

Few Marxists have doubted that the social evolutionism of the Second International played a role in its downfall, but how important was this factor when weighed against other aspects of its Marxism? In his essay ‘Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International’ Lucio Colletti argued that

> German Social Democracy chose the ‘parliamentary road’ at Erfurt, not because it had already abandoned the class conception of the State, but because its ‘fatalistic’ and ‘providential’ faith in the automatic progress of economic evolution gave it the certainty that its eventual rise to power would come about ‘in a spontaneous, constant, and irresistible way, quite tranquilly like a natural process’.\(^1\)

Colletti argues that this evolutionary interpretation of Marxism was developed by Engels and Kautsky, and he compares it unfavourably to something he labels the voluntarist Marxism of the Third International. In contrast, Sebastiano Timpanaro, argues that, while Kautsky’s evolutionary theory of history played a part in his shift to the right, there were other, more substantial, problems with his political theory:

> the real limitation of the Marxism of the Second International did not consist in a lack of voluntarism, but rather in a schematic and tenaciously Eurocentric

\(^1\) Colletti 1972, p. 105.
‘philosophy of history’, in a non-Marxist conception of the State, in an inadequate understanding of the imperialist phase of capitalism, and in a persistent illusion that the bourgeoisie was already and would become increasingly a peace-loving and ‘contented’ bourgeoisie, precisely when it was getting ready for more ambitious militarist and reactionary adventures.²

The background to this exchange was, of course, Lenin’s famous critique of Kautsky’s ‘renegacy’. In 1917, Lenin argued that Kautsky’s centrism was a corollary of his gloss over the central Marxist proposition that ‘the liberation of the oppressed class is impossible not only without a violent revolution, but also without the destruction of the apparatus of state power’.³ Indeed, Lenin insisted, ‘Marx’s theory of the state . . . is inseparably bound up with the whole of his doctrine of the revolutionary role of the proletariat in history’, and, ‘those who recognise only the class struggle are not yet Marxists. . . . Only he is a Marxist who extends the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the dictatorship of the proletariat’.⁴ According to Lenin, it was not because Kautsky’s Marxism included an evolutionary component that caused him to fail the test of war in 1914, rather his evolutionism, in the context of his rejection of Marx’s theory of the state, underpinned his break with the revolutionary soul of Marxism.

Does Weikart’s book offer us evidence from which we might adjudicate this debate? Weikart outlines the scale of enthusiasm for Darwinism in the late nineteenth-century German socialist movement, and shows that, while Darwinism did not entail socialism, it did lend itself, in the German context, to progressive and sometimes socialist political interpretation (pp. 10, 223). Similarly, while Darwinism was embraced by the revisionists within the socialist movement, there was no simple correlation between Darwinism and moderate socialist politics: all of the key Marxists who contributed to the debates of the period – revolutionaries, revisionists, and centrists – were, to a greater or lesser extent, proponents of Darwinism, and believed that Darwin’s theory of natural evolution did not contradict their models of socialism, and indeed generally believed that Darwinism underpinned their own socialist political perspectives. Given the plurality of political perspectives that were held by socialist Darwinists, Weikart argues, it was not the belief that Marxism included an evolutionary component related to Darwinism that caused the failure of the SPD to take a stand against war in 1914; rather, ‘practical political and economic developments account for [its] centrist position far better than the infiltration of biological evolution into socialist theory’ (p. 223). This argument implies that Colletti was mistaken: Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg were just

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² Timpanaro 1975, p. 120.
⁴ Lenin 1968, pp. 280; 285.
as enthusiastic about Darwin’s ideas as were Engels, Plekhanov and Kautsky (pp. 184; 223). However, if Colletti was wrong to argue that the evolutionism of the Second International necessarily robbed historical materialism of its revolutionary kernel, then what caused Kautsky and many of his comrades to break with socialist internationalism in 1914? Unfortunately, Weikart does not discuss in sufficient detail any of the ‘practical political and economic developments’ that might account for the rightward political trajectory of the intellectual leadership of the Second International, and therefore we are unable to adjudicate on his concluding thesis from the evidence marshalled in his text. However, in undermining Colletti’s thesis, Weikart does imply that something like Timpanaro’s or Lenin’s explanations for Kautsky’s political evolution are closer to the truth.

**Marx, Engels and Darwin**

In 1980, Margaret Fay finally put to rest the myth that Marx had sought to dedicate the first volume of *Capital* to Darwin (p. 17). However, the fact that the myth survived for the best part of a century, and continues today despite its refutation, is evidence of its plausibility, based on the admiration that both Marx and Engels undoubtedly shared for Darwin’s ‘epoch-making work’. But why should two men, who primarily sought to understand capitalism in order to overthrow it, be interested in biology? One obvious answer is that Darwin’s model of natural selection undermines the naive belief in the unchanging cosmos of the Bible (pp. 23; 55). Darwin also, as Engels originally pointed out to Marx, ‘destroyed’ teleological explanations in the natural world (p. 53), and therefore, as Marx argued in a letter to Engels, his book ‘contains the basis in natural history for our view’ – despite his ‘crude English style’ (p. 15). But if Darwinism did ‘contain’ historical materialism’s ‘basis in natural history’, what was the actual relationship between the two theories?

The emergent relationship between cultural and biological evolution in Marxist theory was nowhere more eloquently expressed than in Engels’s *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*. In this unfinished masterpiece, Engels took issue with Darwin’s interpretation of the evolution of modern humans. Darwin had argued that the decisive moment in the evolution of humanity occurred with the development of large brains, after which, he assumed, the other human characteristics of upright gait, free hands, and language evolved. In contrast to this hypothesis, Engels suggested that massive brain development followed upon the evolution of an upright gait:

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5 Marx 1976, p. 461.
Climbing assigns different functions to the hands and the feet, and when their mode of life involved locomotion on level ground, these apes gradually got out of the habit of using their hands [in walking] and adopted a more erect posture. This was the decisive step in the transition from ape to man.  

Once the hands of our ape ancestors became free, then they could increasingly be used to fashion tools; and once the evolutionary advantage no longer lay with hands that could be used for climbing, and instead moved to favour hands that could work tools, then it was only a matter of time before simian hands evolved into something resembling those of the modern humans. This fact is of terrific importance because it shows that ‘the hand is not only the organ of labour, it is also the product of labour’.  

This evolutionary adaptation had profound cultural and biological consequences for the further evolution of humanity. Engels noted that social man could have only evolved from a gregarious forebear. However, because ‘labour necessarily helped to bring the members of society closer together . . . men . . . arrived at a point where they had something to say to each other’. Thus, labour reinforced any tendencies towards the evolution of social behaviour, up to and including the adaptation of the larynx, facilitating the development of language. Finally, labour and language together became the two most important stimuli of rapid brain expansion. Increased intelligence and technological know-how then led to the development of a more varied diet. The broadening of our ancestors’ diet, in turn, underpinned further expansions of the brain, which then facilitated the conquest of fire and the domestication of livestock.

So, the basis for social evolution was the natural evolution of an upright gait in our simian ancestors. Social and natural evolutionary processes from then onwards reinforced each other in a positive feedback loop to propel the evolution of our ancestors forward towards our modern form. Engels argued that Darwin’s inability to grasp this process was a consequence of the ‘ideological influence’ on his thought which tended to demean the importance of labour to social history more generally.  

Weikart has argued that, in *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*, Engels had confused Darwinism and Larmarkianism (p. 72). In a sense, this

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7 Engels 1972, p. 252.
9 Engels 1972, p. 255.
10 Engels 1972, p. 259.
11 Engels 1972, p. 259. Gould points out that the fundamentals of Engels’s case were shown to be correct with the discovery of A. africanus in the 1920s, but despite the evidence of the fossil record the alternative opinion has proved a long time dying (Gould 1980, p. 110). The Darwinian thesis implies the existence of the famous ‘missing link’ – a big-brained monkey – which has never been found.
12 Benton 2002, p. 68. Jean Lamarck argued both that characteristics acquired during an organism’s lifetime could be inherited by its offspring, and the basic dynamic of evolutionary
would be unsurprising as Ernst Haeckel, Germany’s foremost Darwinian, accepted that acquired characteristics could be inherited. However, I do not think that Engels meant that culturally evolved characteristics could be inherited directly; and, certainly, his argument need not be interpreted in that way. Rather, he posits a dialectical relationship between cultural and natural evolution, whereby an important part of the ‘natural’ environment, within which humans compete for survival, is culturally constructed, such that cultural structures will act as part of the context within which natural selection takes place.

Once humans had evolved to their modern form, then natural evolution gave way to cultural evolution as the most dynamic force in human history: humans ‘begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation’. If the evolution of the potential for social tool use in simians was that factor which underpinned their evolution into modern humans, then human history in turn, according to Marx, is best understood to be fundamentally the history of the use of those tools – a succession of modes of production. But how does this difference affect the relationship between Marx’s theory of cultural evolution and Darwin’s theory of natural evolution?

In Darwin’s model, evolutionary change in the natural world is the product of the combination of variation between individuals, heredity, selection, and the struggle for existence. Anderson has criticised the application of Darwinism to social history, arguing that social structures do not exist which can reasonably be related to the selection process operating in the natural world: for, whereas genes mutate randomly and have no relation to the forces that select them, in the social world ‘innovation belongs to the same plane as selection, . . . both . . . always involve the common material of conscious human agency’. Thus, ‘social [and natural] innovations . . . are utterly different in both scale of the variation they represent and the speed of the changes they unleash’. Similarly, Callinicos has argued that Marxism includes an evolutionary

change occurred independently within each individual unit in a collection. In contrast to this ‘developmental’ model of evolution, Darwin held to a ‘variational’ model, according to which ‘there is no preordained ladder of life that living forms are inherently disposed to ascend’ (Sober 1984, p. 154).


Marx and Engels 1970, p. 42. Engels repeated this general claim in a letter to Larov, written in 1875: ‘The essential difference between human and animal society is that animals are at most gatherers whilst men are producers’ (Meek (ed.) 1971, p. 199).

Lewontin 1995, p. 149.


component that is closer to the developmental model of Lamarck than it is to Darwin’s variational model.\(^{18}\)

In fact, as Marx’s theory of history was fully articulated before the publication of *Origin of Species*, and as, indeed, its most mature exposition was published co-temporally with Darwin *magnum opus*,\(^ {19}\) Weikart sensibly points out that, while Marx was an admirer of Darwin, ‘Darwinism made no substantial impact on [his] theory of social development’ (p. 43). Marx understood, however, that Darwinism not only did not contradict his theory of history, but could easily support it: the adaptive evolution of natural technology – wings, hands, eyes etc. – paralleled and, in the case of humans, underpinned the cultural evolution of social technology. In *Capital*, Marx argues that a critical history of the evolution of social technology could be written that paralleled Darwin’s outline of a history of ‘natural technology’, so long as we remember that ‘human history differs from natural history in that we have made the former, but not the latter’.\(^ {20}\) So, beyond the fact that Marx’s theory of cultural development could reasonably be understood to have grown out of Darwin’s model of natural evolution, the link between Darwinism and historical materialism could be understood through their similarly anti-teleological explanations of the evolution from simple to more complex forms: ‘here for the first time’, Marx wrote to Lassalle, ‘teleology in the natural sciences is not only dealt a mortal blow, but its rational sense is also empirically explained’ (p. 23).

Marx and Engels, however, were not uncritical supporters of Darwin. Thus, Weikart argues that, while they and other German socialists were ‘elated with Darwin’s elimination of teleology’, and celebrated the ‘fatal blow’ that his thought had, they believed, inflicted upon religion, they were more sanguine about Darwin’s conceptual borrowing from Malthus (p. 221). However, despite Weikart’s suggestion to the contrary (p. 26),\(^ {21}\) the Malthusian rhetoric of *Origin of Species* is far less problematic than it might at first appear: Marx argues that Darwin’s book actually acted as the ‘naturalhistorical refutation’ of Malthus’ ideas;\(^ {22}\) while John Bellamy Foster has argued

\(^ {18}\) Callinicos 1999, p. 103.
\(^ {19}\) Marx 1970, p. 20.
\(^ {20}\) Marx 1976, p. 493.
\(^ {21}\) Weikart perhaps shows the limitation of his own understanding of Marxism in his discussion of the relationship of Marx’s thought to that of ‘his arch-enemy Thomas Robert Malthus’ (Weikart 1998, p. 15). Compare this discussion with the careful assessment made by Ronald Meek in his introduction to a collection of Marx and Engel’s writings on Malthus and Darwin (Meek (ed.) 1971, pp. 16–37).
\(^ {22}\) Marx pointed out that the ‘joke’ was surely that, for Malthus, Malthusian theory applied to humans but not to plants and animals, so an extrapolation of his model of human nature to the rest of the natural world actually refuted his ideas. The Marxist point that human history cannot be reduced to Darwinian is particularly pertinent here, but Weikart’s discussion of this issue is particularly weak (Weikart 1998, p. 26).
that, beyond a superficially shared rhetoric, there is very little of Malthus in Darwin.\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, as Marx never attempted to reduce his theory of cultural development to Darwinism, the social side of Darwin’s Malthusianism was not particularly problematic for his thought. Additionally, where other Marxists did attempt to develop a more one-sided evolutionary account of social development, they did so in what were essentially Lamarckian terms: this was true of Bebel and, to a greater extent, of Kautsky.

**German Marxism**

Social Darwinists have, since the publication of *Origin of Species*, sought to utilise Darwinism to legitimise political programmes of one form or another.\textsuperscript{24} However, the exact mechanism through which Darwin’s theory of natural selection was given a social spin depended to a large degree on national cultural traditions. America in the nineteenth century was, as Hofstader points out, ‘the Darwinian country’;\textsuperscript{25} where the themes of the ‘survival of the fittest’ and ‘struggle for existence’ appealed.\textsuperscript{26} However, precisely because of the hegemony of these ideas, American socialists defended their political beliefs in social-Darwinian terms. Pittenger argues, ‘in such a cultural milieu, thoughtful laymen who inclined toward socialism could hardly avoid addressing evolutionary ideas’.\textsuperscript{27} A similar story has been told of Victorian Britain, where a dominant conservative social Darwinism existed alongside a minority socialist social Darwinism.\textsuperscript{28} In stark contrast to the dominant Anglo-American conservative reading of Darwin, his ideas experienced a very different popular reception in Germany. Kelly, who wrote the foreword to Weikart’s book, argues elsewhere that ‘Darwinism became a kind of popular philosophy in Germany more than in any other country’.\textsuperscript{29} This, however, was not the *laissez-faire* Darwin of the United States:

> German popular Darwinism was a continuation of the old enlightenment tradition. German Darwinism sought to crush superstition, to inform, to liberate, and, indirectly, to democratize. In a narrower sense popular Darwinism may profitably be viewed as a cultural extension of the radical democratic spirit of 1848 – a spirit that was suppressed in the political arena but could live on in less threatening non-political guises.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{23} Foster 2000, p. 186.  
\textsuperscript{24} Hawkins 1997. George Bernard Shaw suggested that Darwin ‘had the luck to please everybody with an axe to grind’ (Bäumer 1977, p. 359).  
\textsuperscript{25} Hofstader 1955, p. 4.  
\textsuperscript{26} Hofstader 1955, p. 6.  
\textsuperscript{27} Pittenger 1993, p. 26.  
\textsuperscript{28} Jones 1980, pp. 8; 63.  
\textsuperscript{29} Kelly 1981, p. 5.  
\textsuperscript{30} Kelly 1981, p. 7.
Benton has shown how Germany’s conservative academic establishment rejected Darwinism, thus compelling her most prestigious Darwinist, Ernst Haeckel, to take a chair at a provincial university. Haeckel’s liberal social Darwinism therefore never attained the level of hegemony associated with similar views in the elite discourses of both Britain and America. Instead, his ideas were taken up and radicalised inside Germany’s socialist movement, which in turn infused German popular Darwinism with a much greater radical edge than was common elsewhere. Haeckel himself started his career as a liberal critic of the Prussian aristocracy:

> What are these nobles to think of the noble blood which flows in their privileged veins, when they learn that all human embryos, those of nobles as well as commoners, during the first two months of development, are scarcely distinguishable from the tailed embryos of dogs and other mammals?\(^{32}\)

Unsurprisingly, books written by the author of these lines were well received in socialist circles. In fact, so respected were Haeckel’s ideas on the Left, that his critics from the Right sought to argue that Darwinism did indeed entail socialism and should thus be rejected. This was the sense of Virchow’s attack upon Darwinism, mounted in 1877. Haeckel’s reaction to this charge was to insist, as Weikart points out, that ‘Darwinism and socialism are incompatible and antithetical’ (p. 104). Indeed, while most German Darwinian scientists accepted that biological laws could be applied to social institutions, politically they were almost uniformly anti-socialist – a perspective that had as much to do with their social class location as it did to their understanding of the link between the social and natural sciences (p. 126). However, as the nineteenth century progressed, and the German socialist movement grew, liberalism lost many of its earlier progressive connotations, and, as conservative critics reacted to the socialist application of his work, Haeckel moved to the right in an attempt to distance himself from the Marxist Darwinists in the SPD.\(^{35}\)

Undoubtedly, the most popular book written by a Marxist Darwinist in late nineteenth-century Germany – going through fifty-three editions in its author’s lifetime – was

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\(^{31}\) Benton 2002. Darwin himself commented that the connection made by many Germans ‘between socialism and evolution by natural selection’ was a ‘foolish idea’ (Weikart 1998, p. 1).

\(^{32}\) Haeckel quoted in Benton 2002, p. 47.

\(^{33}\) Virchow was a progressive liberal member of parliament and a pioneer of cell theory (Benton 2002, p. 56).

\(^{34}\) In 1892, Haeckel argued that ‘Darwinism, or the theory of selection, is thoroughly aristocratic; it is based upon the survival of the best. The division of labour brought about by development causes an ever greater variation in character; an ever greater inequality among the individuals, in their activity, education and condition. The higher the advance of human culture, the greater the difference and gulf between the various classes existing. Communism and the demands put up by the Socialists in demanding an equality of conditions and activity is synonymous with going back to the primitive stages of barbarism’ (quoted in Pannekoek 1912, pp. 29–30).

\(^{35}\) Benton 2002, pp. 60–1.
Bebel’s *Women and Socialism* (p. 131). In this book, Bebel argued that ‘socialism was a logical consequence of Darwinian theory and that the Darwinists who were disputing this deduction . . . were influenced by class considerations, fear, or other base motives’ (pp. 134–5). Like Marx and Engels, Bebel saw a parallel between Darwin’s critique of static models of the natural world and the socialist critique of ahistorical apologies for capitalism: ‘Nothing is “eternal”’, he wrote, ‘neither in nature nor in human life; only fluctuation and change are eternal’ (p. 134). However, in contrast to the founders of historical materialism, ‘Bebel forthrightly applied Darwinian principles to social life’ (p. 138). For most social Darwinists, such an approach would imply an acceptance of the status quo, but Bebel argued that the lack of female – and indeed working-class – geniuses was not a product of their natural inferiority, but reflected the poor environment within which they lived: paralleling the waste of planting good seed on barren ground (p. 139). It followed for him that, if one were to improve the environment within which people grew to maturity, then the intellectual level of those individuals so raised would improve: as socialism would improve the lot of the poorest, it would realise the true potential of human evolution (p. 146). Bebel therefore argued that ‘according to my view Professor Haeckel, the resolute representative of the Darwinian theory, because he does not understand social science, actually has no idea of the fact that Darwinism is necessarily beneficial to socialism, and conversely socialism must be in harmony with Darwinism’. Marx and Engels would not have disagreed with this statement; however, Bebel went beyond their positive reception of Darwinism, such that he ‘never fully separated himself from the tendency to biologise society’ (p. 139). Thus he concluded his book with the argument that

socialism is not arbitrary destruction and reconstruction, but a natural process of development, that all the elements of dissolution on the one hand and of growth on the other, are factors which act because they cannot do otherwise, that neither ‘statesmen of genius’ nor ‘demagogues who stir up revolt’, can guide the course of events according to their will. They believe that they direct the current, and are borne along by it themselves.

If Bebel initiated the tendency within the Second International to reduce agency to non-human development forces in history, it was Karl Kautsky who developed the most sophisticated mechanical interpretation of Marxism, through ‘a much more thorough synthesis of Marxism and biological evolution’ (p. 152).

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36 Bebel’s book has gone through almost as many titles as it has editions: my copy has the title *Women in the Past, Present and Future.*
38 Bebel 1988, p. 257.
Kautsky had come to Marxism via Darwinism: ‘Marx and Engels . . . had started out from Hegel; I started out from Darwin’.\textsuperscript{39} Indeed, in the early days, Kautsky understood his theory of history to be ‘nothing other than the application of Darwinism to social development’ (p. 158). However, Kautsky, ‘unlike Darwin, . . . simply assumed that evolution involved progress’.\textsuperscript{40} By the 1890s, Kautsky had become aware of his previous misreading of Darwin’s system, and suggested that Marx’s theory of history could not be understood as a social application of Darwinism.\textsuperscript{41} This did not, however, lead him to drop his earlier evolutionary schema; rather, he simply re-described his theory of history in Lamarckian terms.\textsuperscript{42}

Kautsky’s Lamarckianism did not imply that he believed that social and natural evolutionary processes were identical. On the contrary, he maintained that ‘with man, . . . there begins a new kind of evolution’.\textsuperscript{43} Of central importance to the distinction between social and natural evolution was the fact that social evolution involved conscious human will in a way that was foreclosed to natural evolution.\textsuperscript{44} He therefore tempered his evolutionism with the claim that ‘each quality has its own laws, which hold good only for its domain, along with such laws as it shares with other qualities’: thus ‘laws of society can be arrived at only through studying society’.\textsuperscript{45}

Unfortunately, this insight did not lead Kautsky to break with mechanical forms of thinking. In the 1920s, he argued that ‘the advance and progress of the proletariat in capitalist society is irresistible. . . . It is inevitable that the process of economic development in the direction of socialism . . . will end with the abolition of all classes’.\textsuperscript{46} This argument was a more extreme case of a position he had elaborated twenty years previously, when, in \textit{The Road to Power}, he had written that socialist revolution is ‘irresistible because it is inevitable that the growing proletariat will defend itself against capitalist exploitation’.\textsuperscript{47} In this formulation, Kautsky appeared to hint at a less mechanical form of agency than that embraced in his later work. Indeed, in 1908, Kautsky criticised those for whom Marxism is a theory of ‘“blindly governing” “automatic” economic development’. These thinkers, he argued, failed to understand the importance of ‘human will’ in history.\textsuperscript{48} However, his discussion of the operation of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{39} Kautsky 1988, p. 6.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Bronner 1990, p. 35.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Kelly 1981, p. 125.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Kautsky 1988, p. 520 and Weikart 1998, p. 160. We can help explain Kautsky’s earlier misunderstanding of the relationship between Darwinian natural evolution and cultural evolution as a consequence of his acceptance of the authority of Haeckel on Darwin’s thought, as Haeckel accepted the Lamarckian argument of the inheritance of acquired characteristics (Weikart 1998, p. 68).
\item \textsuperscript{43} Kautsky 1988, p. 522.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Kautsky 1988, p. 523.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Kautsky 1988, p. 52.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Kautsky 1988, pp. 410–11.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Kautsky 1996, p. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Kautsky 1996, p. 21.
\end{itemize}
human will was itself mechanical: actors could only influence events in the modern world through the medium of parties; however, the growth of parties was itself a consequence of a mechanical process: ‘an independent labour party is bound to come sooner or later. And, once formed, such a party must have for its purpose the conquest of the government in the interest of the class which it represents. Economic development will lead naturally to the accomplishment of this purpose’.49

Once formed, what was the role of the socialist party? Kautsky began his answer to this question with the claim that capitalism undermined the intellectual growth of the working class, and consequently that science was the preserve of ‘bourgeois intellectuals’.50 It was then the role of radical intellectuals, when organised into socialist parties, to introduce socialism to the working class from without: ‘the proletariat is incapable of creating on its own account a viable socialist theory. Such a theory has to be brought to it’.51 As this is the account of the formation of working-class socialist consciousness that Lenin took up in What Is to Be Done?, Geary suggests that Kautsky’s Marxism ‘was less mechanistic than that of many of his critics’.52 But, in arguing this, Geary misunderstands the nature of mechanical Marxism. That Kautsky’s Marxism was complex and mediated did not prevent it from being mechanical, in fact it meant that it was doubly so. First, capitalism, in a mechanical way, created both the objective conditions – the working class – and the subjective conditions – the socialist party – for socialism. Second, the party mechanically introduced socialist consciousness to the working class. Socialist parties were therefore mechanically produced by history; they then mechanically acted on the working class, whose victory was consequentially inevitable. Thus, Kautsky famously expressed his political passivity; ‘the Social Democratic Party is a revolutionary party, but not a party that makes revolutions’.53

Was this position a consequence of Kautsky’s confusion of natural and social history, as Colletti argues? Weikart suggests three reasons for rejecting this claim: first, Kautsky explicitly denied that his ‘evolutionary theory affected his social views’; second, ‘Marx and Engels adopted Darwinism and were not centrists; third, ‘Kautsky’s contemporary opponents on the left . . . upheld basically the same conception of evolution and scientific determinism’ (p. 184). But if it was not the evolutionary component of Kautsky’s Marxism that explains his political centrism, what did? Weikart does not give an answer to this question, but we can trace a coherent story from Marx and Engels’s early criticisms of Kautsky’s Marxism, to the criticisms mounted by Luxemburg,

49 Kautsky 1910, p. 47.  
50 Salvadori 1979, p. 77.  
51 Quoted in Geary 1987, p. 31.  
53 Kautsky 1996, p. 34. In his defence of ‘orthodoxy’ in the revisionist debate with Bernstein, Kautsky had similarly suggested ‘that the word ‘revolutionary’ may be misleading’ as a description of the role of a SPD member (Kautsky 1983, p. 30).
Pannekoek and Lenin which suggest that Weikart is correct to dismiss claims that the fundamental weakness with Kautsky’s Marxism – and of the German socialism of the period more generally – lay in its confusion of natural and social development.

**Kautsky and the state**

The German Social Democratic Party was formed at the unity conference at Gotha in 1875. Weaknesses with the programmatic basis for the merger of two groups at the centre of this process caused Marx to pen one of his most devastating criticisms of the German socialist party: *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*. In this document, he poured scorn on the claim that the SPD would fight for a ‘free state’, insisting that, in the transitional period from capitalism to communism, the state could only exist as ‘the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat’, and that, in avoiding this issue, the SPD had opened itself up to a possible evolution towards liberalism. A similar concern underpinned Engels’s critique of the revamped programme, written by Kautsky and Bernstein, and presented to the Erfurt Conference of 1891. While Engels welcomed the *Erfurt Programme* as an improvement on Gotha, he, like Marx before him, criticised the failure of the Germans to address the question of state power scientifically: ‘The political demands of the draft have one great fault. It lacks precisely what should have been said’. Noting that ‘opportunism’ was ‘gaining ground in large sections of the Social-Democratic press’, Engels argued that it was incumbent upon the framers of the programme to clearly spell out to the German workers that the transition to socialism could only come ‘by force’. Indeed, he insisted, if the SPD did not make this clear then, in the long run, the party would go ‘astray’:

> The forgetting of the great, the principal considerations for the momentary interests of the day, this struggling and striving for the success of the moment regardless of later consequences, this sacrifice of the future of the movement for its present, may be ‘honestly’ meant, but it is and remains opportunism, and ‘honest’ opportunism is perhaps the most dangerous of all!

So, like Marx, he reminded his comrades, ‘our party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic. This is even the specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat’.

While part of the reason for Kautsky’s ambivalent discussion of the state in the

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54 Marx & Engels 1968, p. 313.
58 Ibid.
Erfurt Programme can be related to the way in which he was attempting, quite reasonably, to circumvent the Prussian censors, there was a deeper basis for the ambiguity in his thought; he ‘considered the peaceful and legal road to power within the framework of democratic representative institutions both possible and desirable’.\footnote{Salvadori 1979, p. 41.} And, although he occasionally argued that the peaceful road to socialism in Germany would be impractical, he nowhere ‘brought the question of what organizational techniques were necessary to prepare for the possible use of violence, even if purely defensively, by the working class’.\footnote{Salvadori 1979, p. 69.} Indeed, Kautsky’s failure to fully comprehend the issue of state power underpinned his increasingly passive political theory; which proved such an inadequate response to the shift to the right in the party from the revisionist controversy to the outbreak of war.

Bernstein opened the revisionist debate with the claim that contemporary economic trends had disproved Marx’s theory of crisis and thus rendered irrelevant his concept of revolution. In particular, he argued that Marx’s ‘theory of breakdown’ and his ‘theory of immiseration’ had been refuted by the test of history: hopes for a revolution were therefore utopian; a more realistic strategy would require the formalisation of the SPD’s existing practical reformism.\footnote{Bernstein 1993. In respect of this argument, Weikart reasserts his thesis that an advocacy of biological evolution did not entail a rejection of revolutionary politics: Bernstein explicitly premised his evolutionary socialism on contemporary economic trends, and rejected the suggestion that a direct link could be inferred between biological evolutionism and political evolutionism (Weikart 1998, p. 197).} In response to this challenge to orthodoxy, Kautsky outlined a detailed theoretical critique of his thesis – crucially, he showed that Marx had formulated neither a ‘theory of breakdown’ nor a ‘theory of immiseration’.\footnote{Kautsky 1983; Colletti 1972, p. 52.} Unfortunately, despite the power of this critique, Kautsky refused to engage seriously in a struggle for hegemony against the revisionists within the German socialist movement:

If I could act to get the [revisionists] to leave the party without causing a split, I would do so. But unfortunately I have to recognize them as party comrades, since any attempt to drive them out would involve evils even worse than those created by their presence.\footnote{Salvadori 1979, p. 78.}

Now, this tactic can arguably be read as a reasonable, non-sectarian attempt to maintain the unity of the SDP. However, as Kautsky wrote these lines, it was becoming increasingly clear that, despite the formal defeat of revisionism at party congresses, revisionist ideas were becoming hegemonic within the leadership of both the SPD and the union movement. This new balance of forces became apparent in the years

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\item \footnote{Salvadori 1979, p. 41.}
\item \footnote{Salvadori 1979, p. 69.}
\item \footnote{Bernstein 1993. In respect of this argument, Weikart reasserts his thesis that an advocacy of biological evolution did not entail a rejection of revolutionary politics: Bernstein explicitly premised his evolutionary socialism on contemporary economic trends, and rejected the suggestion that a direct link could be inferred between biological evolutionism and political evolutionism (Weikart 1998, p. 197).}
\item \footnote{Kautsky 1983; Colletti 1972, p. 52.}
\item \footnote{Salvadori 1979, p. 78.}
\end{itemize}
that immediately followed the formal defeats of revisionism at the SPD congresses of 1899, 1901 and 1903; defeats from which revisionism unfailingly grew in strength.\textsuperscript{64}

At the 1905 SPD congress in Jena, the Left carried the party and won a formal acceptance of the mass strike policy; however, this policy stood in opposition to another motion adopted earlier in the year by the trade unions at their congress in Köln: here, it was agreed that the mass strike could not even be discussed. The contradiction between these two statements was formally ‘solved’ at the 1906 party congress in Mannheim. Unfortunately, this solution to the rift between the party and the unions merely reflected the growing hegemony of the revisionist trade-union leaders within the German socialist movement: it was simply declared that the contradictory Köln and Jena resolutions were not in fact in contradiction.\textsuperscript{65} Kautsky proceeded to celebrate this vote as a victory for the Left: ‘a great affirmation of the revolutionary spirit of the German workers’ movement’. It was, however, as Salvadori argues, a ‘historic victory of the trade-union bureaucracy and the retreat of the party before its show of force’.\textsuperscript{66} Schorske suggests that it was from this point onwards that the passivity of Kautsky’s Marxism became most apparent. He was happy to win a formal acceptance of his position at the party’s national level, while ceding the real leadership of the German workers’ movement to the increasingly reformist trade-union and party bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{67} He acted in this way because his main fear was of a split inside the SPD that would harm the prospects for socialism: he could not understand how, in certain circumstances, a split might be unavoidable if the basis for unity declined beyond a reasonable point.

Thus, Kautsky attempted to hold together the various factions within the SPD under the umbrella of the \textit{Erfurt Programme}. Initially, the Left accepted Kautsky’s lead, and stood alongside him; however, within six years of the revisionist controversy, those who stood to Kautsky’s left became Erfurt’s, and his, greatest critics. The context for this shift in the political alignments within the SPD was the debate over the mass strike occasioned by the Russian Revolution of 1905. The most important contributor to this debate was Rosa Luxemburg, who argued both that economic struggles for reform could generalise into revolutionary social movements, and that the bureaucratic structures of the trade-union movement would act as a conservative fetter on such movements. This insight provided Luxemburg with a much more profound explanation for the rise of revisionism than was known to Kautsky. For Luxemburg, revisionism was not simply an issue of theoretical error in the context of economic expansion; it was deeply rooted in the structure of modern trade unionism. Indeed, she insisted that the characteristically capitalist separation between politics and economics had as

\begin{itemize}
  \item Schorske 1983, pp. 16–24.
  \item Schorske 1983, p. 49.
  \item Salvadori 1979, p. 113.
  \item Schorske 1983, p. 115; Salvadori 1979, pp. 63; 113.
\end{itemize}
its organisational expression the division between parliamentary socialism and simple trade unionism.\textsuperscript{68} Thus, Bernsteinism grew as the theoretical expression of interests of the trade-union bureaucracy: a layer whose condition of life was, in many ways, divorced from that of the mass membership of the unions.\textsuperscript{69}

In close connection with these theoretical tendencies is a revolution in the relations of leaders and rank and file. In place of the direction by colleagues through local committees, with their admitted inadequacy, there appears the business-like direction of the trade union officials. The initiative and the power of making decisions thereby devolve upon the trade union specialists, so to speak, and the more passive virtue of discipline upon the mass of members. This dark side of officialdom also assuredly conceals considerable dangers for the party.\textsuperscript{70}

This analysis of the conservatism of the trade-union bureaucracy placed Luxemburg in a much more critical relationship to the trade-union leaders who held sway within the SPD, than did the position taken by Kautsky. Regrettably, however, Luxemburg was slow to complement her theoretical break with Kautskyism with an organisational break with the SPD, as she believed that the hold of the bureaucracy of the trade unions over their members would be easily overcome through the coming revolution:

\begin{quote}
Whether they stand aside or endeavour to resist the movement . . . [the trade union bureaucrats] will simply be swept aside . . . as in a revolutionary mass action the political and economic struggle are one, and the artificial boundary between trade union and social democracy . . . is simply swept away.\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

Luxemburg’s failure to match her theoretical insights about the conservative nature of the trade union and SPD leaderships with an organisational break with this social layer was thus rooted in her overly-optimistic model of the forthcoming revolution. Conversely, Kautsky’s tendency to bend in the face of the pressure from the revisionist wing of the SPD was built upon stronger theoretical foundations than his predilection for unity against fragmentation: he had never fully accepted Marx and Engels' s critiques of the Gotha and Erfurt programmes. This became apparent in 1910, when a growing

\textsuperscript{68} Luxemburg 1986, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{69} Luxemburg 1986, pp. 87; 81. Schorske argues that ‘if we look back over the great issues on which the Socialist movement divided in the years 1906–1909, we discover that in all those in which the trade-unions threw their weight into the scales the reformist attitude was the one to prevail’. He explains this, as did Luxemburg, by the conservative function and structure of the union bureaucracy (Schorske 1983, pp. 108; 127). Similarly, Salvadori notes that Kautsky failed to comprehend that which Luxemburg so clearly perceived: ‘that a cleavage between a “goal” that was socialist and a “means” that was ever more thoroughly administered by a conservative and moderate bureaucracy, which was now concerned to fortify the organisation solely within the dominant system’ (Salvadori 1979, p. 144).
\textsuperscript{70} Luxemburg 1986, p. 88.
\textsuperscript{71} Luxemburg 1986, p. 80.
strike wave in Germany converged with the political struggle over suffrage. Luxemburg led the Left in the SPD during this period and did everything in her power to move the party to aid the radicalisation of the class struggle; while the trade-union leaders did everything they could to thwart her efforts. In the ensuing intra-party conflict, Luxemburg’s call for a mass strike was censored throughout the party’s press; including in Kautsky’s *Neue Zeit*, while Kautsky himself rallied to the Right with an appeal for a return to the parliamentary tactic.\(^72\) Why did he do this? Superficially, it was because he now saw the Left, rather than the Right, as the main threat to party unity. However, there was a high price to pay for the unity that Kautsky craved: his model of the coming socialist revolution increasingly converged in practice with Bernstein’s reformism. Thus, where Lenin later insisted that the existing state machine must be ‘smashed’ were a socialist revolution to succeed, for Kautsky, the state should instead be ‘seized’, and seized if at all possible through parliamentary means.\(^73\) It was from this point onwards that Luxemburg decisively broke with Kautsky: she argued that his conciliatory stance in the face of the party’s shift to the right reflected the practical convergence of his Marxism with revisionism.\(^74\) Indeed, from around 1910, it appeared that Kautsky had finally embraced the parliamentarianism that was implicit to the *Erfurt Programme*, and which had been made explicit in Bernstein’s revisionism. This position implied breaks both with Marx’s theory of the state and his conception of social change: the self-emancipation of the working class was to be mediated by Reichstag deputies. It was on the basis of this stance that Pannekoek characterised Kautskyism as a ‘theory of inactive expectancy’ and ‘passive radicalism’: Kautsky, Pannekoek argued, failed to comprehend the revolution as a revolution ‘against’ rather than ‘for’ state power.\(^75\)

Interestingly, despite the force of this criticism, Pannekoek himself was, like Kautsky, a keen Darwinian. Natural selection, he suggested, operated on animals at the level of the organ, while, in the case of humanity, the social selection process operates, fundamentally, on tools.\(^76\) So, while humans and animals are distinct, ‘the same principle’ of evolution applies to both Darwinism and Marxism; albeit that the former refers to natural processes, whereas the latter can only be applied to social processes. Indeed, Pannekoek suggested that the Darwinian process of tool perfection will continue under socialism; well after the class struggle itself had ended.\(^77\) This argument generally paralleled Kautsky’s; however, Pannekoek moved beyond the ‘Pope of Marxism’ when he argued that, while the types of tools that we utilise evolve, the

\(^{73}\) Geary 1987, pp. 75; 77; compare Geras 1976, pp. 159–60.
\(^{74}\) Nettl 1969, p. 285.
\(^{75}\) Quoted in Lenin 1968, p. 342; Salvadori 1979, pp. 156, 158.
\(^{76}\) Pannekoek 1912, p. 50.
\(^{77}\) Pannekoek 1912, p. 58.
process of social evolution only underpins the class struggle, it does not determine its outcome. Rather, the class struggle is the struggle for the mastery of the tools that have been perfected by Darwinian processes in social history:

The class struggle which is not a struggle with tools but for the possession of tools, a struggle for the right to direct industry, will be determined by the strength of class organisation.\textsuperscript{78}

Pannekoek suggested that social evolutionary processes would come to favour the forces of socialism: as technology evolves, the developing ‘concentration of capital undermines capital itself, for it diminishes the bourgeoisie whose interest it is to maintain capitalism, and it increases the mass which seeks to abolish it’.\textsuperscript{79} However, while Pannekoek’s conceptualisation of the process of technical development was evolutionary, he did not mechanically draw political conclusions from this process. Instead, he attempted to relate the objective process of technological evolution to the subjective process of class struggle, and to break free from the tendency, characteristic of Second-International thinkers, to reduce subjective processes to their objective determinants.

Lenin\textsuperscript{80} while somewhat slower to recognise the limitations of Kautskyism than were Luxemburg and Pannekoek, had, by 1917, concluded that Pannekoek’s characterisation of the theoretical roots of Kautsky’s centrist were largely correct: ‘in this controversy, it is not Kautsky but Pannekoek who represents Marxism, for it was Marx who taught that the proletariat cannot simply win state power . . . but must smash this apparatus’.\textsuperscript{81}

**Conclusion**

All of the key Marxist theorists discussed here – with the partial exception of Bebel – insisted that social and natural laws of development were distinct, and should not be

\textsuperscript{78} Pannekoek 1912, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{80} Lenin, like Luxemburg, wrote little that could be cited to positively substantiate Weikart’s claim to the effect that all of Kautsky’s left-wing opponents accepted that Marxism should be underpinned by a Darwinian component. However, it is reasonable to assume that Weikart is correct to argue that Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg assumed the compatibility of Marxism and Darwinism: indeed, Trotsky argued, ‘Marxism is the application of Darwinism to human society’ (Pomper (ed.) 1986, p. 48). On Luxemburg’s interest in natural history see Foster 2000, p. 240; for Lenin, see Anderson 1995, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{81} Lenin 1968, p. 343. It is perhaps apt to note here that John Holloway’s recent critique of the statism of both reformist and revolutionary socialists willfully misrepresents this division (Holloway 2002, pp. 11–18). In fact, Holloway confuses the positions of Lenin and Luxemburg with that of Kautsky in a rather crude attempt to dismiss the revolutionary tradition associated with the formers’ names. It is not therefore surprising that Holloway himself, despite his claim to have superseded that tradition, contributes nothing of substantial strategic value to the socialist movement: ‘How then do we change the world without taking power? At the end of this book, as at the beginning, we do not know’ (Holloway 2002, p. 215).
confused. Moreover, in so far as they accepted an evolutionary component to their model of social development, it was evolutionary in a Lamarckian rather than Darwinian sense – Weikart notes that it was the non-Marxist socialist Darwinists who held that cultural history could be explained by Darwinian methods (pp. 97–8). Lamarckianism, while inept as an explanation for natural evolution, is a more powerful model of cultural development. However, even as a model of social evolution, Lamarckianism is severely inadequate: it suggests no conservative forces that might seek to hinder a simple evolutionary path to progress, and therefore it is incapable of fully comprehending the dialectical relationship between social evolution and social revolution, whereby developments in the forces of production set the parameters within which actors can collectively struggle to remodel social relations, that is at the core of Marx’s theory of history. Given this fact, could Kautsky’s Lamarckianism help explain his shift to the right? While no serious scholar could deny the link between Kautsky’s theory of history and his political centrism, as Weikart points out, Kautsky’s centrism in particular, and the centrism of the bulk of the Second International in general, cannot be reduced to their positive reception of evolutionary theory – too many other Marxists of various political persuasions have insisted that Marxism incorporates an evolutionary element to its theory of history. In a sense, this is the negative success of Weikart’s book; it demonstrates that explanations of the centrism of the leadership of the Second International cannot be explained, as Colletti attempted, as the corollary of the supposed Darwinism of Kautsky et al. But if Kautsky’s centrism cannot be reduced to his supposed socialist Darwinism, what then explains it? I have argued that both Lenin and Pannekoek realised that it was Kautsky’s rejection of Marx’s theory of the state that fundamentally informed his move to the right, and that this shift was itself underpinned by his desire to maintain unity with what Luxemburg clearly saw were an increasingly conservative layer of trade-union and party officials. Kautsky’s failure to divorce his fate from that of this bureaucratic layer, while aided by his naïve evolutionism, is therefore best understood as a consequence of his rejection of Marx’s political theory in the context of an existing reformist practice. As Timpanaro argues, ‘one should not forget that in all political movements theoretical degeneration comes after an opportunist practice has already taken root – an opportunist practice that remains disguised by the solemn reaffirmation of sacred principles which are

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82 Pannekoek argued that ‘Darwinism and Marxism are two distinct theories, one of which applies to the animal world, while the other applies to society. They supplement each other in the sense that, according to the Darwinian theory of evolution, the animal world develops up to the stage of man, and from then on, that is, after the animal has risen to man, the Marxian theory of evolution applies. When however, one wishes to carry the theory of one domain into that of the other, where different laws are applicable he must draw wrong inferences’ (Pannekoek 1912, p. 33).
Kautsky’s Darwinism, while an easy target of those ultra-leftists who wish to reaffirm a voluntarist theory of history, cannot adequately explain either his renegacy, or the collapse of the Second International in 1914. The key problem with that institution was not its allegiance to an evolutionary model of history, though the crudity of this model was unhelpful, but was rather that it progressively allowed the increasingly conservative trade-union bureaucracy to dictate its strategy and tactics, and without an adequate theory of the state and revolution, let alone of imperialism, Kautsky was unable to resist the shift to the right, and, indeed, contributed to it.

References

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Timpanaro 1975, p. 120.


Many leftist social scientists and activists, including this reviewer, have been literally bowled over by the recent explosion of academic and popular analyses utilising the concept of ‘social capital’. This new intellectual fashion raises many questions. Is social-capital thinking in some sense progressive, creating an opening for class, gender, racial, and ethnic concerns to play a more constitutive role in economic policy debates? Does it provide a useful angle from which to evaluate the evident decline of citizenship and social solidarity in that most capitalist, most commodified society, the United States? Does it offer socialist development theorists and anti-(capitalist)-globalisation activists an intellectual weapon, or at least a terrain, that can be used to contest the regressive, poverty-fuelling modes of development imposed by transnational corporations, the IMF, World Bank, and developed country governments? Or is capital the dominant element in the social-capital pairing, that is, is social capital merely the latest form of neoliberal ideology extending its desocialised image of the economic into new social realms?

Through a detailed account of the origins and development of social-capital analysis in economics, sociology, and political science, Social Capital versus Social Theory provides answers to these questions. Its overall verdict is that social capital mainly serves capital rather than the social. Ben Fine locates social capital in the context of the ongoing colonisation of non-economic social sciences by neoclassical economics, and the corresponding suppression and decline of radical political economy in the age of neoliberalism and globalisation. The paradox is that this ‘economic imperialism’ is happening precisely at a time when the shortcomings of neoclassical theory – its hardcore methodological individualism, its reliance on a combination of abstract-ideal models and crude empiricism, and its unattractiveness to the historically, socially, and institutionally inclined – have never been more apparent. Fine shows that an immanent critique of social capital can help account for this paradox and, more positively, help reclaim a space in the social sciences for a critical political economy more structurally and historically cognisant of important dimensions such as class, gender, race, and ethnicity – a political economy that directly contests neoclassical conceptions of the
economic rather than merely acting as their social auxiliary or conscience. Fine’s analysis is also a salutary warning to left activists and scholars of the dangers of being co-opted by capitalist ideology and policy making under the influence of progressive sounding phrases and intellectual fads such as social capital.

**Desocialising capital and capitalising the social**

As a prelude, Fine outlines the Marxist conception of capital as a historically specific material and social relation defined by the separation of workers from necessary conditions of production and the control of these production conditions by a minority class of capitalists. He uses this conception to sketch an initial critique of the tensions between ‘social’ and ‘capital’ in social capital, showing how these tensions stem from an implicit acceptance (from neoclassical theory) of a concept of narrowly economic capital as an asocial, ahistorical construct. In short: ‘If social capital seeks to bring the social back in to enrich the understanding of capitalism, it does so only because it has impoverished the understanding of capital by taking it out of its social and historical context’ (p. 39).

Fine’s Marxist conception also emphasises the many forms that capital takes on as it accumulates – as capital or value in process moves through its circuit of money, commodities (labour-power and means of production), production, produced commodities, and back to money (sales revenue). Moreover, capitalism leads to the commodification and capitalisation of more and more activities and use-values, or their conversion into conditions of commodity production and capital accumulation even when they are not directly commodified (with schools becoming labour-power training centres for capitalist enterprise, for example). Taken together, capital’s multiform character, and its tendency to convert almost anything into a means of money making, create what Fine terms the ‘social capital fetish’: the illusion that anything can be capital even apart from capitalism’s specific class relations. This helps explain the extremely expansive scope of social capital as a concept, as it seems to encompass anything that contributes to economic growth, but which cannot be reduced to the core building blocks of neoclassical theory, namely, utility-maximising individuals and the physical and financial assets they accumulate.

With these general perspectives in hand, Fine ‘charts the general rise of social-capital thinking across the social sciences’ (p. 131), beginning with the arch economic imperialist, University of Chicago economist Gary Becker.¹ He shows how Becker’s attempt to treat non-economic relations and choices in terms of a pure exchange and utility-maximisation model – mimicking neoclassicism’s desocialisation of economic relations

¹ Becker 1976, and 1996.
– created various conundrums especially when dealing with collective behaviours and the social structuring of individual behaviour. Faced with these difficulties, Becker tried to ‘bring the social back in’ by extending individuals’ preferences and utility-production functions to incorporate social norms regarding such factors as respect, recognition, prestige, acceptance, and power. This is where Becker employed the term social capital as a complement to the human capital concept that he had earlier pioneered.

Obviously, social capital could not have helped neoclassical economics colonise other social sciences without the presence of Trojan Horses within the latter – two leading ones being James Coleman in sociology and Robert Putnam in political science. Following Becker (with whom he co-taught a course at Chicago), Coleman sought to apply rational choice to a broad array of social relationships. Initially championing social exchange theory, which tried to explain the social as the outcome of individual interactions, Coleman responded to the resulting conundrums and gaps (stemming from the absence of any concept of structural determination) by shifting his terminology to that of social capital, viewed as a source of human capital. For example, a strong family background (defined in terms of a traditional Catholic upbringing) was associated with better performance in school.²

Fine shows how, in developing and popularising such conservative analyses, Coleman opportunistically employed a combination of crude empiricist methods, simplistic analogies with mainstream economics (for example, social capital as a solution to public good problems), and a downplaying of the roots of his new social-capital thinking in social exchange theory – the last so as to make the analyses more palatable to less methodological individualist sociologists. Coleman was not above chiding economists for failing to take the social into account, even though his social-capital analysis had the effect of converting sociology into an auxiliary discipline oriented toward colouring in the ‘social and historical’ conditions taken as given by neoclassical economics, so that any concern with the historically specific (for example, exploitative and conflictive) character of these conditions was greatly softened if not completely lost.

Like Coleman, Putnam used the term social capital to describe associations and trust among individuals engaged in common activities. Arguing that such networking often has positive spill-over effects for other activities and other individuals, Putnam posited that increases in social capital lead to better governance and increased economic growth. Thus, he ‘explained’ northern Italy’s advanced economic development compared to southern Italy as an outcome of the former’s greater social capital.³ Putnam then

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³ Putnam 1993.
applied social capital to the United States, suggesting that the decline in US economic performance from the 1970s onward is largely explained by the reduced civic involvement of its population, as measured, for example, by a relative decline in bowling leagues compared to ‘bowling alone’ – the title of Putnam’s most famous book and article. As with Coleman, Putnam developed these arguments without contesting mainstream economic theory in general or neoclassical growth theory in particular; in fact, his analyses of social capital ‘exhibit[ed] a reliance upon atomistic concepts and data’, thus helping to ‘complete the process of making methodological individualism and limited economic content respectable’ (p. 95).

The primitive accumulation of social capital

For Fine, the work of Coleman and Putnam helps account for two features of the subsequent social-capital literature. First, it illuminates the loose relationship between current social-capital thinking and the earlier work of radical French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. While Bourdieu is often acknowledged as a founder of social capital, his actual analyses are rarely described let alone engaged in detail. Why? To answer this question, Fine first considers Bourdieu’s notion of capital as a kind of generalised power yielding income, wealth, and/or status. Fine shows how Bourdieu used this conception to construct various categories of capital – not only economic and social but also cultural and symbolic capital. Bourdieu evidently fell prey to the social-capital fetishism discussed earlier, and his ‘multifarious capitals’ find their pale reflection in the more recent tendency to treat all social, economically relevant, but not narrowly economic phenomena as social capital (p. 55). At the same time, Fine emphasises, Bourdieu always insisted on the proper contextualisation of social capital (and of other capitals) in terms of historically specific power relations. He thus can only be safely cited as a progenitor by mainstream social-capital thinkers insofar as his actual writings are ignored or very partially quoted so as to hide their historical and social content. The prior dehistoricisation of social capital by Coleman and Putnam both enables and necessitates such scholarly malpractice.

The point can be stated differently, in terms of what Fine calls the ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ contextualisation of social capital. The former says ‘that the very meaning of social capital itself is dependent upon the social and historical circumstances in which it is located’; whereas the latter ‘considers that meaning (of social capital)

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5 See Bourdieu 1986, and 1996.
6 For a recent case, see the casual, out-of-context reference to Bourdieu in the otherwise completely neoclassical survey by Sobel 2002.
as unproblematic but that its use, distribution, or whatever depends upon a whole range of accompanying conditions and circumstances that need to be specified’ (p. 104). Bourdieu argued for a strong (though overstretched and thus fragmented) contextualisation; Coleman and Putnam, at the most, for a weak contextualisation – and it is the latter preference that dominates the social-capital literature.

Second, Coleman’s and Putnam’s respective social-capital analyses demonstrate how conceptual and empirical weakness and a lack of real originality, far from preventing a ‘new’ social-scientific contribution from gaining influence and shaping subsequent research, may actually increase its prominence, if the contribution has the advantages of ‘dramatically denying conventional wisdom’ (preferably in a cosmetic way) and ‘straddling both academia and popular consciousness’ (p. 82). Given such advantages, even fundamental flaws in the contribution may have the effect of increasing its prominence, as it becomes the object of ‘a voluminous literature that prospers by devastatingly criticising [it] as point of departure’, whereupon ‘the initial contribution . . . survives by incorporating the criticism, not always successfully or coherently, and evolving in ways that remain influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the (false) starting point’ (p. 82). Fine calls such contributions ‘benchkins’ – an amalgam of Oz’s ‘munchkins’ and the surnames of the co-authors of a miserable, but highly influential, article in the *Journal of Political Economy* that blamed 1930s UK unemployment on excessive unemployment benefits.7 Given the demonstrated theoretical shallowness and empirical bankruptcy of Coleman’s and Putnam’s social-capital analyses, alongside the constant canonisation of both writers as having discovered the ‘missing link’ between the economic and the social, the ‘key to development’, and so forth, one can only agree with Fine’s application of the benchkin term in these two cases.

**Self-sustaining accumulation of social capital**

Fine goes on to show that, given its severe conceptual and empirical difficulties, ‘social capital [analysis] can only survive and prosper by expanding its scope of application’, as it responds to ambiguous outcomes in one sphere by moving on to others and by adding ever more variables as possible indicators of social capital. This process, powered by the academic publish-or-perish syndrome and the ongoing commercialisation of scholarship (fuelled by grants), has resulted in the application of social capital across such broad fields as ‘economic and social development, (dys)functional families, performance in schooling, community life, (work) organisation, democracy and governance, and collective action’ (p. 98) – with statistical correlations found (or not found) between a highly variegated set of proxies for social capital and

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innumerable specific phenomena within each of these broad fields (pp. 98–9, 101–2, 124–5, 158, 189–90). The social-capital literature is literally too big to count, and getting bigger.

Paradoxically, it is the decontextualised character of social-capital analysis that enables such unlimited scope of application. While the absence of a clear, shared definition means that social capital can be virtually anything, the lack of contextualisation (or, at most, weak contextualisation) means that it can be found anywhere. When one adds widespread academic access to computers and statistical software, and to social and economic data for a variety of locales and time periods, then one has a recipe for an exploding empirical literature with no logical end and no meaningful results – certainly no results of any direct use to policy makers.

Given its loose analytical underpinnings, it is not surprising that social capital is often used as a metaphor or heuristic device, frequently motivated by anecdote. Nonetheless, considerable intellectual capital has already come to be invested in it. Just as those who warned of an impending end to the recent stock market bubble were derided as backward impediments to the ‘New Economy’, so those fundamentally questioning the analytical value of social capital are labelled as ‘pessimists’ as opposed to the ‘optimists’ who continue to use it to increase the publishability and/or marketability of articles whose analytical content in no way hinges on the social-capital terminology employed. An example of the latter are the neoclassical high theorists who latch on to the bandwagon by writing abstract treatises on social capital as a tendency toward trust and/or ‘excess cooperation’ in prisoners’ dilemma games. The sociological parallel to this ‘abstract conceptual work’ is ‘the formal consideration of networks’ (p. 108). Both cases have their empirical counterparts. For high economic theory, the main one is the explosion of econometric work on ‘endogenous growth,’ in which economic growth rates are treated as statistical functions of various social indicators (proxies for social capital), rather than just labour, physical capital and given changes in technology as in traditional growth theory. Similarly, empirical works in sociology increasingly combine the terminologies of abstract network theory and social capital (pp. 108–14). These combinations, Fine effectively shows, suffer from the inadequate contextualisation of the concepts employed in the component analyses (for example, network theory’s tendency to reduce networks to a declasse...
degendered resource as a prelude to their commensuration with the supposedly social capital).

The intellectual opportunism of the social-capital dynamic is also reflected in the rewriting of whole scholarly histories in light of the newfound hegemony of the concept – as various articles and books are found to have ‘implicitly employed’ social capital even when they did not use the term. An example Fine mentions is ‘the database of abstracts of hundreds of contributions to social capital being compiled by the University of Michigan on behalf of the World Bank’. This database ‘covers a bewildering array of topics’, and roughly ‘two-thirds of the articles make no reference to social capital at all. Most predate its emergence’. In such ways, ‘the vast bulk of social theory and policy is being incorporated under the umbrella of social capital’ (p. 125).

**Accumulation of social capital on a world scale: the World Bank**

A key factor increasing the prominence of social capital has been its promulgation by the World Bank. Not only do the Bank’s own publications increasingly use the concept, but the Bank has financed a large body of academic research investigating the importance of social capital for economic development. Fine’s analysis demonstrates how the conundrums and tensions produced by social capital here take on specific forms, due to the Bank’s special role as an international capitalist institution combining regulatory, financial, and ideological functions. This includes the specific ways in which non-economist social scientists, as well as non-government organisations (NGOs), are selectively co-opted into analytical and policy deliberations dominated by mainstream economic thinking and capitalist priorities.

An important background element of this co-optation process is the extension of neoclassical economics to more social and institutional concerns, under the influence of the new economics of imperfect information as championed by, among others, Joseph Stiglitz, former World Bank Chief Economist. Fine convincingly argues that this latest form of economic imperialism in social science has both supported, and been supported by, the growing prevalence of social capital in World Bank thinking. By accommodating social capital as a solution to various market imperfections and public good problems, the new information economics creates a space for non-economists to ‘constructively’ contribute to policy discussions, that is, to participate without questioning the primacy of market forces and other capitalist relationships. As Fine puts it, ‘the social and its theorists are taken seriously by economists without questioning their economics’. Indeed, ‘it can appear to non-economists that the issues,

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11 On the new information-theoretic economics and its application to development, see Stiglitz 1989.
especially the social, with which they have long been engaged, and which have been so studiously ignored by economists in the past as unimportant or exogenous, are at last being taken seriously’, when what has actually happened is that ‘whilst economic analysis and economists have been granted a broader remit, the relationship is not reciprocated’ (pp. 154–5, 169). This helps explain why mainstream economists such as Stiglitz have embraced social capital, even though it is fraught with conceptual difficulties from the standpoint of a rigorously neoclassical (that is, desocialised) concept of capital as productive physical assets.\textsuperscript{12}

In parallel fashion, social capital gives the World Bank a framework for incorporating unions, NGOs, and other potentially disruptive social movements into policy discussions and development projects in a non-threatening way. Social-capital thinking, as underpinned by the new information economics, is less dogmatically opposed to state interventions (to correct market imperfections) and popular organisations (for example, to assist the state in welfare and public good provision) than was the previous ‘Washington Consensus’ based on hard-core neoliberalism. Activist states, unions, and NGOs may even be ‘warmly received’ as long as they do not question the primacy of markets and private property (p. 154).

For the World Bank, in short, social capital represents an opportunity to rationalise the fulfilment of its ideological and policy functions in an apparently ‘inclusive’ fashion that helps defuse intellectual and popular forces structurally opposed to capitalist globalisation in general and World Bank policies in particular. The Bank’s social-capital project is, however, loaded with tensions, as social scientists and rank-and-file members of social movements come to realise they are being co-opted (not all of them can be bought off). Even Stiglitz himself eventually had to go, due to his outlying nominal preferences (relative to the narrow neoclassical spectrum) for state interventionism, equity, and at least formal democracy.\textsuperscript{13}

But even while Stiglitz was employed by the Bank, the latter’s accumulation of social capital was extremely co-optive, popularly demobilising, and intellectually bankrupt. Fine’s detailed survey of the Bank’s dedicated social-capital website (and several of its satellites) yields five major findings. First, despite its departure from the ‘Washington Consensus’, the Bank’s social-capital thinking gives very limited allowance for either state intervention – especially in the pursuit of equity – or popular determination of state policies (substantive democracy). Social capital is often treated as a substitute for explicit government regulations, or as a way of making predetermined

\textsuperscript{12} For criticisms of social capital by two Nobel Prize winning neoclassical economists, see Arrow 2000, pp. 3–5, and Solow 2000, pp. 6–10. For Stiglitz’s endorsement of social-capital thinking, see Stiglitz 2000, pp. 59–68; and 1998, pp. 29–30; and 2001, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{13} On the limits of Stiglitz’s progressivism, see Standing 2000; and Burkett and Hart-Landsberg 2003.
regulatory frameworks function more effectively. It is even used as a rationale for privatisation of government services – the idea being that these services are best provided by private ‘horizontal’ networks instead of the ‘vertical’ (and thus inherently bureaucratic and inefficient) networks characterising state-citizen relations.14

Second, the World Bank uses social capital to complement, not fundamentally reassess, standard economics. The Bank’s social-capital thinking embraces the primacy of economic growth, the efficacy of free trade and openness to foreign direct investment for promoting growth, and the reduction of education to a means of accumulating ‘human capital’. Third, the Bank treats various social phenomena, such as conflict, family, and ethnicity, in ‘simplistic and reductionist’ fashion – ignoring the ‘rich intellectual traditions’ addressing these areas ‘in order to import social capital as an organising concept’ (pp. 156–7). Fourth, the Bank has effectively reproduced the dichotomy of social and capital by accepting ‘the presumption that capital in [some narrowly economic] sense is non-social’. The specificity of capitalist relations is thus submerged in the process by which the social is ‘separately assigned to the component of social capital’ (p. 158).

Fifth, and following from the last three results, the Bank’s social capital is a historically decontextualised concept that basically ‘fills out everything that is not already taken care of in terms of standard economic analysis. In principle, it could be anything’ (p. 158). Unfortunately, the conceptual elasticity of social capital does more than open up a playing field for crude empiricism and the retrospective interpretation (and distorting simplification) of social-scientific traditions. Fine documents how the Bank and its hired scholars have selectively applied the category, so that, as regards the search for potential sources of social capital (potential ‘partners in development’) the grassroots networks forged by militant worker-community movements are left out, while the more co-optable organisations are left in – due, for example, to the latter’s more ‘constructive’ or ‘realistic’ attitude toward capitalist and other power structures. This occurs even when (or perhaps precisely because) the more co-optable organisations are clearly more ‘vertical’ than the grassroots movements. In short, ‘despite its popular rhetoric, social capital can also be seen as a potential means of formalizing and institutionalizing participation, the better to be able to centralize and control it!’ (p. 165).

**Alternatives to social capital**

The functioning of social capital as a means of co-optation and control intensifies the need for alternative socio-economic analyses. Fine sketches the outlines of one such

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14 On social capital as an ideology of privatisation, see also Champlin 1997, pp. 577–80.
alternative through an (at first sight) arcane discussion of ‘theoretical issues raised by the problem of how social capital might be measured, drawing upon standard literature from within economics’. In this way, ‘the underlying problems with social capital are confirmed from another angle’, while ‘some light is thrown on the way in which the concerns associated with the use of social capital might be more usefully addressed’ (p. 20).

Fine first shows that the neoclassical utility and capital theories have little if any potential for the development of a measurable concept of social capital. The utility approach to individuals’ choices is purely ordinal, so that ‘all we can say is that we have more or less social capital, we cannot say how much we have in absolute terms’. Utility theory also requires continuous preference orderings, thereby excluding situations where one alternative cannot be compensated by any amount of another – unlike ‘social interaction’ which is likely to be ‘subject to strict hierarchies and exclusions’. And, as is well known from the controversies surrounding ‘social welfare functions’, the difficulties with utility theory ‘are worsened for a society of individuals let alone for comparisons across societies’ (p. 177).15 As for neoclassical capital theory, over three decades ago, the ‘Cambridge Capital Debate’ revealed that, outside of a one-good economy (in which ‘just one good serves as both capital and consumption’), it ‘becomes impossible to define capital as a physical quantity or, by some other measure, as the basis for determining levels of output or distribution between capital and labour’. In short, the neoclassical concept of physical capital ‘cannot legitimately be measured and then used to explain or even measure consequential economic outcomes’, the problem being that ‘once we have more than one good, . . . then the measurement of capital . . . depends on the relative evaluation of the two [or more] goods’ (p. 179).16 These difficulties apply with full force to social capital. Given that social capital most likely ‘require[s] some resources to create or preserve it’, any attempt to measure its economic effects will require some valuation and netting out of these resources. But, unless it is assumed that these resources ‘are physically measurable against, or equivalent to, social capital itself’, their valuation requires that we already ‘know the economic effects of social capital’ – which presumes it has already been measured. ‘We are caught in an unbreakable loop’ (p. 179).

As Fine observes, it is ‘remarkable that the concept of social capital, and associated empirical studies, should have progressed so far, even if in a short time, without these issues having been satisfactorily addressed’ (p. 175). Moving deeper into this relatively unexplored territory, he considers the applicability of social-choice theory to the measurement of social capital. Can individuals’ ‘social interactions . . . be construed

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15 See Little 1957, Chapter 7.
16 For a thorough review, see Harcourt 1972.
in terms of their implicit preferences over different states of the world’? Such a ‘measurement or ranking of social capital requires that a social ordering be realised out of the configuration of individual orderings’ (p. 180). Here again, the main finding is that ‘only by chance will measures chosen for social capital satisfy the most basic properties even under the most simplifying conditions’. But, in this case, Fine argues that the difficulties ‘may be simplified if there are standard patterns of social capital across different socio-economic groups’. By restricting the domain of social choice in a non-artificial way, such patterns or norms of individual interactions lighten ‘the heavy hand of Arrow’s impossibility theorem’ under which ‘reasonable conditions on constructing an ordering of alternatives out of the configuration of individual orderings cannot be satisfied’ (pp. 181–2).17

This analysis shows that ‘it is possible to measure social capital’ (p. 182), at least in the limited sense of the social ordering of different ‘states of the world’ (pp. 180, 182). But, for Fine, it opens up the more interesting question as to how norms or patterns of social interaction should be conceptualised in relation to production, exchange, distribution, and consumption, that is, in terms of the big economic questions of what, how, and for whom to produce. This conceptual question clearly has priority over the problem of measurement.

In his search for an ‘alternative analysis with an appropriate causal and contextual content’, Fine considers postmodernism (p. 186). He strongly endorses the postmodernist ‘insight that (the meaning of) objects that economics and its disciples take as given are socially constructed’, and recognises how this may help social scientists criticise ‘the explicit or implicit incursions of economics into their discipline’. At the same time, however, Fine suggests that the postmodernist response to ‘rational choice and methodological individualism’, while ‘preserving a space for itself’, also has had the effect of conceding economic discourse as such to mainstream economics, ‘within economics itself as well as its application in other disciplines’ (p. 15). One symptom of this is the growing proclivity of erstwhile radical economists to play the game of using neoclassical methods to develop ‘progressive’ theoretical and policy arguments. In providing ‘an alternative that is acceptable to the establishment’, social-capital thinking has already proved quite attractive to such ‘scholarly Third Wayism’. It can accommodate ‘the ethical concerns of those who are well off’, including their desire for more ‘participatory’ development and policy making, and it offers a vision of ‘conflict giving way to positive sum outcomes’ (p. 196). As we have seen, however, social capital’s participation ‘is primarily participation from below imposed from above’, and its conflict resolution ‘is better seen, both in analysis and policy, as compromising with established doctrines and with economic and social engineering,

17 Arrow 1963.
whilst simultaneously absorbing and neutralizing more radical and coherent alternatives’ (p. 199).

Responding to this impasse, Fine proposes a further development of Marxian, class-based analysis. While taking ‘the understanding of the social and of capital as point of departure’, Fine’s alternative would carefully develop the mediations connecting the relations of production (wage-labour) and the overall process of material and social reproduction (p. 186). For instance, at the level of consumption, he suggests a ‘systems of provision’ approach ‘which recognises that consumption is dependent upon a range of social processes, structures, and relations which connect production to consumption, together with the material cultures attached to consumption’ – all ‘organized around specific products or groups of products’, for example, ‘the fashion system for clothes, the housing system, the food system, etc.’ (p. 184). In this way, the various material and social relations and practices currently dealt with under the amorphous category of social capital would be theorised jointly with capitalism’s class relations conceived as relations of material-social reproduction, not just narrowly economic relations. In such a project, the terminology ‘social capital’ is likely to be more of a hindrance than a help – ‘a recipe for invalid generalization and the omission of theoretical and historically specific insights according to the more or less arbitrary fashions by which the social capital literature evolves’ (p. 184).

In Fine’s view, the development and popularisation of such alternatives to social capital mainly depends upon the struggle for ‘scholarly integrity, genuine interdisciplinarity, and the resuscitation of political economy within and across the social sciences’ (p. 200). However, this is where his analysis may be too tightly focused and perhaps even out of date. If the post-1970s decline of radical political economy reflected the academic alienation of progressive scholars and the suppression of popular struggles, the more recent upsurge of worker-community movements contesting capitalist globalisation has created the potential for a resurgence of critical, anticapitalist thinking in the social sciences. The explosion of protests against the IMF, World Bank, WTO, and so forth, together with the obvious socio-economic malfunctions and injustices of the current system (growing inequality, poverty, speculative instability, waste, and ecological destruction, to name a few) has already pushed many adherents of postmodernism to embrace economic concerns and directly contest neoclassical economics and neoliberal policies.\textsuperscript{19}

Social capital arguably embodies – albeit in ideologically distorted fashion – the tensions between capitalism and socialism. Capitalism develops an increasingly complex

\textsuperscript{18} For the detailed development and application of provisions system analysis, see Fine and Leopold 1993; and Fine 1998.

\textsuperscript{19} See, for example, De Martino 2000.
and global division of labour, technology, and appropriation of nature; but this socialisation of production is driven and shaped by exploitative and competitive profit-making rather than the requirements of a sustainable, healthy and fulfilling human development. Socialism, the struggle to place human, social, and ecological needs in command of production, is an outgrowth of this fundamental contradiction between production for profit and human development. Social-capital thinking functions to co-opt, confine, and suppress this outgrowth in line with the requirements of capital accumulation. It follows that liberating alternatives to social capital can and should be developed through a critical engagement with, and participation in, popular struggles in and against wage-labour and other exploitative and oppressive relations. Those interested in pursuing this project will find a valuable resource in Ben Fine’s painstaking account and critique of social capital.

References


Burkett, Paul and Martin Hart-Landsberg 2000, Development, Crisis, and Class Struggle: Learning from Japan and East Asia, New York: St. Martin’s Press.


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20 Fine states that insofar as social capital ‘seeks to complement economic with social engineering’, it ‘might appropriately be understood as socialism/capitalism rather than social capital’ (p. 196).


Peasants into Farmers? The Transformation of Rural Economy and Society in the Low Countries (Middle Ages – 19th Century) in Light of the Brenner Debate
edited by Peter Hoppenbrouwers & Jan Luiten van Zanden
Turnhout: CORN Publication Series, 4 – Brepols Publishers, 2001
Reviewed by Jan Dumoly

Why Did Capitalism Not Arise in the Netherlands?

This collection of essays is the result of a conference on the social and economic history of the Low Countries (the contemporary Netherlands and Belgium) in the medieval and early-modern period, organised in 1994 at the University of Utrecht, ‘in light of the Brenner debate’, the well known discussion of the transition from feudalism to capitalism following Brenner’s 1976 article ‘Agrarian Class-Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe’,¹ in which a relation was sought between ‘social-property relations’ specific to different regions and the growth of an ‘agrarian capitalism’ producing for markets. A number of specialists of primarily the economic history of the countryside in the Southern and Northern Netherlands discussed this issue from different angles. Robert Brenner’s rejoinder includes a new summary of his general points of view on the social basis of economic development and a reply to specific critics concerning the economic trajectory of The Netherlands. Some of the papers in this book had not been delivered at the 1994 conference but were added later, such as the article by Jan de Vries, a leading scholar in the economic history of the Dutch Republic and early-modern Europe in general. Brenner carefully reconsidered and rewrote his original contribution considering new research results and criticisms of his approach. This must have been one of the reasons why the publication of this volume took so long. It is edited by Peter Hoppenbrouwers, professor of medieval history at the University of Amsterdam, and Jan Luiten van Zanden, professor of economic history at the University of Utrecht and author of The Rise and Decline of Holland’s Economy: Merchant Capitalism and the Labour Market.²

The CORN-publication series in which this volume is published makes up a new set of scholarly contributions to European rural history. ‘CORN’ is a somewhat artificial abbreviation for ‘Comparative Rural History of the North Sea Area’. This research

¹ Brenner 1985.
² Zanden 1993.
network was founded in 1995 on the initiative of the University of Ghent, under the general direction of Erik Thoen and financed by the Flemish National Science Foundation. It is composed of different research units that primarily want to study long-term developments of rural society from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. It focuses on the ‘North Sea Area’ (especially Belgium, The Netherlands, Britain and Northern France) from a comparative and interdisciplinary point of view. Hitherto, volumes on land productivity and agro-systems in the North Sea area, on marriage and rural economy in Western Europe and on labour and labour markets between town and countryside have appeared. Volumes on the state of research in rural history and on the management of common land are expected. For a group that wants to stimulate international comparative research, the so-called ‘Brenner debate’ is an interesting topic par excellence.

What is at stake in the Brenner debate is presumably common knowledge for most readers of *Historical Materialism*. It is a scientific discussion about explaining the differences in growth-patterns of north-western and eastern-European countries in the course of the transition from feudalism to capitalism and detecting the origins of modern capitalism in the countryside and not in the medieval cities or the growth of international trade. Brenner started with a critique of the generally received opinions on the economic development of this part of Europe: the so called ‘commercialisation model’, neo-Malthusian demographic theory, and what he labelled ‘neo-Smithian Marxism’ – the analysis of, among others, Paul Sweezy and Immanuel Wallerstein. In the course of this debate and later on, Brenner earned a reputation as one of the most innovative historians working from a Marxist perspective.

The editors give a rough sketch of the ‘historiographical fate’ of the Brenner thesis. It appears from a bibliometrical search that the Brenner debate has become a classic in handbooks and encyclopaedias of historiography and is often cited in theoretical, sociological or anthropological journals. This is however much less the case in historical journals in the more limited sense. Among most historians, the Brenner debate ‘was silently considered to have run its course’. Certainly, the discrediting of Marxism since the late 1980s has (temporarily?) contributed to this standstill in the debate. Social scientists use Brenner’s conclusion to enlighten contemporary debates, but they seldom add new relevant historical data to it. Social and economic historians have the last decade been on the defensive or sometimes seem to have lost interest in ‘grand theory’, ‘big structures’ and ‘large processes’, such as the discussion on the origin of the capitalist system. But perhaps the tide may be turning.

At any rate, if this volume on Dutch economic development provides an incentive to the pursuit of this important scientific debate, it is because a whole range of new empirical material is added which was up to now unavailable in international languages or only in a very scattered manner. Future case studies, explicitly confronting new findings with Brenner’s fundamental assumptions, might still prove very stimulating.
But, on the other hand, it is the impression of Hoppenbrouwers and Van Zanden that the distinctive elements of the Brenner thesis over the years have been ‘toned-down’. They propose to ‘translate’ the Marxist idiom of Brenner into the terminology of the neo-institutional economics (Douglas North) that has become so popular in economic history in the 1990s. According to this perspective, institutions are ‘social rules’ that ‘shape economic outcomes by influencing the costs, choices, and incentives for individuals’. It is hard to see the point of this ‘translation’. As they say, they are aware that it alters the content of the debate, though there seem to be striking similarities between core issues raised in these debates. But why unilaterally adapt instead of trying to communicate scientifically?

Moreover, their further claim that Robert Brenner himself has been responsive to this turn ‘so far as over the years his historical argumentation has become less social-political and more economic’ remains a rather mysterious one. Apart from the false dichotomy that is posed here – and especially and most obviously, of course, for historians writing in the broad tradition of historical materialism – Brenner’s recent *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London’s Overseas Traders, 1550–1653*,³ actually proves the contrary. He clearly remains concerned with how social classes wielded power and tried to control politics. Brenner does not seem to have altered his basic approach in any significant way, as is also proven by the succinct reformulation of his original theoretical views in his rejoinder at the end of the book. Though Hoppenbrouwers and Van Zanden may rightly criticise some aspects of this theory, which they judge too limited and narrow, I do not really see the improvement in their endeavour. However, it does not necessarily raise any scientific problems either and their contribution – as is the case for the other authors who co-operated in this volume – lies more in their powerful surveys of Dutch economic development in general and in specific angles like the economy of the county of Holland or proto-industrialisation. And this was indeed necessary in the international literature on medieval and early-modern social and economic history.

As the back cover of *Peasants into Farmers?* rightly argues, ‘in the debate that immediately followed Brenner’s first article, and in subsequent exchanges, the Low Countries were sorely neglected, although areas such as Flanders and Holland played a decisive role in the economic development of Europe’. It is explained that this was partly due to a lack of relevant publications in international languages. But, on the other hand, this shortcoming was also due to a lack of regional monographs and thematic studies even by Dutch and Flemish scholars writing in Dutch. This collection draws on a wide range of new research undertaken during the 1980s and 1990s, the results of which are now explicitly confronted with the Brenner thesis. In this respect,

the works of two of the Low Countries’ leading specialists in medieval agricultural history who undertook this confrontation right from the start in their own research but so far have only been published in Dutch must be mentioned: Erik Thoen’s *Landbouwekonomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen gedurende de late Middeleeuwen en het begin van de Moderne Tijden. Testregio: de kasselrijen van Oudenaarde en Aalst (eind 13de – eerste helft 16de eeuw)* (on the Flemish inland area) and Bas van Bavel’s *Transitie en continuïteit. De bezitsverhoudingen en de plattelandseconomie in het westelijke gedeelte van het Gelderse rivierengebied, ca. 1300–ca. 1570* (on the Dutch ‘river area’).

As Peter Hoppenbrouwers puts it, so far, the rather peculiar economic history of the Low Countries has only provided some footnotes to general discussions. This is an odd situation indeed, given the well-known importance of the Flemish and Brabantine economy in the later Middle Ages and sixteenth century and, of course, the even greater significance of the early-modern (Northern) Dutch economy in Europe and the world. Some factual data were accessible to scholars, but there has been a great lack of integration of these insights into a general theory of social and economic development, of what we might still call the transition to capitalism. Accordingly, Jan De Vries remarks that international surveys of economic history, whether they be neo-Malthusian, neo-institutionalist or neo-Marxist, again and again fail to provide convincing accounts of the economic success story of The Netherlands.

Immanuel Wallerstein’s *Modern World System*, on the period 1450–1650, is a typical example. The description and explanation of the economic miracle of the Dutch Republic, a factor which from his point of view should actually be fundamental, is treated in a very sketchy and unsatisfying manner. Robert Brenner himself had, of course, to a large extent ignored The Netherlands altogether in his initial account of the rise of agrarian capitalism. In fact, other early-urbanised regions, such as central and northern Italy are neglected in his analysis as well. The fact that, according to him, capitalism arose in the countryside is not sufficient to justify the lack of attention to these regions, which medieval and early-modern contemporaries considered to be economically the most dynamic. In a certain manner, Brenner has acknowledged this. As he puts it, ‘in view of the centrality of the economic history of the Low Countries to earlier stages of social scientific and historiographical discussion of the origins of capitalist development, the neglect of the Flemish and Dutch trajectories remains perplexing’. To a certain extent, the publication of this volume has filled this lacuna.

Suggesting that earlier social theory paid more attention to The Netherlands, Brenner is, of course, referring to Henri Pirenne’s important work on industry in the
late-medieval Flemish city and on social and economic development in general. The influence of Pirenne (who was himself deeply affected by the views of Max Weber) on allegedly ‘Smithian’ Marxists such as Paul Sweezy and Wallerstein is well-known. However, the refutation of the importance of the growth of commerce – in itself a typical feature for the Flemish and Dutch economy – and the shifting of scientific attention towards the countryside were further causes of the neglect of the economic history of The Netherlands. A last reason is perhaps the shortage – to say the least – of Belgian and Dutch historians writing from a Marxist perspective. If the atmosphere in academia – and not the least among historians – still remains hostile and contemptuous to anything resembling a historical-materialist approach, the organisers of this conference and editors of this volume clearly went against the current.

The medieval principalities of the southern Low Countries, among which the most important were Flanders, Brabant and Hainaut, roughly constitute contemporary Belgium. It is generally known that these included commercial gateway cities such as Bruges in the fourteenth and fifteenth century and Antwerp in the sixteenth century. The important role of Flemish and Brabantine cloth production oriented towards international markets – especially in large industrial towns like Ghent – is also recognised. Not a few scholars use the word ‘capitalism’ in this regard, and it must be said that there were certainly many ‘commercial-capitalist’ features in these economic formations. We could mention international trade and financial markets, but very early and important proto-industrialisation as well. In the largest cities, there was even a certain presence of wage-labour relations, though this certainly did not bring about any fundamental change. It is often forgotten, however, that industry and trade in the medieval southern Low Countries were supported by very intensive agriculture as well. Outside the specific field of specialised scholars on medieval agriculture, it is little known that especially some Flemish and Artesian regions had high land productivity. During the thirteenth century, these areas presumably produced the highest yield ratios in Europe and the production methods can be considered predecessors of the English ‘new husbandry’ system, though it must be said that labour productivity was on the contrary very low. The same goes roughly for early modern Holland.

Brenner’s thesis tries to explain the absence of prolonged economic growth within the framework of the feudal mode of production (from around 1000 to around 1800). He attempts to do this without using neo-Malthusian or neo-Smithian models, which means he does not want to give centrality to either population or the growth of markets and individual economic rationality (a brilliant summary of the general discussion has recently been given by Ellen Meiksins Wood’s The Origin of Capitalism).7 Brenner’s two

7 Wood 1999.
most important lines of approach are the struggle of lords and peasants over property rights to the principal means of production (land), on the one hand, and the transformation of the feudal ‘surplus extraction system’ (the system of appropriation of the surplus product) as a result of demographic, economic and political changes, on the other hand. The growth of the role of the ‘absolutist’ state is a good example, but, this time, Brenner also explicitly takes into consideration cities and markets. Of course, it is difficult to ignore these in regions like late-medieval Flanders and Brabant, or early-modern Holland, where an estimated 40 to 50 per cent of population were town dwellers.

In the Brennerian analysis, the three most important preconditions for a development towards capitalism are the following: the decline of serfdom, the short-circuiting of the dominance of so-called ‘peasant’ possession (a structure of predominantly small farmers with ‘survival farms’), and the obstruction of the replacement by individual lords of the typically feudal extra-economic coercion as a base for surplus extraction by a new and similar system in the shape of state taxes. In other words, a space was needed for a new – Smithian, capitalist – logic in economic behaviour, a logic in which circumstances forced peasants to produce for the market and invest productively, but which, at the same time, gave them the opportunities to do so.

Brenner expounds these ‘generative mechanisms’ of agrarian capitalism in a detailed manner in his rejoinder to the discussion, making ample use of Belgian and Dutch examples. In fact, in ‘The Low Countries in the Transition to Capitalism’, Brenner restates and refines his fundamental method and views earlier developed in ‘The Social Basis of Economic Development’.

In ‘Property Relations and the Growth of Agricultural Productivity in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe’, starting with another assessment of the debate since the Dobb-Sweezy controversy, as well as of the contributions of Marc Bloch, Wilhelm Abel, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Anderson, North and Thomas et alia, Brenner proceeds to expound systematically his views on feudal social-property relations, rules of reproduction, developmental patterns, state-building and feudal crisis. Robert Brenner has indeed constructed an impressive conceptual framework, clearly deviating from an ‘orthodox’ historical materialism – whatever that may be – while retaining a clearly dialectical angle.

Erik Thoen, a specialist in the history of Flemish agricultural, economic and environmental history, is clearly a supporter of the Brenner thesis. This approach implies an analysis of the social-property relations starting from the social structures of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the growth period during which European feudal society took its institutional shape. The roots of precapitalist rural structures, it is asserted, stretch back to this epoch of important medieval (feudal) growth. The

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8 Brenner 1986.
social-property relations in the countryside – the relations of peasants and lords as well as the relations between different lords, including cities and ecclesiastical institutions – largely established the context and balance of forces within which the pre-industrial economy would develop. Bas van Bavel uses this same research method to analyse a number of regions in the Dutch river area. Van Bavel rightly emphasises that one important way forward in research on the divergent paths of social and economic development within The Netherlands, or within Europe as a whole, would be the roots of the social-property structures, going back to the centuries before the later Middle Ages.

Other articles in this volume have a less explicit theoretical orientation but present valuable case studies. A fine example is Bart Ibelings’s excellent article on the relation of the Dutch city of Gouda with its economic hinterland. The relation to the central theme of the volume still remains clear. This is less the case in Milja van Tielhof’s essay on grain provision in Holland in the sixteenth century or in Michael Limberger’s contribution on merchant capitalism in the West of the duchy of Brabant. These articles, though providing very interesting data, hardly refer to the general theories, models or discussions the book is all about (or do so only in a passing manner). Limberger does link his vision with the work of Stephen Epstein, which was in itself in some ways a clear response to the Brenner debate. But Limberger lacks conceptual clarity and, trying to come back to the Brenner debate in his conclusion, his vision becomes a bit confusing. Like Petra van Dam, whose article treats Holland’s labour market around 1510, he is principally concerned with market accession but ignores the social and institutional constraints Brenner indicates in this context. Van Dam does enter into discussion with Jan Luiten Van Zanden, seeing his ‘proto-capitalist’ model for the labour market confirmed. This was the case because of the presence of regional migrant labour, the existence of a considerable labour surplus and regional specialisation. And one might say that this is, in fact, the whole point. Probably, however, these authors did not have the opportunity to revise their original papers for the 1994 conference.

Jan Luiten Van Zanden suggests that The Netherlands (and particularly the counties of Flanders and Holland) followed a so-called ‘third way’ towards capitalism, England and France being the other two paths. Apart from this rather fashionable and perhaps ironic designation, this vision is actually not so far-fetched. The Netherlands had a rather specific position, characterised by a high level of urbanisation, early proto-industrialisation (rural cottage industry) and the moderate nature of the late-medieval crisis. In fact, we even deal with an underestimated ‘first wave of proto-industrialisation’, a reaction to a feudal crisis comparable with what was to be the second wave in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The economic development potentially present in this first wave was disturbed by the political and military troubles of the sixteenth century. Van Zanden advances a vision in which the combination of agriculture and
rural industry led to a flexible workforce, thus facilitating economic expansion in a manner diverging from a more general European pattern.

In this way, the demand of labour even increased, but so did the level of proletarianisation and the accumulation of large fortunes by entrepreneurs. A rural proletariat came into being, which used to work long hours and had little affinity with real agriculture. There was a clear tendency to a ‘primitive accumulation of capital’ in the countryside, though vulnerable to the impact of ‘political’ factors. According to Van Zanden, reviving the theories of authors such as Mendels, Medick and Kriedte, in some ways rural industry laid the foundations of industrial growth. It is indeed suggested that proto-industrialization had a crucial role in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. However, as the author himself admits, ‘the important question which this article does not answer adequately is how these developments in population, urbanisation and proto-industrialization are interrelated’. It seems that cottage industry created a positive demand for labour, while population growth stimulated the expansion of non-agrarian activity in the countryside. It is certainly not without justification that Van Zanden puts the problem of proto-industrialization back on the agenda, considering the importance this phenomenon had in the Netherlands.

Erik Thoen agrees with Brenner’s proposition that, in bringing about the ‘revolution’ towards capitalism, it was not so much the expropriation of the means of production of the direct producers that was decisive, but rather the expropriation of their means of subsistence. The question is whether small peasants could still control their own survival in some ways. After all, many peasants owned their means of production, but often these yielded an insufficient amount of food even to support themselves and their families. In such cases, paid agricultural work, cottage industry and the leasing of additional plots were vital. Thoen sketches the agrarian and economic development of Flanders from the year 1000 until the nineteenth century, putting emphasis on social-property relations of lords and peasants. This is an excellent summary, including the results of a lot of new research which had hitherto not been published in English or French. Thoen fundamentally describes Flanders as what he terms a ‘commercial survival economy’, implying that most peasant holdings were actually too small to assure subsistence. As is well known, five hectares was a minimum surface to keep a nuclear family alive. In most cases, these farms were originally leased for a fixed rent, but from the thirteenth century onwards, a system with variable lease contracts was gradually generalised, thus weakening the position of the peasants. The long-term trend in the size of holdings showed an ongoing fragmentation as a result of laws of succession. Only now and then were there brief periods in Flemish history that witnessed a concentration movement.

For the hard-labouring Flemish peasant, survival was the main objective. Ambitious commercial plans, large-scale investments or the pursuit of upward social mobility
were, in most cases, unthinkable. This was a specific feature of pre-industrial Flemish agriculture: the land productivity was very high but labour productivity, on the other hand, was very low. The Fleming rooted up and weeded every square inch of the earth. He used very labour-intensive techniques to get some of the highest yield ratios of the Middle Ages. Fallow land almost completely disappeared. Peasants planted fodder crops, dye and other industrial crops, leguminous plants and other vegetables. However, this market-oriented production was mostly additional and served the purpose of obtaining some money to buy some consumer goods and to buy taxes and fines. This could hardly be called a commercial agriculture, though the market dependency of farmers indeed gradually increased, albeit rather as consumers than as producers.

Particularly in periods of growth, this growing dependency incited them to further investments in improving the forces of production. Wage-labour and proto-industry became more important from the sixteenth century, and even more so from the eighteenth century. Rural weavers partly owned their means of production (their loom), but of course remained dependent on commercial capitalists for purchasing raw materials and selling their commodities (a Kaufsystem). Their disadvantageous credit position effectively proletarianised these semi-independent rural textile weavers. The internal contradiction in the expression ‘commercial survival economy’ indeed very accurately illustrates how Flemish peasants were fettered by extra-economic coercion and market forces at the same time. But it must be said that this model did not apply for the county of Flanders in its entirety. It was specifically valid for the inland sandy plains of ‘Binnen Vlaanderen’. In coastal Flanders, there was a tendency to the formation of larger commercial farms, which nevertheless did not develop into real ‘agrarian-capitalist’ enterprises, as it did seem to have occurred along the coast of the northern Netherlands. Thus, late-medieval Flanders perhaps missed the boat to a capitalist revolution in agriculture. Existing social-property relations impeded this, despite the important development of the productive forces.

Peter Hoppenbrouwers provides an excellent summary of some of the problems evoked by confronting historical data for the county of Holland with the Brennerian theory in its more ‘classical’ form. Jan de Vries formulates very explicit criticisms against Brenner’s approach. From the perspective of the Smithian commercialisation model – as Brenner puts it, ‘once again the dominant force in contemporary economic historiography’ – he makes a classical but rather unconvincing critique. De Vries argues, for instance, that Brenner’s basic argument has shifted over time from an assertion of ‘the primacy of class struggle’ – which, from a Marxist point of view, is actually not a ‘relatively autonomous process’ at all – to an assertion of the primacy of social-property relations, where the only possible change would be brought about by an ‘exogenous shock’. However, when Brenner states that a break with the precapitalist social structure is the result of ‘unintended consequences of the actions
of feudal lords and peasants’, he obviously refers to a factor indigenous to the system. But, of course, this is a matter of theory. In the vocabulary of North and Thomas, economic agents are ‘rational actors’ and historical outcomes of the intrusion of the market vary in accordance with an institutional environment, which is considered an external factor.

De Vries calls Holland ‘a land without feudalism’, referring to the low level of extra-economic coercion during the Middle Ages. He prefers to describe it as a ‘post-feudal, pre-capitalist’ society, a qualification that does not really solve the problem. He calls this ‘a Marxist framework’, but it sounds more like a set of Weberian ideal types. In general, his conceptual points prove that a real open debate between Marxists and supporters of the commercialisation model is still a difficult though necessary challenge. Clearly, as a renowned specialist in Dutch economic history, De Vries has far more interesting contributions to make on the empirical level. He asserts that investment, mostly by peasants themselves, was the driving force of northern agricultural development in the 1500–1650 period. This resulted in agricultural specialisation and created opportunities for the growing rural, non-farm population. There was specialised agriculture, linked by market relations. Productivity increased through better land and capital, but the size of holdings did not expand. De Vries’s most important point is, therefore, that the peasants played an active and important role in building a productive agriculture. He thus refutes Brenner’s argument that the medieval peasants were prisoners of rules of reproduction that prevented them from responding to the calling of the market. Inversely, it was the market that eroded extra-economic coercion where it still existed.

In his rejoinder, Brenner shows that De Vries’s criticism is a classical Smithian reasoning. The latter’s ‘specialisation model with peasants’ (as opposed to a normal peasant model) was to be the outcome of two fundamental conditions. Agriculturists had to be free from feudalism and the extra-economic coercion associated with it. Moreover, they could respond to a powerful demand for their goods in urban markets and abroad. Socio-political freedom and market opportunities thus remain the fundamentals for economic rationality and the rise of capitalism. Brenner denies that these were sufficient conditions, particularly because peasants of the inland southern Netherlands were confronted with a very similar situation, but, after the Middle Ages, the agricultural economy in these regions faced economic stagnation and perhaps even involution and a classical stagnationary peasant economy remains dominant until the nineteenth century. When Dutch peasants (especially in the peatlands areas) did take the specialisation path, it was because they had ceased to be peasants and were rendered market-dependent producers who had to buy their basic needs in the market. In this way, they were obliged to specialise, accumulate and innovate to face competitive pressure. The origin of this development, Brenner considers, was late-medieval ecological degradation, ultimately separating many
peasants from their means of production and forcing them into market dependence.

The maritime southern Netherlands (the coast of Flanders) and the northern maritime provinces of Zeeland and Friesland distinguished themselves fundamentally from inland Flanders because they had a ‘capitalist’ set of social-property relations. There had never been a strong seigneurial power and, by the end of the Middle Ages, the lease system clearly dominated, resulting in a market dependency for land. Tenants thus had to maximise their price-cost ratio to remain competitive for leases. There was a tendency towards the concentration of holdings and increasing investment and labour productivity throughout the early-modern period. On the contrary, the inland districts of the northern Netherlands shared the poor sandy soils with inland Flanders and Brabant. There was only a limited development of agriculture because peasants were relieved from the necessity of improving yields and labour productivity or going to the market, since they could hold on to their means of subsistence and were not subjected to competition. Flemish and Brabantine peasants were increasingly forced to intensify their labour to secure their survival, as their holdings became ever smaller through subdivision of inheritance. Stagnating or declining incomes led to strict limitations of market purchases. In the maritime northern Netherlands, on the other hand, market incentives were present in the form of the strongly deteriorating soil of the peatlands. This compulsion to specialise and invest brought about higher labour productivity and standards of living.

So, ultimately, though by the seventeenth century the Netherlands were surely the most highly industrialised and urbanised regions in Europe, the economies of the north and south went into crisis and did not proceed towards capitalism. The feudal dynamic processes exhausted themselves and the export industries could not develop further because the European luxury market was saturated and suffered the consequences of the generalised crisis of feudalism of the seventeenth century. This was, in fact, due to the fundamental constraints of urban-industrial development in the feudal mode of production. Cities and industries remained, in the final analysis, dependent upon a rural economy structured by social-property relations. The growth of an early Netherlandic capitalism was thus impeded by the precapitalist economy of Europe as a whole. Dutch producers could not maintain the extraordinary levels of specialisation they had reached in the preceding centuries because these were only possible through exploiting the world market in a ‘commercial-capitalist’ manner. Investment and productivity fell, dragging down the domestic market and therefore the whole ‘over-developed’ economy. Brenner contrasts this with the English road to capitalism. When the Netherlands entered into a destructive crisis after 1650, the English economy, and especially the industrial sector, survived thanks to the development of an important domestic market, fuelled by the continuous increase of agricultural investment and agricultural productivity.

This volume is an important achievement and a significant step forwards in the
scholarly knowledge of social and economic history in the Netherlands. It is true, the authors have not yet completely explained the origins of (agrarian) capitalism. Brenner and his colleagues do, however, draw attention to the fact that strongly developed cities and fully-grown forms of commercial capitalism as they were present in the Low Countries were in themselves insufficient (though necessary?) conditions to explain the transition to a mature industrial capitalism. At the same time, they have proved that different regions in both the southern and northern Netherlands showed very diverse social-property relations. A further comparison, even more systematically contrasting areas with a predominant peasant economy with regions characterised by a greater tendency toward property concentration and commercialisation, might prove very fruitful in this respect. According to the Brenner thesis, in the long run, these features seem to have decided whether or not a specific region went on to ‘take off’ into agrarian capitalism.

In this respect, the coastal plains of the northern Netherlands were perhaps the most ‘progressive’ areas. Inward Flanders generally did not have large market-oriented lease farms, exploited by ‘capitalist farmers’, but rather a multitude of small peasant farms. This agricultural and social structure eventually led to economic stagnation. As the editors note, this is just the first step in this necessary research. The final ‘qualitative leap’ of commercial capitalism in the cities and agricultural capitalism in some parts of the countryside towards a socially dominant capitalist mode of production remains the Achilles heel of Brenner’s whole theory. For that matter, this was also the case in other theories trying to explain what has become known as the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The primitive accumulation of capital still remains one of the most fascinating and complicated debates in historiography. Theoretical reflection has presumably not been exhausted and empirical research has certainly not. If a revival of social and economic history is possible, this is still an enormous task for historians. The geographical extension of this research is a number one priority. Hoppenbrouwers and Van Zanden are probably right when they state that ‘there was no royal road to capitalism’ and that Marx was mistaken in implicitly considering the English development as the only possible trajectory. It is certainly legitimate to ask why capitalism did not (or, perhaps, almost did?) arise in the economically progressive Netherlands. Before ‘true’ capitalism came about, in the final analysis, every urban or industrial development remained dependent on the rural economy and the social relations in the countryside.

Peasants into Farmers? could well prove to be a new point of departure for the transition debate, the ‘crown jewel of Marxist historiography’ as Jan de Vries has called it. In any case, its publication has given the social and economic history of The Netherlands the important place it deserves in this continuing search for the origins of the most powerful economic system ever to have conquered the world. It has also been an occasion for Brenner to refine and illustrate his theoretical outline of the
feudal logic and his contributions to the development of Marxism as a living science. Ellen Meiksins Wood has already published an interesting rejoinder to the debate in the 2002 issue of the new *Journal of Agrarian Change,* stressing the distinction between market dependence in early-modern England and Holland, the latter being more related to ecological conditions than to social relations and probably not directly leading in itself to further capitalist development. Dutch ruling classes thus reacted very differently to the general crisis of the seventeenth century from their English counterparts. Brenner and Dutch historians will presumably reply to this article once more, perhaps bringing in more empirical evidence, so commenting on this new debate in a detailed manner would be premature. Marxist and non-Marxist historians alike can hope that the old but unfinished transition debate will show a new vitality in the coming period.

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Rome: Derive Approdi, 2002

Reviewed by STEVE WRIGHT

Children of a Lesser Marxism?¹

While it has inspired more than its share of critical essays and polemics over the past forty years, the political tendency of operaismo (workerism) has been the subject of few book-length analyses in Italy or elsewhere. Perhaps this is less surprising in the English-speaking world, where, for whatever reason, Italian workerism has commonly been passed over in discussions of postwar Marxism(s).² In Italy’s case, this is a little more perplexing, given operaismo’s influence for many years within the local Left and labour movement. Back in the late 1970s, it is true, there was a collection of papers from a conference organised by the Istituto Gramsci. There, leading Communist Party (PCI) intellectuals – many of them former workerists – grappled with the tendency’s historical significance, as well as its meaning for their own political commitments of that time.³ Interestingly enough, the conference in question also allowed a certain space for contributions from workerist intellectuals deemed ‘to reek of autonomia’,⁴ at a time when that movement and the PCI were themselves daggers drawn. In any case, the arrests of 1979 onwards, led by Judge Calogero (himself close to the PCI), both put the final nail in Autonomia as a mass phenomenon, and marginalised operaismo

¹ This title was inspired by the phrase ‘Figli di un operaismo minore’, in Macera 1998, p. 311.
² For many years, there was little movement on this front outside the efforts of a small number of individuals, starting with Ed Emery, Harry Cleaver and John Merrington. See ‘Preface to Second Edition’ in Cleaver 2000; Linebaugh 1997; and the numerous Red Notes publications produced in the 1970s and 1980s, culminating with Negri 1988. A notable volume in more recent years is Virno and Hardt (eds.) 1996, while Tim Murphy and others also have a number of interesting projects in the pipeline.
³ The conference proceedings are collected in D’Agostini (ed.) 1978.
⁴ Bologna 1977, p. 68.
as a current within Italy’s cultural and political life. To use a much-quoted phrase of Primo Moroni and Nanni Balestrini, the years that followed were ones of ‘cynicism, opportunism and fear’, granting little time or space for dreams of a life beyond capital and the state.

The revival of social conflict in Italy over the past decade or so has seen a growing curiosity there about operaismo, as well as about those movements that have been touched by it in some way. More recently, the English-speaking world has also witnessed the publishing success of the book Empire, co-authored by Antonio Negri, himself once a leading exponent of Italian workerism. Within the activist networks that have come together since the Zapatistas first launched their appeals ‘for humanity against neoliberalism’, there has likewise been a fascination with some sections of the Italian radical Left whose (far distant) origins lie in Autonomia.

In a certain sense, both Empire and the organisations Ya Basta/Tute Bianche represent distinctive (if in part convergent) attempts to settle accounts with, and move beyond, those workerist ways of seeing and acting first developed in the 1960s and 1970s. For those who would like to draw their own conclusions on the matter, there is now a growing body of literature that seeks to explore in a critical fashion the trajectory of operaismo as a distinctive Marxist tendency. In English, beyond my own recent survey, there is Patrick Cuninghame’s important research, including his as yet-unpublished doctoral dissertation concerning organisational expressions of working-class autonomy after 1968. In Italian, apart from some stimulating essays in the journal Intermarx and elsewhere, recent years have seen the publication of Franco Berardi’s reflections upon the experience and legacy of the revolutionary group Potere Operaio (Potop), and now, in 2002, the volume Futuro anteriore edited by Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi and Gigi Roggero.

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Why pay any attention to Italian workerism? Now that more and more of Negri’s writings are appearing in English, what else is there to know about this tendency? To start with, Negri’s work is far from the sum total of operaismo, just as his politics of the 1970s hardly exhausted the range of views then to be found either within Potere Operaio or the later movement of Autonomia. More to the point, workerism’s preoccupation with workers’ efforts to overcome the divisions imposed upon them in a given time and space by capital – the discourse it named ‘class composition’ – make its precepts of ongoing interest in this age of dynamic class relations. For the

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5 Balestrini and Moroni 1988, p. 387.
7 See Wright 2002.
8 See Cuninghame 1995; Cuninghame 1999.
authors of *Futuro anteriore*, the emergence of new movements against global capital provide an appropriate context within which to look back upon and ‘interrogate that extraordinary experience which emerged over two decades enervated by movements and a level of social conflict unparalleled in this country’s postwar history’ (p. 8). More than this, they have sought to engage with many of operaismo’s most prominent exponents in search of ‘new political hypotheses, starting from the unresolved nodes of those experiences of which they were protagonists, and confronting these with the present’ (p. 9). *Futuro anteriore* is thus the outcome of an ambitious research project carried out during the late 1990s and early 2000s, capped off in 2002 with seminars organised up and down the Italian peninsula, including a weekend conference in Rome. The authors’ book-length assessment of many of workerism’s central themes is accompanied by a CD-ROM containing transcripts of interviews with the likes of Negri and nearly sixty others, interviews which form the raw material of the authors’ own reflections. Indeed, as I hope to show, the book merits a careful look for these transcripts alone.

Borio, Pozzi and Roggero present their book as an exercise in *conricerca*, that process of ‘joint’ research with social protagonists pioneered by Danilo Montaldi and others in the 1950s, then embraced by workerism as its own. I am not so convinced of this, as the book seems to be more one way of reading the variegated oral sources assembled by the authors through the research project, rather than a collectively organised enterprise. This is not a criticism, however. In providing transcripts of these interviews, the authors have made it possible for readers – perhaps I should say ‘readers with stamina’ – the means with which they too can begin to construct their own sense of the complex experiences of operaismo, as well as the various organisational currents upon which it left its mark: the autonomist movement (or rather, ‘the various Autonomies’, as the authors suggest), Potere Operaio, the Movement of ’77, and so on.

Within the English-speaking world, Antonio Negri is without question the best-known figure to have been associated with operaismo. By contrast, rather fewer readers of English will have heard of Romano Alquati, whose writings of the past forty years or more stretch from documenting the emergence of militancy within FIAT’s massive Mirafiori plant, to more recent reflections upon the virtual and the nature of labour. All the same, it is Alquati who is a key influence behind *Futuro anteriore*, as the authors openly acknowledge. Always an iconoclast – back in the 1950s, his politics, like those of his friend Montaldi, were in part an attempt to mix Castoriadis and Lenin – Alquati

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10 The transcripts of these seminars can be found at <http://www.deriveapprodi.org/dibattiti/dibattitisoperaismo.htm>.

11 See Alquati 1975; Alquati et al. 1994; Alquati 1996.
has long been fascinated with the nature of working-class subjectivity, starting with the formation of militants within struggles. The authors of *Futuro anteriore* share this fascination, with one of the more intriguing themes of the book being precisely the relationship between militants, cadres and theoreticians within revolutionary movements.

*Futuro anteriore*’s CD-ROM ‘book within a book’ contains information about many radical journals of the 1970s, an extensive bibliography, details of relevant websites, and some brief information on Pozzi’s parallel project on Italian feminism. The centrepiece here, however, is the collection of interviews recorded between 1999 and 2001. Along with the tendency’s ‘big names’ – notably Negri, Alquati, Mario Tronti and Sergio Bologna – *Futuro anteriore* provides discussions with a couple of dozen of those comrades most closely associated in the public eye with operaismo’s development as either a distinctive theoretical school and/or an ensemble of political organisations: people like Ferruccio Gambino, Oreste Scalzone, Franco Piperno and Marco Revelli. Beyond this, there is a smattering of workerism’s critics (from within as well as outside the old autonomist movement), along with the thoughts of some younger comrades who came to operaismo in the wake of the defeats of 1979–81.12

If this were all, the CD-ROM would already be more than noteworthy. But Borio, Pozzi and Roggero have gone further, also interviewing a range of individuals active in Potere Operaio and/or Autonomia primarily at a regional level. Perhaps there is no surprise in this, given that much of Borio’s own activity as an autonomist in the 1970s had been within that layer of militants which provided a channel of communication between local and national initiatives – and, in a certain sense, between some of operaismo’s leading theorists and campaigns in the factory and community. In any case, it is this subset of interviews that adds depth to the collection, allowing the reader real insights into the efforts then made to translate operaista ideology into political practice.

Having said this, there are still some gaps worth noting amongst the sample of respondents. Perhaps the most obvious absence is from that part of the Italian libertarian Left most influenced by operaismo: in particular, the circles that would produce the journal *Collegamenti*.13 And, while there are interviews with Silvia Federici and Alisa del Re, it would have been useful to have heard more from the broad circle of workerist-feminists to which they have belonged (although it may be that these will be better represented in Pozzi’s forthcoming study of Italian feminism).14 There are also a few

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12 Members of both these cohorts can today be found amongst the editors of *Derive Approdi*, a journal closely associated with the publication of the two books under review – see <http://www.deriveapprodi.org/edit-engl.htm>.
14 Enda Brophy informs me that while Mariarosa Dalla Costa was unavailable for the original interviews, she made a substantial contribution to the Rome conference organised in June 2002 by the book’s authors. See his Conference Report *infra*. 
prominent male operaisti absent from the interviews (Massimo Cacciari and Nanni Balestrini are two obvious names that spring to mind): perhaps both were amongst ‘the few’ (p. 31) approached who chose not to take part.

Borio, Pozzi and Roggero organise their book around a number of related themes. After presenting their methodology and reviewing the political and cultural formation of their respondents, they devote a chapter to a discussion of ‘workerism or workerisms?’ They identify two operaismi in the postwar Italian experience: that of the journals such as Quaderni Rossi and Classe Operaia before 1968, in which the likes of Tronti and Negri first made their mark as theoreticians, and that of Potere Operaio and the autonomist movement in the years that followed. Both, they argue, are ‘political’ workerisms. By this they mean that, unlike other experiences that might also be termed workerist (for example, in and around the metalworkers’ unions of the 1970s), these saw in the working class ‘not a weakness to defend nor a condition to exalt, but rather a force to use for a project of transformation, one able to surpass and extinguish both the working class condition [operaieta] and labour’ (p. 69). Beyond the class-in-itself, or even the class-for-itself, the workerists sought to chart the emergence of ‘a class against itself, against its own proletarian condition, against its own being as commodity’ (p. 83). During the 1960s, many operaisti believed that they had found such a subject in the so-called ‘mass worker’. This was workerist shorthand for a new class composition, those tens of thousands of ‘Fordist nihilists’ (Alquati) who had come to the cities of northern Italy to meet capital’s demand for assembly line fodder, only to wreak havoc upon the latter at the decade’s end during the so-called ‘Hot Autumn’.

Another chapter of the book seeks the interviewees’ opinions of more contemporary issues, from debates around post-Fordism, the ‘general intellect’, the place of the Internet and virtual communication within social relations today, to the restructuring of classes since the 1970s and the legacy of Marxist orthodoxy for operaismo itself. This section draws out both the affinities that continue to unite many of the respondents, as well as some of those sharp differences that have developed between them over the years. In any case, a number of these arguments will already be familiar to English-language readers, above all from the volume Radical Thought in Italy. It is also a section where the authors’ debt to Alquati is most evident, drawing upon his discussion of the distinctiveness of ‘generic-human-active-capacity’ as the most special commodity within a capitalist society (p. 131).

While themselves steeped in the workerist tradition, Borio, Pozzi and Roggero do not shy away from the tendency’s practical failings. As an exploration of Italian operaismo’s ‘riches and limits’ (this being the book’s subtitle), Futuro anteriore locates the most important of these failings in ‘the incapacity to elaborate a new political project adequate to its own rupture with the socialist-communist tradition [socialcomunismo storico]’ (p. 8). Having helped to stir up a hornet’s nest within Italy’s industrial landscape during 1969, most workerists were subsequently unable to do
more than propose some variant of traditional communist political structures as the most suitable instrument to carry such instances of working class self-organisation further. Those like Mario Dalmaviva, a founding member of Potere Operaio that year, pinned their hopes on a new Leninist party; for Tronti and those closest to him, the promise of the PCI still seemed far from exhausted. But, as Dalmaviva recalls in his interview, many of the best activists within the mass worker turned their backs on both choices, preferring to gamble on revitalising the union movement through the new network of factory councils formed in those years. This was to be only one of the surprises that the 1970s held in store for operaismo. Above all, the absence of a political project adequate to the class composition around them – one able to undermine ‘the intrinsically political nature of [capitalist] social relations’ (p. 271) – continued to be the most fundamental stumbling block to the workerists’ designs for social subversion. For Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, any effort to go beyond operaismo on this front requires ‘a network of critical elaboration and debate that knows how to invert the desperate tendency towards political fragmentation and the acceptance, conscious or otherwise, of the capitalist horizon’s categories of thought’ (p. 277). In the end, one does not have to concur with the language the authors choose in describing such a network (a ‘(plural and collective) vanguard élite’ (p. 278)) in order to concede their central point. And, if the workerists often got the answers wrong a generation ago, there is still much to learn from what Alisa del Re cites in her interview as ‘the thing that I miss the most . . . that collective intelligence that we had set in motion in the 1970s’.

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Much of the ‘riches and limits of Italian workerism’ emerges most clearly through the interviews conducted for Futuro anteriore, and it is to these that I now want to turn.15 Many participants from the generation emerging in the 1960s recall that they first cut their teeth on the works of Tronti, in particular his book Operai e Capitale (‘the bible of Potere Operaio’, according to Claudio Greppi). Greppi also remembers meetings of Quaderni Rossi as boring, full of long silences, while those of Classe Operaia were ‘much more entertaining’. Tronti himself looks back upon operaismo as only one phase in his political life, albeit a fundamental one, and recalls his wariness of the student movement of 1968, which he largely viewed from the outside. More poignantly, he suggests that the great worker upsurge of 1969 was perhaps more the ‘twilight’ than the ‘dawn’ of something new, and reveals his increasing preoccupation with efforts to ensure that working-class memory not be ‘dispersed into nothing’.

One of the important aspects of Futuro anteriore’s interviews is that they offer access

15 Another excellent collection of oral sources concerning the Italian radical Left, this time specifically addressing the Movement of ‘77 in Rome, is Del Bello (ed.) 1997.
not only to the worldviews of a wide range of participants, but also reminiscences of some of the more extraordinary figures within the tendency who are no longer with us. One of these is Guido Bianchini, a former partisan and union organiser who both performed much of Potop’s legwork in the Emilia region, and provided the group with its critical conscience.16 Lauso Zagato cites Bianchini’s great talent for communication, and his efforts to counter that Eurocentrism which has rarely been far from workerist outlooks. Greppi has a similar story to tell about Bianchini the networker and mentor; allegedly, the present-day political class in the city of Ferrara was largely formed through its encounter with Bianchini, who ‘creamed off’ the best militants for Potere Operaio, leaving behind only ‘the village idiot’ for the PCI. Another formative influence recalled in the interviews is Primo Moroni, who worked with Bologna and others in the important 1970s journal *Primo Maggio*, and whose Calusca bookshop provided a crucial bridge between the aftermath of 1968 and the generations of the eighties and nineties.17 Raf Scelsci, later a key player in the cybertulture zine *Decoder*, recalls the material encouragement that Moroni provided to Milan’s nascent punk scene, at a time when more traditional leftists were likely to offer only fisticuffs. A third comrade fondly remembered is Luciano Ferrari Bravo, a fine writer of political theory doomed to years of prison thanks to the false charges brought by the likes of Calogero.18

During the seventies, Ferrari Bravo worked in the University of Padua’s Institute of Political Science, where Negri had assembled an impressive array of workerist intellectuals. One of them, Alisa del Re, recalls a certain intellectual elitism within the Institute, that drew its sustenance as much from familiarity with the experience of worker militants at Venice’s petrochemical plants as it did from close attention to the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. In her words, ‘the most evident form of this was the phrase “Frankly, comrade, I don’t understand you”, which actually meant “You’re a fuckwit”‘. Many of the interviews register the impact of Negri’s intellect, and perhaps even more so, of his force of personality. Certainly, few have claimed over the years that his texts, whatever their erudition, are an easy read. According to del Re, ‘at the beginning I didn’t understand what he [Negri] wrote, I swear, now perhaps it seems he writes a bit better but I still don’t understand any of it, and in any case he wrote things that didn’t interest me very much’. Instead, what she most valued from that time was ‘Toni’s proximity, his capacity to convince you that we had to act as if the revolution was already underway . . . it’s something I miss’. For his part, Greppi is rather more

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16 Some of his more important essays have been collected in Bianchini 1990.
17 Beyond documenting part of his own fascinating life, Moroni was also the unofficial chronicler of Milan’s postwar radical Left: see Moroni 1983; Moroni 1994.
18 Some of his more important essays have been collected in Ferrari Bravo 2001.
dubious about the merits of what he calls Negri’s ‘extraordinary capacity to convince himself and others of things’.

In a similar vein, many of the interviewees offer quite different recollections and assessments of Potere Operaio itself. Some praise the antagonistic politics still shared by many former members; others, particularly those from Florence, recall their ability to develop a local policy more grounded than that of many other Potop branches. Ferruccio Gambino argues that ‘in Potere Operaio, militants who did not dedicate time to study were bound to fail, even if they were able to produce some sporadic fireworks at the local level’. Against this, Greppi thinks Potop did little to develop a sufficiently ‘critical mentality’ within its ranks:

I remember once meeting Luciano [Ferrari Bravo] coming out of a lesson, and he asked, ‘Why do I have to waste my time explaining Toni’s books?’ He was a wreck after two hours of interpreting the thoughts of the great master. Basically this was ideology, rather than the critique of ideologies.

For his part, Bologna has come to believe that the very establishment of the group – a decision in which he had taken a leading role – was a misguided step:

‘68 was a great thing, where we succeeded in overturning its initial character, imposing worker-student unity. We gave a working-class valence to something that risked becoming, as happened in other countries, an anti-authoritarian rebellion. After that our sorrows began, certainly: we were mistaken to found Potere Operaio, we were mistaken to found an extraparliamentary group. We should have continued working in the social sphere, constructing alternatives there, workers’ centres all over the place, social centres already back then: alternative spaces, liberated spaces. We were mistaken, we were mesmerised by the old idea, the old ambition of conquering power. We fell once again into the ‘communist syndrome’, and we tried to set up an abortion of a Bolshevik Party that had in mind the dictatorship of the proletariat, and so inevitably got burned by those with more decisive options, such as armed struggle . . .

Carlo Formenti, who came into contact with the likes of Negri after Potop’s collapse, offers similar criticisms of the autonomist movement’s self-styled ‘organised’ wing. In particular, he notes ‘the paradox of Autonomia’ as the product ‘of the dissolution of the [post-1968 groups] while maintaining the logic of the party within itself, that is the logic of leading cadres who had to lead, dominate, direct, coordinate and encompass within a common strategy and tactics everything that moved, every aspect and contradiction’. Until this encounter, Formenti had been a member of Gruppo Gramsci, one of the more interesting of the smaller Marxist-Leninist organisations formed after the Hot Autumn. Influential within some factories and schools in Lombardy,
and with a number of prominent intellectuals to its name (including Luisa Passerini, Romano Madera and Giovanni Arrighi), the group built a certain presence within the radical Catholic metalworkers’ union FIM before reconstituting itself with Negri and friends as the Collettivi Politici Opera (CPO). According to Formenti, one reason he chose not to remain long within ‘organised Autonomia’ was the tendency of many of its northern components to establish clandestine structures parallel to their public face: ‘once created . . . there was inevitably a transversal attraction between the various separate organisms . . . rapidly leading to the separation of this level from that of class autonomy and from political direction by the movement . . .’.

Like the book’s authors, many of those interviewed trace the practical failure of the various workerist formations back to the tendency’s inability to follow through the questions of political direction and programme. While Borio suggests that the absence of any real programmatic alternative to the armed groups was characteristic of Autonomia as a whole, his account of his own political allies of the time (the CPO, also known as Rosso after their newspaper) is less than flattering:

Negri’s group never confronted the problem of the formation of political militants . . . throughout the 1970s Negri emphasised pushing forward, reaching and forcing along the discourse on struggles. He said: the struggle, power, the strength of the class, its organised segments and parts, have reached a level that is irreversible. This focus on the contingent might even be considered a necessary tactic for carrying the struggle forward, for leading the conflict to more advanced dimensions. But in reality, from a theoretical point of view, if you look not only at the immediate situation, but in terms of a broader project, it was a great political error, even a catastrophe.

Similar criticisms are offered by Ferruccio Dendena. While I have never been certain how seriously to take Jacopo Fo’s account of baiting Negri during meetings with regard to Rosso’s so-called ‘clandestine structure’,19 Dendena is in very little doubt that such antipathy was widespread within the Milan-based group: ‘the youths of our collectives hated [the leadership] . . . even more than Calogero did’.

Further glimpses into the provincial autonomist movement are provided by the interview with Sergio Bianchi, whose experiences of the 1970s are recounted in Nanni Balestrini’s novel The Unseen.20 Bianchi begins by citing his ‘fortune’ in not having spent any time in the far-left organisations formed immediately after 1968. For the circle of working-class youth of which Bianchi was part, employed in the many small factories outside Milan, there was a certain attraction to be found both in many

20 See Balestrini 1989.
traditional workerist precepts, as well as Negri’s more recent arguments about the ascendency of a new, ‘socialised’ proletariat:

A slogan like ‘the refusal of work’... corresponded to a material and immediate need not to accept those living conditions; only later did we understand that it also had a very relevant theoretical basis... What interested us was raising hell within the workplace, challenging the factory régime.

Making little headway at organising workplace by workplace, his group established one of Italy’s first squatted social centres, as a launching pad from which to address industrial matters on a territorial basis. Unable to bridge the cultural chasm that separated them from many older workmates, their struggle against management discipline ultimately led – as was so often the case at that time – out of the factory altogether: ‘I’m not talking of a few people, a small group, but rather of hundreds of subjects who had been grounded in the workplace’.

Finally, the interviews with militants like Bianchi and Dendena also make clear the shifting and often uneasy relations that characterised Autonomia Operaia as a national movement. Having fended off various attempts at ‘colonisation’ from groups based in the big smoke of Milan, Bianchi was clearly also unimpressed with the autonomists in the nearby city of Varese, describing their politics as ‘prefabricated... they simply recited a series of slogans’. As for the Veneto region, Zagato speaks of Padua and Venice as ‘two different things, at war with each other from the word go’, while Mario Piccinini in Vicenza suggests that, beyond a broad debt to Negri’s political and theoretical work, the earlier Potop might have been less homogenous ideologically than was first supposed: ‘we were more Trontian than Negrian, perhaps also because Toni was 30 kilometres away...’

While the focus of most interviewees is on the experience and legacy of workerist politics, their reflections upon more recent political debates are equally intriguing. If many have moved some considerable distance in outlook over the years, their judgements of contemporary issues and controversies often remain astute and of interest. Negri, for example, wonders whether ‘Luxemburgism’ might not be ‘the Leninism of this epoch’, adding a little later:

The idea that the party has in hand the whole complexity of elements involved in a process of radical transformation is worthy of paranoiacs. It’s like saying, ‘I’m God’... 

For his part, Bologna is critical of Negri’s emphasis in recent years upon the most spectacular, visible aspects of the circulation of struggle amongst movements against global capital, offering these thoughts by way of contrast:

Conflict as the moment of identity, as ‘the’ moment of constitution, of politics, of class constitution... this for me is a forced understanding. Amongst other
things, this conception still attributes great value to visibility. The ‘other’, in order to be such, must be visible, manifest, and the more clamorous the conflict, the greater the identity it confers. . . . This is the back door through which the traditional logic of politics is returned to play. I prefer the image of beams eaten from within by termites, I prefer a non-visible, non-spectacular path, the idea of the silent growth of a body that is foreign to the sort of visibility that leaves you hostage to the universe of mediation.

There is much more in these interviews than can be recounted here. There is Bruno Cartosio’s account of Primo Maggio’s founding by dissident workerists keen to explore earlier instances of class autonomy such as the IWW, as well as the more recent restructuring (capital’s ‘revolution from above’) unleashed in response to the Hot Autumn. Then there is Massimo De Angelis’ interview which, apart from providing a detailed critique of Empire, describes his own encounter, courtesy of Harry Cleaver, with the distinctively American brand of autonomist Marxism, with its attention to unpaid no less than salaried layers within the working class. Paolo Benvegna recounts the long passage that has led him from the Veneto’s leading autonomist group to union activism and membership of Rifondazione Comunista, while Maria Grazia Meriggi ponders left historiography, Negri’s relations with Milan’s intellectual Left, and the nature of Italian universities today. Vincenzo Miliucci muses upon his own journey from PCI activist to leading member of the ‘Volsci’ (for many years the dominant organisation within the Autonomia of Rome, and one generally untouched by workerist sensibilities), while Franco Berardi (Bifo) tells of falling out with both Negri’s group and the Volsci, after some members of the latter joined Lotta Continua stewards in physically disrupting a national feminist demonstration in late 1975.

As Greppi points out in his Futuro anteriore interview, former members of Potere Operaio have to date been far less interested than some ex-Lotta Continua militants in recounting in public the history of their organisation. So far as I know, Berardi’s La nefasta utopia is the first book-length account of the Potop experience. Even then, as its author admits, the book is less a history proper than a consideration of the legacy of that group’s particular approach to workerist theory.

Berardi’s book has three clearly delineated parts. The first of these presents the distinctive way of seeing developed by Tronti, Negri and others in the 1960s, while the second traces the rise and fall of Potere Operaio. The book’s final section – its most provocative – explores a number of contemporary issues that, if the author is to be believed, are best viewed through the particular lens of what he calls the ‘metodo

21 For the most recent – and most grand – of such projects, see Cazzullo 1998.
composizionista’). Berardi does not care for the label ‘workerism’: to his mind, this is a term ‘worthy of journalists, i.e. worthless’ (p. 17). Instead, he places the emphasis upon the method developed and refined through the analysis of class composition, which grasps social processes as a ‘heterogeneous becoming’ (p. 18). In Berardi’s view, this method has pushed past the original attention to class relations, to some unknown point ‘beyond the political’.

Berardi writes in a manner that is very accessible, especially to the reader whose first language is English. His is a clean yet lively prose, far from the more turgid style found in certain workerist texts from the late 1960s onwards. Perhaps this is not so surprising, given his longstanding preoccupation with political communication,22 including a formative role in important linguistic experiments such as Radio Alice and the journal A/traverso. In any case, the opening section of Berardi’s book offers a good introduction to that ‘perspective of estrangement’ first laid out in the pages of Quaderni Rossi, Classe Operaia, and Operai e Capitale. ‘Seen from its positive side’, we are told, ‘alienation is estrangement, the refusal of working-class sociality to feel part of the capitalist totality’ (p. 82). Rather provocatively, Berardi opens this section with a brief discussion of those philosophical tracts that circulated in and around the international student movement of 1968, from works of Sartre and Marcuse to Marx’s own Paris Manuscripts. Suggesting that Tronti’s own understanding of the working class was infused by a ‘hard Hegelianism’, Berardi concedes that from the beginning, workerism was shot through with ‘an exaltation of the Subject’ (p. 38) that too often crowded out its emphasis upon class composition as the gauge of struggle and programme.

Berardi sets out the political reading of class relations developed in Quaderni Rossi, and then the so-called ‘Copernican revolution’ unveiled by Tronti in his 1964 essay ‘Lenin in England’, where the working class is presented as the prime mover of struggle and innovation within capitalist society. While the manner in which Tronti argues this allows him to move beyond conventional Marxist notions of ‘class consciousness’, Berardi argues that it also represents a step back, with ultimate recourse to the Leninist party as the key (f)actor needed to recompose labour power as a class subject. Against this, Berardi paraphrases Hans-Jürgen Krah: ‘what meaning can Leninism ever have in the metropoles? What meaning can the idea of the cadre party ever have when mental labour has become a superindividual continuum that connects and globalises innumerable brains?’ (p. 69).

22 Enda Brophy has reminded me of the interesting interplay on this front between Berardi’s work and that of Dyer-Witheford 1999. Questions of communication and information are some of the more important fields in which a range of theorists of a workerist background are now finding engagement within the English-speaking world – see for example, Day 2000, and Day 2002.
For me, at least, the most engrossing section of the book is the central one, which deals with the experience of Potere Operaio. Unlike some other accounts, Berardi’s emphasises the continuity between the regional grouping Potere Operaio veneziano-emiliano formed before 1968, and the national organisation later established between this and like-minded circles in other parts of the country. In his reconstruction, Potere Operaio was an organisation with two souls: one stressing mass autonomy and the deployment of class-composition analysis as the ultimate barometer of practice, the second borrowing from the Bolshevik tradition in order to ward off the actions of the class enemy. Berardi also argues that very different linguistic consequences followed on from this cleft within Potere Operaio’s inner being. On one side there was the ‘relaxed, ironical’ tone of ‘a possible mass Epicureanism’ embodied in the struggle against work; on the other there were the ‘vaguely hysterical . . . promethean’ calls to build the party (p. 119). Co-existent within workerism from the beginning, these two forms of expression had alternatively butted heads or talked past each throughout the 1960s. Then again, given the prevalence within Potere Operaio almost from its foundation of the ‘promethean’ discourse, it was often hard to find anything ‘relaxed’ within the group’s own press, as Patrizia Violi’s analysis of Italian far-left publications ably documents. Berardi believes that beyond ‘suffocating the group’s originality’ (p. 187), Potere Operaio’s early Leninist turn found its most serious consequences in the alienation of many of its workplace activists and contacts. In increasing numbers, these turned their back upon the group, pinning their hopes for collective self-organisation instead either on the mainstream ‘union of councils’, or else the factory-based collectives of the early Autonomia (pp. 131–2). In response, the group’s talk of ‘militarising the movement’ grew increasingly shrill; finding itself more and more isolated, Potop collapsed in all but name by 1973.

The last part of the book concerns contemporary themes, from cybertime and cultural mutation to postmodern fascism and globalisation. This is the Berardi best known to English-speaking connoisseurs of such electronic forums as <http://www.nettime.org>. While remaining unconvinced by his assertion that Potere Operaio held some privileged grasp upon the potentialities contained within capitalist development, I found many of the reflections here to be thought-provoking, starting with those concerning the changed class terrain of recent years. The book ends on a positive note, suggesting that ‘the movement of the refusal of wage-labour’ must be understood as a manifestation of the ‘irreversible eruption’ onto the world stage last century of women as social subjects (p. 236). And, yet, there is a heavy air of pessimism overhanging all this, given what Berardi sees as capital’s efforts – shades here of Jacques Cammatte – to domesticate part of humanity and toss the rest into the dumpster of history:

The collapse of the socialist régimes was inscribed in the horizon of possibilities foreseen by Potere Operaio’s analysis. What instead was certainly alien to its predictions was the close connection between the collapse of the Soviet empire and the crisis of every internationalist perspective, and so the outbreak on a planetary scale of a civil war over the question of identity (p. 188)

. . . It is no longer true that the decisive forces are capital and the working class. As in a game of mirrors, the context has been fragmented, multiplied, overturned. Capital and working class continue to confront each other, but in a manner that overturns their relation in the 1960s: the initiative (which then belonged to the workers) has today decisively shifted to international finance capital. At the same time two other figures have appeared: the virtual class, that is the cycle of globalised mental labour; and the residual class, the shapeless mass of populations excluded from (or never part of) the production cycle, which press aggressively to conquer a space of survival and recognition within the planetary spectacle. (p. 189)

Unfortunately, the very brevity of the reflections in this section mean that such assertions are never really fleshed out. However intriguing, in the end, they fall short of that sombre analysis of class composition that is the true ‘theoretical novelty’ (p. 130) of the operaista current at its best.

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Given the vagaries of the international book market, it is unlikely that either of the books under review here will appear in English, at least not any time soon. Nonetheless, as I have tried to show, both are worthy of further attention, and certainly deserve to find new readers outside Italy itself. Perhaps the best we can hope for in the short term is that extracts of each may be translated, either in left journals or at some movement-related website. Certainly, the interviews that inform Futuro anteriore deserve wider circulation: not only those conducted with individuals already known within the English-speaking Left, but also – even above all – those with the likes of del Re, Bianchi and Gambino. Taken together, these books, and the source materials that inform them, provide a unique window upon more than twenty years of efforts to abolish ‘the present state of things’. More, they help the reader to draw their own conclusions about the many small triumphs – a long with the real disasters – that this experience has left us. With any luck, they also provide some genuine pointers towards the development of that collective reading of class composition we so desperately need in these uncertain times.
References


The ‘Operaismo a Convegno’ conference took place in Rome last summer during what was a transitional moment in several respects.¹ The ‘movement of movements’ seemed to be pausing, with its Italian contingent caught between digesting the lessons of Genoa and the need to consider objectives and strategy in view of the European Social Forum which was due to be held in Florence at the beginning of November. In the meantime, the escalation of global violence and rapid geopolitical swerves demanded at the very least a rethinking of the theoretical and practical categories that had seemed to suffice until September 11. Adding to the sense of timeliness was ‘autonomist’ Marxism’s strong resonance outside of Italy, due to the success of Michael Hardt and Toni Negri’s Empire and the ability with which other

¹ My thanks go to Francesca Pozzi, Gigi Roggero, and Guido Borio for making available transcripts of the conference and other materials, as well as for the time they shared this summer discussing their intriguing series of projects with me in Rome and Bologna. I would also like to thank Steve Wright for not only encouraging me to write this report, but providing invaluable advice on a rough draft of it. I am also indebted to Mariarosa Dalla Costa, who offered helpful suggestions along the way. Errors, inconsistencies, incorrect translations and problems in style remain my responsibility rather than theirs.
practitioners of the perspective (in North America and elsewhere) have documented and translated its explanatory power. Considering this, it was fitting that the legacies and contemporary directions of the diverse and dynamic political tradition be rediscussed in its country of origin.

As Mariarosa Dalla Costa suggested later, the conference was an exceptionally rare and special moment if only due to the presence of so many of the tradition’s better-known figures in one space. Another of the participants, Marco Berlinguer, echoed her thoughts on the second day, pointing out how the moment was an ‘unprecedented’ and ‘previously unthinkable’ one. Indeed, the bitterest of political defeats, the insult of occasionally lengthy prison terms, and the twenty-plus years that have passed since that tremendously forceful and creative cycle of struggle that shook Italy between 1968 and 1977 all contributed to force material wedges between many of those in the tradition.

*Operaismo* has its roots as a theoretical body in post-war Italian history, becoming a broadly social force towards the end of the 1960s and gaining momentum until the end of the following decade. Central to its trajectory was the growing estrangement of large swathes of the working class from the institutions, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the major trade unions, which had been up until that time the traditional reference points for the Left. Negri, the tradition’s best-known theorist, suggests that *operaismo* emerged ‘as an attempt to respond to the crisis of the labour movement during the 1950s’. As the decade of social upheaval wore on, the Italian revolutionary Left grew in numbers and strength, becoming a social force to be reckoned with. While, as some of the key figures of the period suggest, it is ‘literally impossible to construct a unitary history of these movements’, by the mid-1970s, the extraparliamentary Left was able to mobilise groups of 20,000–30,000 on short notice in Milan, and had a strong presence in most Italian cities. Yet, towards the end of the decade, the movement collapsed due to a series of factors. The first was state repression, eagerly participated in by the PCI and ‘legitimated’ by part of the movement’s poorly thought-out adoption of the ‘theory of the offensive’. The latter came about as an expression of the inability of this part of the movement to adapt to a rapidly shifting political

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2 Particularly important in this respect is the work done by Cleaver 2000, Ryan 1982, Dyer-Witheford 1999, and Wright 2002. I have maintained Cleaver’s use of the term ‘autonomist’ to refer to the tradition, but sometimes will call it by the more literal translation – ‘workerist’ – of the Italian term ‘operaista’.


4 Castellano et al. 1996.

and economic context, in which older paradigms of revolution were held on to at the expense of emergent and more creative ways of advancing class interests. A wave of arrests was carried out in 1979, in which Pietro Calogero, a Paduan magistrate with links to the PCI, targeted many of workerism’s leading theorists. Often lengthy prison terms followed, with unsubstantiated charges being dropped after a number of years. Some autonomists such as Negri and Franco Berardi (Bifo), forced to escape the country, forged ties with an emergent current in radical French thought (that, by the late 1970s, had increasingly turned its attention to Italy), through poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. Many, such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa, weathered the purge and took the path of committed academic life.

Deep differences over key issues of theory and practice have further distanced some of the protagonists of those years from each other, a process which had already started by the end of the 1960s as the level of social conflict in Italy escalated. The conference, therefore, as well as being occasionally (and unavoidably) sentimental, was also a palpably tense affair at distinct junctures.

Beyond the exceptionally high participation rate by several generations of operaisti, however, the ultimate success of the conference was mainly due to the indefatigable authors of Futuro Anteriore: Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi, and Gigi Roggero. Working under the guidance of Romano Alquati, their project, to look back at the rich legacy of operaismo in order to program paths for contemporary moments of struggle and a parting of ways with capitalism, seemed in one way or other to have struck a chord with all those present. Over the seminar’s first day, presentations were made by Romano Alquati, Mario Tronti, Claudio Greppi, Toni Negri, Giairo Daghini, Paolo Virno, Carlo Formenti, Eugenia Parise, Marco Bascetta, Franco Berardi (Bifo), Judith Revel, Enzo Modugno, Benedetto Vecchi, Oreste Scalzone (by videotape), Christian Marazzi (by videotape), and Mariarosa Dalla Costa.

This two-day conference acted as the culmination of a first stage of public debates around the book’s handling of the tradition, and the venue for it was well-chosen. The Rialto Occupato social centre is located in the heart of the Roman ghetto, and seems to have finally been allowed to operate without

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6 Following the publication of their book in February 2002, Borio, Pozzi and Roggero organized a series of similar encounters across Italy in which they elaborated on key themes contained within it. These took place in Bari on March 4, Cosenza on March 11, Milan on March 19, and Naples on March 22.
the need for barricades by the local *comune*. It includes three floors and an idyllic courtyard that both provided shade from a terribly hot summer weekend and acted as a backdrop for the first day of the talks. The hundred or so chairs laid out remained mostly empty for at least an hour after the conference was supposed to start, allowing those who had arrived early to take a look at the excellent selection of books displayed by DeriveApprodi and talk.

Of particular interest, for a tradition that has long stressed the vital importance of understanding working-class composition, was the makeup of the crowd. While initially there were jokes amongst the participants that the average age of the attendees was fifty, a strong cohort of younger people trickled in as Saturday’s presentations began. This, in itself, underscored the manner in which key themes and contributions stressed by various exponents of *operaismo* still percolate in the experience of younger generations dealing with what is a qualitatively different cycle of struggle. The number of attendees grew to well over two hundred people at peak times.

The event was organised so that the first day was the province of the movement’s theoreticians, with the second reserved for presentations and debate between several militant *gruppi di ricerca* [research groups] from across Italy. While most of the first day’s presentations displayed affinities, in that they were responses to the book, the sheer breadth of ideas unleashed by workerism’s various exponents over four decades meant that the contributions lacked a certain thematic cohesiveness. Due to this, subjects not given much coverage in *Futuro Anteriore* occasionally became central to the conference’s corpus of ideas.

Gigi Roggero’s thankfully welcomed this in his introduction, highlighting the occasionally richly diverse trajectories taken by *operaismo* since its emergence.

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7 This mirrored, to a certain extent, the organisational preference of the authors. ‘Militants’ are indicated in *Futuro Anteriore* as the ‘hinge’ connecting intellectuals and a larger movement and allowing for a beneficial recurring circulation of transformative energy between these. As we shall see, this conception of the structure of a movement follows a less-discussed Leninist variant of Italian workerism.

8 For reasons of space, the second day’s contributions will unfortunately not receive the same attention as those of the first. Faced with the difficult choice of what to highlight amidst such a wealth of material, I have made this particular one for two reasons. First, readers familiar with the autonomist tradition will note that what made the conference remarkable was Saturday’s succession of theorists. Second, for those less familiar with the tradition, the specificity of many experiences discussed on Sunday mean that readers outside of Italy stand to gain less from them. While this takes nothing away from those presentations, they are the ones that suffer, and for this I apologise.
While the original experience of Italian workerism may be dead, he reminded the audience that it remains a ‘living political body’ to which we cannot remain indifferent. This was, after all, a tradition that, beginning in the late 1950s, had the audacity to construct a new form of revolutionary theory and practice, to propose a new socio-economic reading which indicated in the ‘mass worker’ a revolutionary subject capable of destabilising Fordist and Taylorist configurations of production. Breaking decisively with traditional leftist politics that idealised labour, operaismo advocated its refusal, putting faith in a working-class desire to act ‘both for itself and for its self-extinction’ as a class. Flowing from these characteristics of the tradition is the ‘anticipatory’ power of the autonomist approach, at once able to comprehend key aspects of struggles against Fordist capital as well as the latter’s reconfiguration towards post-Fordist productive arrangements.

Having set the scene for a meeting that ‘probably could not have taken place even a few years ago’, Roggero outlined the notion of subjectivity. Central to the book’s thrust (here Alquati’s influence on the authors is felt most deeply), subjectivity is a ‘contemporary node’ demanding the attention of any research whose goal involves radical social transformation. Discarding an understanding of subjectivity as somehow inherently radical, in Futuro Anteriore the authors take pains to present it as an ‘ambivalent’ force. In this way subjectivity can be ‘common’ that is, accepting of capitalist power relations, or it can become a ‘counter-subjectivity’ formed through political intervention. The notion cuts through a rather onerous list of terms and areas that Roggero indicated as being open to discussion. These included biopolitics, the mass worker, the multitude, the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, immaterial labour, and a series of others.9

Fittingly, it was the group’s mentor, Alquati, who began the series of talks with a brief discussion centring around the potential benefits he saw as flowing from the research contained in Futuro Anteriore. These, he suggested, revolved around whether or not a new community of researchers could be formed that was international in scope and not divided by pettiness or jealousies.10

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9 Amidst much hilarity, the list was often pointed to in various presentations that followed as a terrifying one. Particularly useful for gaining one’s bearings amidst autonomists’ contributions to the language of social theory is Zanini and Fadini 2001.

10 His point was important, especially considering the particular strengths that Italian workerism managed to develop in this area (their cooperation with North American and British researchers and activists along the same political lines was notable, leading to a fruitful cross-fertilisation with groups outside of Italy).
community of researchers would need to promote better, horizontal research (presumably along the lines of how *Futuro Anteriore* was produced). After providing anecdotes on the conditions in which groups such as *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia* carried out their forays into social theory, Alquati ended his discussion with a question: ‘Are there the conditions to begin a new project in this regard, one that can use communications technology in a more organic way to achieve such a goal?’ Coming from a figure whose thought has probed so many vital areas in the development of a methodology for militant research, it clearly struck a chord with most of the participants.  

Mario Tronti’s presentation was longer and more complex. The full richness of it, as is the case with several other presentations described, cannot be rendered here. Tronti’s work has significantly characterised the backbone of *operaismo*’s thought, to the point where several of the book’s interviewees refer to themselves as ‘Trontian’ (often as opposed to ‘Negrian’). These references allude to one of the first and most important splits that characterised workerism as a developing body of thought. Tronti’s work was central to the perspective’s formation in making a decisive break with Marxism that had sometimes obsessively looked to capital for indications as to how working-class emancipation could occur. In *Operai e Capitale*, Tronti’s partial reformulation of Marxist theory is inscribed in the title – it is the activity of the working class that enables capitalist innovation, in that the latter must appropriate the fruits of this activity. Stemming from this is the preoccupation characteristic of the overwhelming majority of later autonomist thought: in order to understand how workers can free themselves from capital, we must understand the nature and composition of the working class. Where another split comes, one that ultimately led to the demise of the *Classe Operaia* journal,

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11 ‘Conricerca’, the method used by Borio, Pozzi, and Roggero in *Futuro Anteriore* was initially used by autonomists as a radical methodology for understanding the nature of labour and the composition of the working class. While the authors of *Futuro Anteriore* used it in the service of understanding an intellectual tradition, creating an international network of militant research is an important horizon that their project strives towards. Alquati’s writing informs this. See Alquati 1993.

12 My treatment of the actual talks will combine description, paraphrasing, and quoting (in translation) in the occasionally conflicting interests of faithfulness, flow, and staying within the limits of this paper. All translations, and thus the responsibility for their quality, are mine.


14 This sensibility is initially evident in the *Classe Operaia* journal, the members of whom broke away from Raniero Panzieri’s *Quaderni Rossi* over their belief that their research ought to lead to direct intervention in working-class struggle rather than be more descriptive and detached in nature.
is primarily in the articulation of strategy. While Tronti opted to remain within the Italian Communist Party, thus endorsing an ‘external’ force capable of promoting worker’s interests from a position of ingrained strength, the ‘Negrians’ followed this line of thought to a different conclusion, tending to lump trade unions and the Communist Party in with capital.\textsuperscript{15} It was thus with particular attention that the crowd followed his talk, which he began by noting that he was there primarily to listen. Tronti mused about his surprise for the renewed interest in \textit{operaismo}: ‘I would like to understand the reasons for this, because I honestly cannot see the objective conditions that might justify a return.’ Despite the misgivings, he praised the effort of the authors, underlining the pleasure with which he noted Alquati’s ‘good scholarship’ and the book’s ‘political approach’. While the authors take pains to point out that theirs is not a historical work, he justly suggested that this ‘work of historical reconstruction is important’, urging us ‘not to underestimate it. What is lacking from present practical and political theory’, Tronti said, ‘is the capacity to tie together history and actuality, memory and perspective’. \textit{Operaismo}, it should be noted, was not a beginning for him, rather it was a ‘fundamental passage’, an experience, he said, ‘that in many respects was a fundamental practical failure’. This failure was marked by the limits of a political culture that were inadequate to the mass worker as a revolutionary subject, one ultimately unable to fulfil its role as ‘both within and against’. Thus the question this led up to became one of why Italian workers during the decade of struggle ‘were unable to develop a force [\textit{forza}] that could become power [\textit{potenza}]’,\textsuperscript{16} in order to rival capital’s and to overcome it.

To begin to answer this question, that begged by failed revolutions, one should avoid making too much of the distinction between the workers’ movement and its official representatives:\textsuperscript{17} ‘It is a distinction that at a certain point I dropped, and one that I believe should be dropped’. Rather, the answer

\textsuperscript{15}As the communist lawyer Pasquale Vilarda noted on the second day, ‘therefore, if we must return to the beginning, to ’68, when Tronti goes one way and Negri goes another, well Negri did a whole bunch of jail time, Scalzone is still at this point in Paris: it is the latter \textit{operaismo} that demonstrated it knew how to interpret the present of the seventies and the future of today’.

\textsuperscript{16}On the untranslatability from Italian to English of ‘potenza’ and ‘potere’, see Michael Hardt’s introduction to Negri 1991. There the problem is solved by translating \textit{potenza} as ‘power’ and \textit{potere} as ‘Power’. I have maintained this distinction for the purposes of this review.

\textsuperscript{17}In \textit{Futuro Anteriore}, the authors often speak of the ‘movimento operaio’ on the one hand and the ‘Movimento Operaio’ on the other.
to this question must come in the form of constructing what Tronti referred to as a ‘unified history’ of the worker, running from the first industrial revolution to the emergence of what lay beyond the mass worker whose outlines the autonomists had traced. The history of the worker is one of ‘struggles and organisation . . . not just self-organisation, but organisation from the exterior, from above’. Referring explicitly to the book’s recuperation and refinement of Leninist concepts, he made the point that these were exactly the notions Classe Operaia was working with as they distributed leaflets at factory gates in the 1960s. Looking back on the twentieth century, Tronti pointed out that it was not only one of global civil wars, but one of civil wars amongst social classes. The present-day worker therefore is not only a subject of capitalist production, but of world politics [politica-mondo]. In a move that underscored the uniqueness of the day, he pointed out that to have placed this development of the worker within a global dimension was a great accomplishment of Hardt and Negri’s Empire. Post-1968 however, he continued, the emerging political culture has tended ‘in an unconsciously subaltern manner, to destroy every form of polar conflict’. This tendency on the part of the Left is the first thing that needs to be challenged, as the failures of autonomist thought were to be found not in its lack of a political culture, but in a ‘fear of the political’.18

Touching on a most delicate subject, Tronti reminded the audience that there was indeed an attempt to develop a ‘force’ that could rival capital’s, in this case ‘a bloc of political power with militaristic offshoots’. Understanding this is part of not averting our eyes from reading a history that makes us uncomfortable, of coming to terms with the fact that the foundations for some actions taken in the name of the worker may have only been ideological. He ended with a few words on the ‘multitude’, indicated as our contemporary revolutionary subject by Hardt and Negri, pointing out that there is no intrinsic disposition towards politics within this subject, a factor that demands countermeasures. If this is the case, while the categories provided by the authors (‘élites’, ‘militants’ and ‘movements’) were in need of refinement, then production of alternative élites is a perfectly reasonable and even essential goal in the enactment of social change.

18 By ‘the political’, Tronti was here referring to traditional bastions of Marxist strategy, such as trade unions and the PCI, the relationship of these with Italian workerism having been a notoriously tormented and often dysfunctional one. For accounts of this that are generally unsympathetic to aspects of Italian workerism, see Ginsborg 1990, and Callinicos 2001.
Next up was Claudio Greppi who, true to his interview in *Futuro Anteriore*, began by citing the importance of Tronti’s readings of Marx on the one hand and Alquati’s research endeavours on the other. Picking up one of the themes of the book (the tension between spontaneity and structure), he characterised himself as being ‘essentially spontaneist’ back then, admitting that organisational concerns such as those just elucidated by Tronti rarely concerned him. ‘While in the 1960s it was clear enough what element was to be dislodged in order to damage the whole system, today it is not’. *Empire* (the work would emerge again and again over the course of the afternoon) can give a context for the present, Greppi suggested, but it cannot solve this problem. In the absence of a key for contemporary political intervention, even amidst the global movement of movements that had just been consolidated in Porto Alegre, there has emerged a certain ‘ideological’ quality. All that is given relevance in contemporary critiques of globalised capital is the scarecrows it erects, he continued, auspicing instead a return to critiques of ideology and of the capitalist use of science. Greppi concluded by saying that *Futuro Anteriore* was a book in which he ‘recognised’ himself, praising the ‘correct’ treatment of the interviews by the authors.

Of a different tack was Toni Negri’s brief and polemical *intervento*. ‘I believe that *operaismo* is dead’ he began. ‘What I understand from reading Marx,’ he continued, ‘is that structure and substance go together’. Here, Negri tied the methodology of conricerca to a specific kind of capitalist structure: ‘Today we have been lucky enough to experience a passage, and we are intelligent enough to be able to change method, that passage having occurred’. Granted, the ambiguities within *operaismo* were ‘perverse’ in certain respects, and he conceded that perhaps these needed to be confronted. Pausing, Negri continued however by describing his present relationship with the body of ideas as one that is ‘without passion’. Here, Toni echoed a sentiment that surfaced in several of the presentations, a deep reluctance to re-open and re-evaluate old categories and debates. In what could only be seen as a direct contradiction of Tronti’s recipe for the multitude, Negri categorically (and energetically) denied that the political subject was in need of direction. ‘It rankles me to hear that the multitude needs an external politics in the same way that the working class [*classe operaia*] did’. Its relationship towards politics in general

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19 For Greppi, the *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia* experiences were much more formative ones, as he was younger than Tronti at the time.
could only be seen as vastly different from that of the mass worker, which itself had a varied relationship to the political. ‘The working class’, Negri continued, ‘was the soviet, the working class was the trade union, the working class was the party’. Yet our contemporary project should be to interrogate ourselves on the meaning of labour nowadays, he admonished the audience. To speak of ‘operaismo . . . we must speak in terms of a formidable adventure that we lived, of something that was absolutely fundamental in allowing us to interpret and in allowing us to understand a fundamental passage, beyond which labour, subjectivity, political culture, doing politics become something else. No comparisons are admissible’.

Amidst a murmuring crowd, Giairo Daghini’s presentation returned to the fluid nature of operaismo’s analysis, discussing how there were ‘no firm reference points’ for it back then. In a point that belied Daghini’s formation as a militant intellectual, he discussed labour as the ‘centre of things’ for the operaisti. Yet, even back then, he recalled, there were signs that work was in a process of becoming, of breaking free from a certain given form. These ‘fluxes of becoming’, according to Daghini, were evident wherever they looked, from the Soviet Union to capital itself. ‘It can be said, therefore, that that which was for an historical period a central subject, the working class, the bearer of becoming, is now the multiplicity of minorities, of differences and singularities’.

Paolo Virno’s characteristically sophisticated discussion began by commenting how diverse an area of thought Italian workerism is. If operaismo were to be considered a living organism, he quipped, then it would undoubtedly look ‘like Frankenstein’. The body of theory is ‘made up by now of too many experiments . . . at times even practical experiments too different amongst each other to refer back to a true family of thought’. When we speak of operaismo, it becomes a sort of psychological experiment, Virno continued: ‘Is it not true that when we speak of operaismo today we speak of it in quotes or in italics?’ This suggests we need to consider alternatives, a new ‘order of names’, and ‘other words’. His presentation made the vital point that the defining moment for Italian workerism came in the 1960s, after which subsequent experiences can only be seen as offshoots. Stressing this, he

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20 Daghini’s political formation occurred against a working class Swiss background, and by his own account initially involved self-education after long days of manual labour as a bricklayer.

21 Virno’s work is amongst a particular variety of these offshoots (along with Negri,
differentiated between that ‘original’ body of thought and what occurred from the mid-1980s onwards: ‘that is, the failure, the defeat of the second cycle of revolution’. Here he was referring to what is a continual point of return for autonomist (especially that which identifies as ‘post-workerist’) thought: the notion that the productive shift between Fordism and post-Fordism can be seen as a revolutionary one, despite the fact that it resulted in a temporary victory for capital. This ‘second revolution of the past century, after that of the 1920s’, is, according to Virno, ‘histrionically ascertainable’. Yet what remains of workerism, despite defeated revolution, is its style, which seeks always to operate where ‘the contradictions are most extreme . . . where the paradoxes are least governable, where the weathervane is most deceptive’.

Virno continued by indicating in journals such as *Futur Antérieur* and *Luogo Comune* helpful attempts to transcend older categories by looking at the new social co-operation as a basis for understanding constitution. Here, while moving on from older categories that when uttered immediately seem to preclude any fruitful discussion, attempts have been made to examine forms of productive co-operation in which language, communication and knowledge play decisive parts, in which the so-called ‘general intellect’ referred to by Marx has ‘become living labour’. The political, in other words, has been justly re-framed within a new form of productive co-operation. This, in turn, guarantees that Tronti’s discussion of the intellectual’s role ‘gains a particular relevance’. While maintaining that their respective notions of ‘the intellectual’ might be different, Virno returned to new forms of co-operation within capitalism. ‘Would it not be the case’, he ended up by asking, ‘to ascribe many of our difficulties, even theoretical and practical, to a situation in which both legitimately and literally . . . one can speak of a communism of capital?’

Of particular relevance to this alleged facet of informational capitalism

Revel, Bifo, Marazzi, Lazzarato, and others) – one that has chosen to highlight difference over continuity, poststructuralism rather than Hegelian philosophy, post-Fordism over Fordism. Evidence of this is to be found in his recent work – see Virno 2002.

22 It is surprising that Virno failed to put more recent efforts, such as Toni Negri’s journal *Posse* or the French *Multitudes* within this tradition, of which they are certainly a part.

23 A distinctive feature of Virno’s, Formenti’s, and to some extent Berardi’s work is their insistence that high-technology capitalism has, in its attempts to neutralise successive waves of struggle, incorporated within itself and come to depend upon cooperative practices that threaten its very existence. This characteristic of their work flows from an understanding (developed differently in each of their cases) of the ‘general intellect’ discussed by Marx in the *Grundrisse* section known as the ‘Fragment on Machines’. Marx 1973, pp. 699–743.
were the thematically related and equally incisive discussions by Carlo Formenti, Franco Berardi (Bifo), and Christian Marazzi. ‘That which remains alive within Frankenstein has much to do’, Formenti began, ‘with a style’. This style revolved around twin characteristics, ‘autonomy’ and ‘ambiguity’, ones he outlined in a series of questions. If the 1970s was indeed a revolution inasmuch as it involved ‘the suspension of capitalist control’, is it not possible that capital itself has never recovered from this? The net economy, that distinct phase of accumulation which he referred to as an ‘economy of desire’, has doubtless imploded over the last two years. This implosion, as Formenti suggests in Mercanti di Futuro, was inextricably related to resistance on the part of a new working class to the planning laid out for it by hyper-capital. File sharing has continued to be indulged in by millions around the planet ‘not because they are organised or ideologically oriented, but because there has been a paradigm shift, in the facts rather than the theory, of capitalist development’. The resulting euphoria around the ‘new economy’ was the result of an ‘incredible mirage’ experienced by mental workers who lived this process, that of a ‘communism of the rich in America’. One of the first conclusions to be drawn from this semi-failure is that, when capitalism is forced – as Formenti suggests is the case under post-Fordism – to subsume within itself co-operative forms of social relations that are anathema to it, it inevitably brings upon itself deep problems in its ability to accumulate. Here, capital must begin another project of formal subsumption, it must deal with social autonomy, creativity, desire, communities, and concrete subjects. Breaking away from both Negri and Hardt’s borderless rendition of power in Empire and the framework proffered by Tronti, however, Carlo went on to insist that ‘the political’ remained an enemy. Post-September 11, he contextualised the American shift from a communication economy towards a military one as fully within the grand tradition of capital’s ability to restructure itself when faced with resistance. As an antidote, he warned against resurrecting old foes, but rather proposed that contemporary social movements ought to take advantage of capital’s ‘folly’. In order to survive, capital must ‘become necessary’ suggested Formenti, and this was its weak point.

24 Formenti and Berardi’s work have a number of affinities, particularly in their sustained attention to cyberspace, the new economy, and new social movements. Their most recent efforts continue this trend: See Berardi 2001, and Formenti 2002.

25 Here one can only infer that the allusion was to the aforementioned ‘communism of capital’.
Franco Berardi (Bifo)’s contribution\textsuperscript{26} began by outlining the importance of communication processes to contemporary capitalism as well as to the movements within and against it, and the consequent necessity to focus on them as an object of study. As a means for arriving at this conclusion, Bifo began by discussing how he had never felt comfortable with \textit{operaismo} as a moniker for the group’s ideas. This was an expression used by journalists, perpetually able to extract ‘the inessential’ from social processes. Yet, at the same time, there ‘is a strong specificity and homogeneity of the experiences’, which valorised stressing unity over rupture in the perspective. What best captures this specificity of autonomist thought, according to Berardi is not the reference to a single, immutable social subject (i.e. the ‘mass worker’), but rather a ‘method’, that of ‘compositionism’. The theoretical move is an incisive one, arguably freeing autonomist thinking from the accusation that it was relevant only during a specific historical period.\textsuperscript{27} ‘In that concept, class composition, composition, combination, there is something that . . . permits us to emancipate ourselves with respect to a modern political tradition that locates accomplished subjectivities, that locates relatively identifiable political blocs . . .’

Following this vindication of compositionism, Bifo suggested that he could not even begin to ‘pose himself the problem’ of ‘working-class defeat. What is important is not to win or to lose, what is important is to be impeccable. In this situation . . . what is in play is an interminable dynamic, a dynamic that does not conclude itself, that therefore cannot be concluded with a victory as much as it cannot be concluded in defeat’. In this key, he briefly suggested that the struggle around the workers’ statute in Italy\textsuperscript{28} was ‘noble yet impotent’. The figure of the worker cannot be resurrected amidst the profound fractalisation of the process of labour, one that accompanied its increasing cognitisation. In essence, our working time has been splintered into so many millions of pieces, of microseconds, that there can be no single worker identity any longer, only a plurality of diverse ones. Picking up on a theme dealt with

\textsuperscript{26} Chronologically, Bifo’s talk came after Eugenia Parise’s and Marco Bascetta’s. I cover it immediately after Formenti’s due to the preponderance of concerns shared by the two presentations. Christian Marazzi’s talk is covered after this for the same reason.

\textsuperscript{27} The \textit{Rekombinant} website (which Berardi is amongst the editors of) gives a good idea of the current applications of his approach: <http://www.rekombinant.org>.

\textsuperscript{28} The changes proposed by the Berlusconi government to the workers’ statute (Articolo 18) had, in the weeks leading up to the conference, proved to be a tremendous catalyst for the Left, provoking Italy’s first general strike (on April 16) since 1982.
in *La Fabbrica dell’infelicità*, Bifo wrapped things up by stating that the crisis of informational capitalism is to be located primarily in the nervous breakdown of the modern worker. Unable to keep the dizzying pace imposed by hyper-capitalism, ‘psychopathic epidemics’ have begun to break out amongst what Nick Dyer-Witheford would refer to as its ‘value-subjects’.\(^{29}\) Considering all of this, he ended by suggesting that analysing the new institutions of self-organised work is the direction that needs to be taken by future generations of researchers.

Christian Marazzi’s contribution, a recorded one, covered similar territory to that reflected on by Bifo and Formenti. Rather than deny any continuity between the beginning of workerism and current projects engaged in by the tradition (as Negri had done), Marazzi suggested that the ‘common denominator’ of the work of research and political action is a particular method. Tronti’s vital assertion, that as far as the subjects and processes to be examined it was ‘class first and then capital’ is, ‘still to this day, a fundamental assumption of workerism’. From this, a series of lines of research emerged, such as the emergent analysis of the importance of language,\(^{30}\) the classic one of labour and its modifications, or the state-form and its crisis. These paths, while leading to the uncovering of categories such as biopolitics and the multitude, according to Marazzi still leave unresolved the most important question, that of the ‘becoming of conflict. The problem’, he continued, ‘is that the multitude in a certain sense registers, from a sociological point of view . . . a condition and a state of society more than alluding directly or even indirectly to forms of conflictual subjectivity’.

Another area Marazzi’s talk confronted was the materiality of workerism’s own existence as a movement. While having ‘well-identifiable origins’, operaismo ‘was never a movement with its own compactness and its own linearity . . . if anything it was very important at the point in which it shattered’. With tremendous insight, Marazzi suggested that feminism was one of the primary causes for a crisis internal to the tradition, exposing a series of its weaknesses and forcing it to expand beyond its theoretical limits. What the feminist tradition brought about was attention, employing a workerist method, to the thematic of reproduction. ‘This is fundamental’, Marazzi said, suggesting that

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\(^{29}\) The crossover between Dyer-Witheford’s work and Bifo’s particularly on the indication of class composition as a central concern for contemporary radical thought is apparent also in the attention they pay to each other’s work: See Dyer-Witheford 2002, and Berardi 1998.

\(^{30}\) Particularly valuable in this area is his own work. See Marazzi 1994 and 2002.
a closer look at the crisis and transformation induced by the feminist critique reveal that only after this rupture does the analysis of the subsumption of life itself engaged in by the workerist perspective become a possibility. In this sense, he suggested, some of workerism’s discontinuities are more defining than its continuities.

Finally, implicitly highlighting a subtle change in course from one of *Empire*’s dominant strands of analysis, Marazzi claimed that we are presently confronting a ‘particular form of biopolitics . . . thanatopolitics [*thananatopolitica*], the politics of death’. Echoing the dominant theme of his recent book, *Capitale & linguaggio*, he underlined the shift on the part of capital in ‘its imperial form’ towards the annihilation of the other. While biopolitics can and must be seen in its ‘historical dimension’, that is, the intervention of the state in the reproduction of labour-power, presently biopolitics offers itself ‘as a form of pathological management, a pathologisation of the very existence of labour-power’. Here, Marazzi ended an enriching but brief talk by (again implicitly) suggesting that the validity of *Empire* and the theoretical framework it offers was now somewhat compromised by the events of September 11 and the shift between Clinton and Bush, and that the category of biopolitics itself needed to be questioned.

Marco Bascetta considered the question of why there remains a curiosity around *operaismo*. Heading in the opposite direction from that of Tronti, he wondered whether this generalised avoidance of the political was actually a reason for workerism’s continued relevance, especially with regard to contemporary movements. If, on a global scale, the continued relevance of the political was exemplified by the resurgence of fundamentalism, then our present problem within this scenario is not much different from that confronted by groups such as Potere Operaio (PO) back in the early 1970s. That is, what are the forms of organisation to be taken by the ‘movement of movements’?

Francesca Pozzi’s short talk introduced Eugenia Parise, the first female speaker of the day. Considering that, by this point, over three hours had passed, this could definitely be seen as a problem for the conference, an unfortunately familiar one for the autonomist tradition. Here, the domination of groups such as PO by men during the 1970s was reproduced in a contemporary context, yet, as we shall see, there were reasons for optimism. The first of these is Francesca Pozzi’s parallel and ongoing inquiry into the

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31 Ginsborg 1990, amongst others, has pointed out the problematic gender dynamics in revolutionary groups such as Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua.
history of Italian feminism, the results of which were the attendance of women such as Parise at the conference. The second lies in the fact that, despite the questionable gender dynamics of Italian autonomist thought and practice as a whole, the strains of feminist thought influenced by it remain a rich resource from which projects such as Francesca’s can draw. These ‘feminisms’, as she referred to them, developed primarily during the 1970s, the most ‘autonomist’ articulation of which remains Mariarosa Dalla Costa’s group, *Lotta Femminista*. Drawing directly on this legacy, Pozzi correctly pointed out that, if the processes of social production and reproduction were vital to contemporary capital, then the role of women in relation to this obviously becomes strategic. ‘Do we want to turn a capitalist patriarchy into a capitalist matriarchy’, she ended off by asking, ‘or are we fighting against this capitalism and against this patriarchy for a new relationship between the genders renewed in a new difference?’

The matter of gender representation was mentioned explicitly by Parise in a talk that was exceptionally brief because in her own words she had ‘to go’ and ‘did not have much to say’. While the presentation opened up important questions (‘... when we speak of politics I see we that we research everything else, and never feminisms’), it let them drop without confronting what could have resulted in an important discussion. What was most important about the authors’ project, Parise continued, was building networks of militancy. For this reason, she supported the book during the Salerno meeting, and because the interrogation of older traditions might bring to the fore specific and obvious gender dynamics that plagued the movements of the 1970s. This was made particularly important due to the fact that, from her limited contact with the ‘no-global’ movement, she still discerned customs and attitudes that are ‘old and frustrating ones’. Her last statement betrayed a certain annoyance, thanking Franci for convincing her to come to Rome. Their shared concern was that ‘female voices had to be present during seminar, which risked being a meeting in which the feminine presence ... the feminine body risked being torn apart, to disappear in these attempts to re-think workerism as an historical experience, living or dead as it might be ...’

If there were a need to fill the gender disparity, however, Mariarosa Dalla Costa’s presentation certainly did this. The talk, taking up the better part of an hour and coming complete with a title (‘The Door of the Orchard and of the Garden’), demonstrated the Marxist-feminist’s famous commitment to any intellectual project she undertakes. While having been unable to participate
during the ‘conricerca’ phase before the book’s formulation (and thus becoming one of the CD’s only gaps) due to the conflict between it and her other work,\textsuperscript{32} Dalla Costa more than made up for this. Her intervento became what the project had been missing: a long discussion of her personal history, path, and development, moving from PO (in which she participated from 1967–71), through \textit{Lotta Femminista} (LF), to her engagement with an international community of researchers, to the present focus of her work.\textsuperscript{33} Identifying as part of the feminism of autonomist derivation, she mused: ‘Why am I here after thirty years? The answer is simple. Because this is my home. Here I was born, here my political formation came about, but above all this is the experience that I searched for and which gave an answer to my need to understand and act’.

This said, Dalla Costa enumerated her own areas of inquiry, all of which are a part of social reproduction. The first is the abuse of hysterectomy as a devastation of the ‘orchard of reproduction internal to the female body’, and thus the ‘devastation of the sites of the generation of life and pleasure’. Secondly, there is the ‘labour of reproduction as a labour of production and care for life’, which she identified as ‘question remaining unanswered’. Finally there was that of the earth ‘as orchard and garden of the reproduction external to bodies, because the earth is not only a source of nourishment, but from the earth bodies gain spirit, sensations, and the imaginary’.\textsuperscript{34} In the first of these areas of study and intervention, Dalla Costa spoke of the related difficulties of researching such a topic and challenging the medical establishment over their practices.\textsuperscript{35} Here was, therefore, a critique along the lines of what Greppi had claimed was necessary:

> What are in question are the types of science that assault us, the interests of the medical profession, the further deformations produced in the health system by the policies of large financial organisms that, in a neoliberal perspective, reduce ever more to commodities the life of citizens and the physical and social body that encases it.

\textsuperscript{32} Besides its occurrence during the school year, in her own words ‘I was defining the strategy for that which, after birth and abortion, I consider to be the third great battle between the female body and the medical body: the abuse of hysterectomy’.

\textsuperscript{33} In many ways, the article acted as an extension of one English-speaking readers might be familiar with: see Dalla Costa 1988.

\textsuperscript{34} For her writings in this area in English see Dalla Costa 1999, and 1995, and 2003.

\textsuperscript{35} See Dalla Costa (ed.) 1998, as just one example of her efforts around the practice of hysterectomy.
While the breadth of Dalla Costa’s presentation cannot be properly treated here, her reflections on her own path made for fascinating listening. Looking back on her parting of ways with PO (the male-female relationship within that milieu, she stated, was not characterised by sufficient ‘dignity’) she covered the birth of Lotta Femminista’s perspective. ‘We revealed that production originated fundamentally from two poles, the factory and the house, and that the woman, exactly because she produced capitalism’s fundamental commodity, possessed a fundamental lever of social power: she could refuse to produce’. Dalla Costa offered rich little insights into the materiality of a life’s work, such as her humorous recounting of LF’s limited means of communication, or how their movement was in a bitter irony ultimately hampered by a lack of funds. Tying these into broader historical processes, such as the particular fate reserved for revolutionary feminist thought in Italy amidst the repression of dissent during the early 1980s, she closed the account of a chapter of her life by saying that in neither of the two groups did she experience ‘a single moment of joy’. All that she remembered was the immense fatigue brought on by those struggles: ‘what I was missing was something able to move me in a positive manner, to provoke a strong collective imagination, to reveal different scenarios’. It is at this point that a series of new social movements – indigenous rebellions, peasant movements, those of fishermen, those of populations against dams or deforestation – which all posed the earth as central in their struggles provided her with what she had been missing. ‘The matter of the earth obligated us to rethink that of reproduction, [the] reproduction of humanity if we want to think in global terms’. Her talk finished by suggesting the need to recognise the centrality of these questions and strengthen relationships with movements engaged on this front.

Judith Revel, who began a wonderfully thoughtful presentation by stating that she would be disappointed ‘if there were a niche in which only women were allowed to speak of women’, did not amplify the frustration betrayed by Pozzi or Parise. This she would return to later, but the first broad thematic that she outlined was that of ‘passages of continuity and discontinuity’. Here, Revel highlighted that what had been employed up to that point were actually two different lexicons: ‘… on the one side class, etc, on the other, terms that are [part of] another vocabulary’. Referring to the split between those who

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36 Here Dalla Costa’s work intertwines with that of the Midnight Notes Collective, the perspective of which she acknowledged as being far closer to her own in many instances than that of Potere Operaio.
at a certain point took a poststructuralist turn and those who have remained more wholly within the Marxist canon, she denied the incompatibility of these, and yet suggested that at least they ‘should be posed as a problem’. The problem of language however is not only that of communication or information, ‘because a community is not enough to make a common language and ‘a common language is not enough to make community’. Moving on, Revel pointed to reproduction as ‘that work of generation, and thus of creation, of invention, the paradigm of which is the reproduction of children, or female labour that is not considered as such. Here, while praising Dalla Costa’s focus on reproduction, she stated that ‘women speaking of women . . . is not far from men speaking to men, for men and of men’. Speaking of subjectivity, Revel expressed her interest in its ‘forward’ production rather than the opposite.\footnote{As I do not have language behind me as a toolbox, as I do not have models to verify but ones to invent, I do not have a subjectivity that supports me, because I invent it . . . in language, in affects, in practices, in experience and in life tout court, thus in the production of value.} This she used to contest the notion of counter-subjectivity ‘because if one is against then one is against something, and that something, in its oneness, in its unity, in its visibility, does not exist anymore’. In conclusion, she returned to \textit{conricerca} as a method, the importance of which is to be found in the ‘construction of a language’, the ‘construction of paths’ and the ‘construction of identity’.

With this ended a formidable first day of talks. The second day, while in some ways equally rich, was most important in that it offered a chance for various militant research groups to come together and communicate amongst each other. Opened by Guido Borio’s introduction, this portion of the conference was geared towards ‘enriching experiences and paths’ of various forms of research and political intervention. Featuring contributions by Andrea Fumagalli, Pasquale Vilarda, Marco Berlinguer, Maurizio Bergamaschi, Lorenzo Calamosca, Antonio Conte, Andrea Russo, Carlos Prieto, Francesco Raparelli, and Roberto Ciccarelli, it accomplished this satisfactorily. What was perhaps most remarkable was the cross-section of \textit{operaismo}’s legacy that it offered, covering research emerging from the \textit{centri sociali}, the more radical corners of Italian academia, from a dialogue with the Partito di Rifondazione Comunista, and that of independent groups.

The first talk of the day however, completing Saturday’s schedule, was Oreste Scalzone’s. Delivered by video due to his exile in France, he began by
noting that he was speaking to those who were his ‘teachers’. It was his role 
during those heady times to translate what he thought were the perspective’s 
subversive strengths, ones he initially encountered with Operai e Capitale, with 
which he was ‘thunderstruck’. This role was not that of a student though 
(since, as he said, he might be defined a ‘bad student’), but of one ‘in charge 
of the drills’. That Scalzone was headed towards uncomfortable territory was 
only confirmed by his question: ‘Is it not that there is . . . an opaque zone, 
one of difficulty and suffering with respect to the discussion of a certain 
autonomy of operaismo’s within the sphere of action?’

Some of operaismo’s founders located their own role within class struggle as a catalytic one at the 
time. ‘Within this, we were something like the accumulation [of tactics], as 
if around us there were models: on the one hand in a way a classic extra-
parliamentary group’ the autonomous assemblies, etc., ‘and then there were 
the Red Brigades, the armed groups, later the archipelago of organisational 
forms that had autonomy in a wide sense’. One got the feeling from Scalzone’s 
talk that he was desperately trying to bring those involved in the conference 
back to the materiality of operaismo’s praxis. ‘When one speaks, for example, 
of PO . . . at times one has the sensation of a kind of fluid inside the fluid . . . as 
if it were a state of mind, an idea; in reality it was a material body, a militant 
organism that made, unmade, committed errors, got it right, gambled, lost . . .’. 
While lauding Empire and its different sensibility, Scalzone targeted the problem 
of creating heroes for a movement, each with their respective pedestals. ‘It 
isn’t only a problem of putting together polemical pamphlets, it is the problem 
of understanding whether or not it is necessary to give ourselves forms that 
are congruent with our discourse, or otherwise say it to ourselves clearly’. 

Going back to Tronti, he ended by suggesting that we should not be afraid 
of articulating political forms in a different and new way, perhaps along the 
lines of revolutionary syndicalism. This would be ‘a vindication located on 
the terrain of resistances, of the sabotage of this swallowing up of life and of 
the most extreme paradoxes . . . of the capital-state logic of our phase’.

The rest of the day brought with it accounts of several local research 
experiences, such as that of the Bologna-based Libera Università Contropiani 
discussed by Maurizio Bergamaschi. Taking its cue from Libur (an experience 
born within the Rialto Occupato), the research project engages with three

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38 For a look at the events of the 1970s that is similarly unflinching with respects 
to armed struggle, see Persichetti and Scalzone 1999.
areas: ‘reading in the local the transformations that intervene on a global plane’, the method of research itself, and the attempt to put different experiences and subjectivities in Bologna on common ground. Finding expression in a series of public debates around urban transformation, the self-interrogation over political categories to which the movement had subjected itself, and the unresolved theme of work, the project was a good example of locally rooted experiments in militant research and intervention.

It was Fumagalli who perhaps captured this legacy best, noting that ‘the first task of a social researcher should be to grasp the continual elements of transformation, therefore it is never research as an end in itself, it is never research that has an end. It is a research that is in continual movement, that generates situations even of contradictions internal to the research process’.

Ultimately, it was this sense of dynamism that marked the ‘Operaismo a Convegno’ conference. While, at times, the result of bringing together such a rich and varied legacy was a cacophony of terms, objects of inquiry, organisational forms, and perspectives, this feature paradoxically became the conference’s most attractive quality. The stunning diversity within autonomist Marxism as a body of thought, one that this report has tried with great difficulty to capture the breadth of, means that those who declare it to be dead are passing a hasty judgement. At the very least, as we have seen, they must name the particular offshoot that has withered. If, in turn, debates over this will doubtless continue, they can only be testament to the fact that far from being anachronistic, autonomist thought has demonstrated a tremendously resilient ability to mutate along with the times.

References


A researcher in Economics at the University of Pavia, Fumagalli has made several important contributions to autonomist thought in his own right. See for example his work with Sergio Bologna 1997, and 2001.


Notes on Contributors

Jason Barker is the author of *Alain Badiou: A Critical Introduction*, London: Pluto Press. jasonbarker00@hotmail.com

Paul Blackledge is a senior lecturer in the School of Cultural Studies at Leeds Metropolitan University. He is the author of *Perry Anderson: Marxism and the New Left*, London: Merlin 2004, the co-editor of *Historical Materialism and Social Evolution*, London: Palgrave 2002, and a member of the Editorial Board of *Historical Materialism*. p.blackledge@leedsmet.ac.uk

Enda Brophy is a doctoral student at the Department of Sociology, Queen’s University, Kingston, Canada. The author of several forthcoming articles on private regulation in cyberspace, Italian social theory, and the political economy of communication, he has worked as a telecommunications policy researcher for the *Public Interest Advocacy Centre* in Ottawa and as a translator to Italian authors in the fields of communications studies and political theory. enda_b@email.com

Paul Burkett teaches economics at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, where he is active in the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors and the Eugene V. Debs Foundation. He is the co-author, with Martin Hart-Landsberg, of *Development, Crisis, and Class Struggle: Learning from Japan and East Asia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000). ecburke@isugw.indstate.edu

Alan Carling works as trade-union consultant. He is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Bradford, where he also chairs the Programme for a Peaceful City. He has published on a variety of topics in Marxism, social theory and political philosophy, including *Social Division* (1991) and *Analysing Families* (edited with Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards, 2002). He is a founding editor of *Imprints*. a.h.carling@Bradford.ac.uk

Jan Dumolyn is assistant professor in the Department of Medieval History in the University of Ghent. His fields of interest are state formation processes and the social history of the late Middle Ages. He is the author of (with David Dessers and Peter Tom Jones), *Ya basta! Globaliseren van onderop*, Ghent, 2002 (Academia Press) and
Notes on Contributors


Jan.Dumolyn@UGent.be

John Foster is Emeritus Professor, Social Sciences, University of Paisley. His best known publication is Class Struggle and Industrial Revolution (1974). He has written broadly on Scottish working-class history, most recently the twentieth-century section of the Penguin History of Scotland (ed. R. Houston and W. Knox, 2001).

john.foster@paisley.ac.uk

Peter E. Jones is a linguist by background. His main areas of interest are general linguistic theory, the Vygotskian cultural-historic approach to language and mind, and the role of language in social processes and social change. He teaches in the School of Communication Studies in Sheffield Hallam University.


ab.campbell@ukgateway.net


Paul Wetherley is a principal lecturer in politics at Leeds Metropolitan University. His main research interests are Marx’s theory of history, the state, and the Third Way. He is joint convenor of the Political Studies Association State Theory Specialist Group.

p.wetherly@leedsmet.ac.uk

Steve Wright works in the School of Information Management and Systems, Monash University. He is the author of Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism, London: Pluto, 2002.

pmargin@optusnet.com.au

Erratum: due to an editorial error, the following Note did not appear in issue 11.3:

Jairus Banaji is a historian whose work has ranged widely across periods and disciplines, from issues in historical materialism (Hegel/Capital; modes of production; the agrarian question) to field projects on the pathologies of corporate regulation in India. His latest book is Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour and Aristocratic Dominance
(Oxford University Press, 1992), which he is currently involved in developing further with monographs on the Sasanian aristocracy and aristocratic responses to the Arab conquests, as well as a longer study of the origins of capitalism.

jairus@vsnl.com
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