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How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions? (contd.)

Theories of bourgeois revolution 1.0: the Enlightenment

Bourgeois thinkers had been attempting to understand the process that was bringing their class to power for at least two hundred years before the emergence of Marxism in the 1840s. The first successful bourgeois revolution, the Dutch, took the form of a war of liberation against the external power of Hapsburg Spain. Consequently, the political theories which emerged, notably those of Hugo Grotius, were less concerned with identifying the relationship between different social classes and forms of private property, than with the rights of the state over its own citizens and vis-à-vis other states. Discussion of revolution as an internal process only came in three subsequent moments of theorisation, as the focus of bourgeois revolution shifted consecutively from Holland to England, from England to Scotland, and finally from Scotland to France.

In England, the development of capitalism preceded the revolutions of the seventeenth century, if not so completely as Brenner claims. In this respect,

\[1\] The first part of this lecture appeared in Davidson 2005c.
there are interesting similarities between the writings of the moderate republican, James Harrington, before the Restoration and those of the moderate royalist, Edward Hyde, First Earl of Clarendon, afterwards. Harrington wrote in grand theoretical terms, Clarendon left a rather more empirical reconstruction of landowner behaviour in Somersetshire; but both men made essentially the same point: changes to political attitudes had followed changes in the nature of property ownership, and the conflict between representatives of different forms of property was the underlying cause of the Civil War. However, the Civil War was only one of two conflicts that emerged in the middle of the seventeenth century. The other arose mainly within the revolutionary camp and concerned the franchise. ‘Property, generally, is now with the people’, said Adam Baynes in Parliament during 1659, ‘government must be there’. Nevertheless, as Hugh Stubbe in effect replied, ‘it is necessary to know who the PEOPLE are’. Baynes identified the key issue as being the triumph of a particular form of property; Stubbe, how much of that form of property people had to possess before they could be said to belong to the People. The first issue was decisively resolved by the Revolution of 1688; the second only by the Reform Act of 1832.

The Scottish moment fell between these two dates. Capitalism had scarcely developed in Scotland before the kingdom was incorporated into the British state in 1707. The Scottish Revolution involved neither decisive popular insurgencies, such as had accompanied the defence of London, nor wide-ranging debates on the limits of democracy, such as had taken place within the New Model Army at Putney. Instead, it took the form of the military repression and juridical abolition of feudal power by the British state following the civil war of 1745–6. ‘Power follows property’, wrote John Dalrymple in 1757, in a phrase redolent of Harrington: England had developed commercial property, Scotland had not, and this accounted for the difference between them, a difference which the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment believed could now be overcome. The transition to capitalism in Scotland was, therefore, a conscious and highly controlled exercise in revolution from above with the specific objective of introducing commercial property, first in agriculture, and then more generally. I say ‘from above’, because it did not involve the popular masses in any sense, but it was not state-led either. On the contrary, this was

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3 Both quoted in Manning 2003, pp. 10, 60.
4 Dalrymple 1757, pp. 338–9.
one of the purest bourgeois experiences in history, precisely because it did not involve the lower orders with their inconvenient demands for representation. Instead, it involved an overlapping alliance of feudal lords and clan chiefs who had been forced to transform themselves into capitalist landowners, Enlightenment intellectuals concerned with national development, and a cadre of improving tenant farmers who leased land from the former and drew theoretical inspiration from the latter. The main difference between the English and the Scots in theoretical terms was that the former were simply justifying the outcome of a process which had taken hundreds of years to complete, while the latter were concerned with producing a blueprint for how the process could be reproduced in a period of decades.5 Interestingly, Adam Smith shared with Brenner a disbelief in the necessity of bourgeois revolution. Smith certainly saw the suppression of noble power as essential for the rise of what he called ‘commercial society’. As he explicitly stated in his lectures at Glasgow University during the 1750s, the nobles must be ‘brought to ruin’, ‘greatly crushed’, before liberty and security could be secured.6 In his view, however, this process had already been largely realised, at least in England, by the absolutist state whose ascendancy was followed by the gradual growth of commerce in the towns, once these were freed from parasitism and wastefulness of the feudal nobility. The specifics of how the lords had been defeated in Scotland – which, of course, depended on their prior transformation in England – was never really discussed in the theoretical works of the Scottish Enlightenment, although it is an essential component of the novels of Sir Walter Scott, the last great representative of the Scottish historical school.

French theory was different again. The one hundred and fifty years between the outbreak of the English and French Revolutions is at least partly due to the fact that, initially at least, the French ruling class was capable of learning from history and made conscious attempts to prevent the growth of similar forces to those which had overthrown the Stuarts. (In this respect, there are parallels between the Chinese tributary state and French absolutism which do not exist between the former and English absolutism.) French capitalism in 1789 was, therefore, much less extensive than English capitalism in 1640, especially in the countryside but, as forthcoming work by Henry Heller will demonstrate, it did exist, and often involved far more advanced forms of

5 Davidson 2004a; Davidson 2005a.
industrial wage-labour than were known in England during the previous century. In a speech to the National Assembly of September 1789, the Abbé Sieyès portrayed a world in which ‘political systems, today, are founded exclusively on labour: the productive faculties of man are all’, and described ‘the largest number of men’ as ‘nothing but labouring machines’. Such a world would have been incomprehensible to John Lilburne and, in reality, it was still far from being actualised even in 1789. Yet, it was an image which the French bourgeoisie wanted to copy, and which they saw emerging in England after 1688 and Scotland after 1746. Indeed, one semi-anonymous member of the National Assembly wrote enviously, in 1790, of how far Scotland had advanced in fifty years, how superior Scottish intellectual life now was to that of England, and how much wealthier Scottish peasants were than those of France. The problem for the French was that, unlike the Scots, no benevolent state would intervene to remove feudal obstacles to capital accumulation, since the state itself constituted the main obstacle. Because the French bourgeoisie had less economic power and a far stronger absolutist opponent than the English, they had to rely to greater extent on the intervention of a popular majority to overthrow the old régime. Nonetheless, they were acutely aware that the masses, upon whose strength they relied, had other views about society, however unrealisable these might have been in the short term. Despite these different circumstances, the formulations used by the French theorists are still very similar to those used by their English predecessors, insofar as they see changed property relations as the social basis of the revolution. In 1791, Joseph Barnave noted that the French Revolution had only been possible because of the social forces that had grown up within the feudal system: ‘Just as the possession of land gave rise to the aristocracy, industrial property increases the power of the people: they acquire their liberty, they multiply, they begin to influence affairs’. The revolution which ‘the people’ would make would be democratic: ‘The democratic principle, almost stifled in all European governments as long as the feudal regime remained vigorous, has since that time increasingly gathered strength and moved towards its fulfilment.” But who would exercise the ‘democratic principle’? All the bourgeois revolutions before the French, with the exception of the Scottish (and no one outside that country considered it a process separate from the English anyway), had involved popular interventions to achieve

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7 Quoted in Sewell 1994, p. 72.
8 B-de 1790, pp. 44, 100, 103–4, 116.
9 Barnave 1971, p. 122.
their goals. What was unclear was whether these mobilisations were integral to the process, or contingent, or merely typical of a particular stage in the development of capitalism. The bourgeois theorists themselves had not answered this question, nor could they.

By the time Marx and Engels entered political life, then, there had been for nearly two hundred years a consensus, common across quite different local circumstances, which held that the basis of political change lay in prior changes to the nature of property and in the individuals who owned that property. It is perhaps worth pausing for a moment to consider the significance of the theoretical consistency involved in such a stance. I accept the point made by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* that the bourgeoisie can never achieve a completely scientific understanding of the world, even in its revolutionary phase. However, this did not mean that bourgeois intellectuals had no insights into the historical process. It was the suppression of these insights, after all, which led Marx to identify a transition from ‘disinterested research’ to ‘apologetics’ by the 1830s.10 We have seen that a common position was held fairly consistently by the greatest intellectuals of their epoch, from Harrington and Clarendon in the 1640s, to Dalrymple and Smith in the 1750s, through to Barnave and Sieyès in the 1790s and beyond. So it is perhaps safe to assume that it reflected, in however incomplete a form, real changes in society which were general, in varying degrees, throughout Europe.

None of the French liberals who survived the Revolution of 1789 doubted that it was a similar event to the English Revolution of 1640. Marx had good political reasons for disliking Francois Guizot (who had, among other things, arranged for him to be deported from Brussels), but for all that, this supreme representative of the postrevolutionary bourgeoisie was not a complete intellectual nullity. Writing in the early 1850s Guizot dismissed as ‘superficial and frivolous’ attempts to distinguish the English and French Revolutions: ‘Originating in the same causes, by the decay of the feudal aristocracy, the Church, and the royal power, they laboured to affect the same work – secure the domination of the people in public affairs’. His final judgement was that, although deceived in many premature expectations, it liberated English society, to an immense extent, from the monstrous inequality of the feudal regime – in a word, such is the analogy between the two Revolutions, *that the first would never have been properly understood unless the second had occurred*.11

11 Guizot 1854, pp. xvi, xviii, xix. My emphasis.
In this respect, at least, he was in agreement with his class enemies, Marx and Engels. The latter were also quite clear that, apart from the common presence of the absolutist state, there were differences between the class forces involved in the English and French cases. Nevertheless, the patterns of development were similar enough for these to be classifiable as the same kind of event. Does this level of agreement mean that Marx and Engels simply endorsed the views of their bourgeois forerunners and contemporaries, that they were responsible for perpetuating a ‘bourgeois paradigm’, and the rest? By no means.

**Theories of bourgeois revolution 2.0: Marx, Engels and the classical tradition**

Brenner and his supporters have claimed that, although Marx and Engels used different terminology, they initially conflated two bourgeois explanatory models to produce the theory of bourgeois revolution. On the one hand, they used the commercial model of socio-economic development associated with the political economists of the Scottish Enlightenment to explain how capitalism emerged from within feudal society. On the other, they deployed the revolutionary model of political development articulated by the liberal historians of Restoration France to explain how the bourgeoisie was able to overcome the absolutist obstacles to its ascendancy. Marx (Engels tends to vanish from these accounts) supposedly produced his own model of capitalist development, based on the establishment of changed social-property relations rather than commercial expansion, only during the 1850s, while drafting the notebooks subsequently published as the *Grundrisse*, which then formed the basis of the discussion in *Capital*. The theory of bourgeois revolution, however, retained the impress of its liberal origins and therefore remains at odds with his mature critique of political economy. Opinion within the Brenner camp seems to be divided over whether Marx actually abandoned the theory or not, but the issue is, in any case, irrelevant for them, since they claim it was rendered redundant by Marx’s discovery that the key to the origin of capitalism lay in social-property relations.\(^\text{12}\)

Before discussing these claims, it is perhaps worth pointing out, for those who imagine that influences only come from books, that Marx was born and

lived until young manhood in the Prussian Rhineland, one part of the German \textit{Länder} where the influence of the French Revolution was most directly experienced, not least because of French occupation. For Marx, therefore, the French Revolution was not simply absorbed from the works of French liberals, it was also a historical experience only recently past, whose effects and unfulfilled promises still defined the politics of the time. In particular, they defined the debate over the forthcoming German revolution; and this was not an abstract debate. There was going to be some sort of revolution – everybody but the dullest Prussian bureaucrat knew that – but what kind of revolution? What would its objectives be? What should ‘extreme democrats’ – socialists like Marx and Engels – argue that its objectives must be? In other words, Marx and Engels had to develop a theory of bourgeois revolution at least partly because they expected to be taking part in one, and they therefore needed to establish what their attitude should be in these circumstances. This is the context. However, even if we attempt to isolate their theoretical influences from their social environment, neither of the claims made by the Brenner school can be sustained.

First, Marx and Engels arrived at their mature theory of socio-economic transition long before the composition of the \textit{Grundrisse} and it remained fundamentally unchanged afterwards. Marx and Engels did, of course, inherit a series of important distinctions from their Enlightenment forebears. The distinction between one stage of subsistence and another (pastoral, agrarian, agricultural and commercial) they inherited from the French and the Scots; the distinction between no property and property from the Dutch and the English. Nevertheless, they abandoned the term ‘mode of subsistence’, and subsumed the process it describes within what they called the productive forces. Moreover, while they continued to refer to property relations, they did so as part of the broader category of productive relations. When did the break from – or, rather, the radicalisation of – their Enlightenment inheritance take place? The Brenner school is correct to say that \textit{The German Ideology}, jointly written between 1845 and 1846, is, in some ways, still heavily dominated by the Scottish historical school. Here, the concept of the productive forces is not yet twinned with the productive relations, but with ‘forms of intercourse’, which include, in addition to property relations, such aspects of ‘social intercourse’ as methods of transportation, which Marx would subsequently assign to the forces of production. However, although the terminology is sometimes inconsistent and thus confusing, it is not the case that Marx and Engels simply identified economic development with the expansion of
commerce and the resulting increased complexity in the division of labour. On the contrary, the latter category has another source altogether: ‘How far the productive forces of a nation are developed is shown most manifestly by the degree to which the division of labour has been carried’. In other words, the extension of the division of labour is a function of the development of the productive forces, not the expansion of trade. Whatever problems there are with *The German Ideology*, it is clear that Marx and Engels’s mature position on socio-economic development was fully worked out by 1847 at the latest, in *The Poverty of Philosophy* and the original lecture upon which *Wage Labour and Capital* is based. That position did not subsequently change, as can be seen by comparing these texts with subsequent works from the *Grundrisse* through the Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* – a text which has always proved rather inconvenient for the Brenner school – to *Capital* itself. Most of the references to bourgeois revolution by Marx and Engels post-date the turning point of 1847. Indeed, as late as *Capital*, Volume I (1867), Marx refers to total dominance of the money-form only being implemented ‘on a national scale’ towards the end of the eighteenth century, ‘during the French bourgeois revolution’.

Second, Marx and Engels did not simply take over the theory of bourgeois revolution from the French liberals and give it a name for the first time. Marx famously wrote in a letter of 1852 to Joseph Weydemeyer: ‘Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle and bourgeois economists the economic anatomy of classes’. These comments refer to the class struggle, not to the bourgeois revolution. The bourgeoisie’s own conception of their revolution had, in any case, begun to change by the early 1830s, a process which coincides closely also with the end of political economy as a science and the turn to naked ideological support for the system to be accidental. We can see the change, in a British context, in the writings of Thomas Babington Macaulay. On 2 March 1831 Macaulay made an incendiary speech in the House of Commons in support of the Reform Bill, in which he argued that political forms had to adapt to changed

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property relations and gave examples from history, including the French Revolution, of how this had happened. Yet, if we turn to his great work, *The History of England from the Accession of James II* (1848–57), within which he describes how those property forms were consolidated in the Revolution of 1688, the subject has changed to that of constitutional liberty, and it is the continuity of English history – from which both James and his uncle had temporarily broken – that is both celebrated and contrasted with that of France, where continuity was lost. Is it too much too suggest that this change in attitude developed (even unconsciously) in opposition to fear of working-class revolution? The English were, of course, fortunate in having what Macaulay called the ‘preserving revolution’ of 1688 to indicate as their decisive turning-point. The French did not and, consequently, could not ignore or downplay the events of 1789 in the same way as the English did those of 1640. Nevertheless, we are dealing here with a general ideological shift. The consolidation of capitalist society increasingly led to the separation of economics and politics. In parallel, the bourgeoisie increasingly rewrote the history of their own revolutionary rise to power so that each individual moment appeared to be a political rather than social revolution.

In other words, by the time Marx and Engels came to consider the issue, bourgeois thinkers had begun to reinterpret the great revolutions in terms which gave greater emphasis to ‘liberty’, or the achievement of constitutional government, than to ‘property’, or the unshackling of a new economic order. Faced with this retreat, to have retained the original insights of the revolutionary bourgeois thinkers would, in itself, have been an intellectual achievement, but, in fact, Marx and Engels moved beyond their predecessors. Just as they did not restrict themselves to defending classical political economy from the ‘hired prize-fighters of capital’, but undertook a critique of the entire intellectual tradition, neither did they confine themselves to restating the political doctrines of French (or more properly, Franco-British) liberalism, but separated out the issues of liberty, property and agency in a way that bourgeois thinkers themselves were ideologically incapable of doing. In consequence, they transformed conceptions of revolutionary change to at least the same extent as they did, say, the law of value.

Confusion over this issue may be due to the fact that Marx and Engels theorised both bourgeois and proletarian revolutions at the same time, and, in both cases, drew heavily from the example of the French Revolution. This is not in itself a problem, since, as Lukács later noted, ‘From the Great French
Revolution on, all revolutions exhibit the same pattern with increasing intensity. Marx and Engels drew, however, on different aspects of the French experience in relation to these two types of social revolution. If the form of the French Revolution (mass popular democratic upheavals) foreshadowed the process of proletarian revolution, the consequences (overthrow of absolutist restrictions on capitalist development) defined the nature of bourgeois revolutions. It was this consequentialism which they saw as linking the French with the Dutch and English Revolutions, despite their other differences. It is in this respect that Marx and Engels differ most significantly from their contemporaries such as Guizot. As far as I am aware, their position was anticipated only once, by Pierre-Louis Roederer (1754–1835), a participant in the French Revolution who, unlike Barnave, survived to re-enter political life during the Restoration.

We should first note Roederer’s exasperated dismissal of the argument that the French Revolution was simply a political squabble – a view that was already circulating in the 1830s:

And what a goal for a nation of twenty-five million men, what a deplorable goal for such a deployment of forces and wills – the overthrow of a king and his replacement by some upstart!

Like Barnave, Roederer noted the ideological change that had already taken place prior to 1789: ‘The revolution was made in men’s minds and habits before it was made into law’. And Roederer thought he knew in whose minds these changes had occurred: ‘It was the opinion of the middle class that gave the signal to the lower classes’. But Roederer did not believe that the Revolution had been made for economic reasons:

The principal motive of the revolution was not to free lands and persons from all servitude, and industry from all restraint. It was not the interest of property nor that of liberty. It was impatience with the inequalities of right that existed at that time; it was the passion for equality.

Nonetheless, just because the Revolution was not directly made for economic reasons did not mean that it had no effect on economic development: ‘What the nation did for liberty and property was only the consequence and side effect of what it did to achieve equality of rights’. Here, Roederer was breaking new ground by suggesting that the release of new forms of property and

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17 Lukács 1971c, p. 308.
production by the overthrow of absolutism might not have been the intention of the majority of actors, who may have had quite other objectives. I have no idea whether or not Marx and Engels read Roederer, but this is relatively unimportant. Roederer’s insight, to which he refers only in passing, is central to Marx and Engels’s conception of bourgeois revolution.

Take, for example, the Manifesto of the Communist Party itself. An interesting fact is that the French Revolution is mentioned precisely twice in this text: once, in passing, as an example of changes in property relations; and once on the final page, in the context of a discussion on the nature of the forthcoming German revolution. The latter page also contains the only reference to the bourgeois revolution in the entire pamphlet. Moreover, if we turn to the pages in which Marx and Engels discuss the achievements of the bourgeoisie, the revolutions to which they do refer are ‘in the modes of production and exchange’. The hymns of praise to the bourgeoisie with which the Manifesto itself opens refer to its economic and social achievements, not to its political capacity for seizing power. In this context, it is by no means clear that Marx and Engels expected the bourgeoisie itself to burst asunder the fetters invoked in the famous metaphor that follows. Marx and Engels did invoke the revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie, for quite specific reasons closely related to the politics of the time. During the brief revolutionary period between 1847 and 1849, Marx and Engels took every opportunity both to identify and explain the inadequacies of the German bourgeoisie, which had developed so sluggishly, so pusillanimously and so slowly, that it saw itself threateningly confronted by the proletariat, and all those sections of the urban population related to the proletariat in interests and ideas, at the very moment of its own threatening confrontation with feudalism and absolutism.

One way of drawing attention to the shortcomings of the contemporary bourgeoisie in Germany was by highlighting the virtues of the historical bourgeoisie in England and – especially – France. ‘Reading these texts’, comments Michael Löwy, ‘one often gets the impression that Marx only extolled the virtues of the revolutionary bourgeoisie of 1789 the more effectively...

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18 Roederer 1989, pp. 4, 5, 6, 7.
19 Marx and Engels 1973, pp. 80, 98. Indeed, some writers seem to believe that the Manifesto does not refer to the bourgeois revolution at all. See Anderson 1992, p. 107.
20 Marx and Engels 1973, pp. 69, 70, 72.
to stigmatise the “misbegotten” German version of 1848’. Comprehensible in the context of arguments over political alliances at the time, these claims nevertheless involved a degree of exaggeration. In 1848, for example, Marx wrote of the English and French Revolutions that ‘the bourgeoisie was the class which was genuinely to be found at the head of the movement’ – a statement which is true only in a very qualified sense. And Marx does indeed go on to qualify this point. He points out that ‘plebeian’ methods were required to achieve and defend both the English and French Revolutions; methods from which the bourgeoisie themselves shrank. However, these revolutions could not have been successful if the economic conditions had not themselves developed to the extent that the new social order of the bourgeoisie could inherit; otherwise absolutist rule would simply have re-established itself.

None of this suggests a fixation on the revolutionary bourgeoisie. Indeed, Engels much later generalised ‘a law of evolution of bourgeois society’ from these observations in a discussion of the English case. Whether Engels is actually describing a general law is open to doubt; it seems, rather, to be one specific to the early period of capitalist development, since plebeian activity is no longer decisive after the revolutions of 1848. Marx made the same point more generally in Capital: ‘The knights of industry, however, only succeeded in supplanting the knights of the sword by making use of events in which they had played no part whatsoever’.

However, it was not only plebeians or proto-proletarians who acted to clear the way for capitalist development on behalf of the bourgeoisie. ‘Since it is an army of officers’, wrote Engels of the bourgeoisie, ‘it must ensure the support of the workers or it must buy political power piecemeal from those forces confronting it from above, in particular, from the monarchy’. As Engels subsequently noted, however, there were situations where money was insufficient and sections of the existing feudal ruling class were prepared to take political action to advance the development of capitalism, which the bourgeoisie itself was unwilling or unable to take. The notion of ‘revolution from above’ was first used by Engels in relation to Germany and took two forms. First, those changes brought ‘from above and outside’ by the French

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22 Löwy 1989, p. 115.
Revolution. Second, those transformations brought ‘from above and within’ by a section of the old Prussian ruling class. This involved an ironic reversal of roles: ‘The grave-diggers of the Revolution of 1848 had become the executors of its will’. Nor was his analysis restricted to Germany:

The Revolution of 1848, not less than many of its predecessors, has had strange bedfellows and successors. The very people who put it down have become, as Karl Marx used to say, its testamentary executors. Louis Napoleon had to create an independent and united Italy, Bismarck had to revolutionise Germany and to restore Hungarian independence, and the English manufacturers had to enact the People’s Charter.

Such an analysis is as incompatible with ‘bourgeois paradigms’ as Marx and Engels’s earlier discussions of 1649, 1792 and 1848.

Later Marxists further developed Marx and Engels’s analysis of bourgeois revolutions. Lenin’s starting position, for example, was the point at which Engels finished his argument.

If you want to consider the question ‘historically’, the example of any European country will show you that it was a series of governments, not by any means ‘provisional’, that carried out the historical aims of the bourgeois revolution, that even the governments which defeated the revolution were nonetheless forced to carry out the historical aims of that defeated revolution.

This position had specific implications for Russia. In his reflections on the fiftieth anniversary of the ‘peasant reform’ of 1861, Lenin described it as ‘a bourgeois reform carried out by feudal landowners’, at the instigation of the greatest feudal landowner of all, Tsar Alexander II, who had ‘to admit that it would be better to emancipate from above than to wait until he was overthrown from below’. Lenin identified three main reasons for these initiatives: the growth of capitalist relations of production through the increase in trade, military failure in the Crimea and the upsurge in peasant insurgency in the countryside. However, even these reforms were achieved only through ‘a struggle waged within the ruling class, a struggle waged for the most part within the ranks of the landowner class. As a result, ‘the year 1861 begat the year 1905’.

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31 Lenin 1960–70b, p. 42.
period in Russian history which Lenin describes as ‘the era of her bourgeois revolutions’.32

Lenin here introduces the idea that a bourgeois revolution can be spread over a prolonged period – an ‘era’ – although it is a period that has a definite endpoint. Characteristically, however, he envisages the resolution of the Russian bourgeois revolution as one that could take more than one form. Lenin saw ‘revolution from above’ as one of two alternative paths to bourgeois revolution in Russia, based on the ‘two types of bourgeois agrarian evolution’ which had occurred in Europe and its overseas extensions. In the first, the ‘Prussian’ (or reformist) path, the landowners of the great estates would gradually replace feudal methods of exploitation with those of capitalism, retaining feudal instruments of social control over their tenants (at least in the medium term), but ultimately transforming themselves into large capitalist landowners or farmers. In the second, the ‘American’ (or revolutionary) path, the landowners are overthrown, feudal or other pre-capitalist controls are removed and the estates redistributed among the previous tenants, who now emerge as a new class of medium capitalist farmers.33 The ‘Prussian’ path had been underway in Russia since 1861. Was the alternative American path a possibility? If so, who would lead it?

Does not the very concept ‘bourgeois revolution’ imply that it can be accomplished only by the bourgeoisie? … A liberation movement that is bourgeois in social and economic content is not such because of its motive forces. The motive force may be, not the bourgeoisie, but the proletariat and the peasantry. Why is this possible? Because the proletariat and the peasantry suffer even more than the bourgeoisie from the survivals of serfdom, because they are in greater need of freedom and the abolition of landlord oppression. For the bourgeoisie, on the contrary, complete victory constitutes a danger, since the proletariat will make use of full freedom against the bourgeoisie, and the fuller that freedom and the more completely the power of the landlords has been destroyed, the easier will it be for the proletariat to do so. Hence the bourgeoisie strives to put an end to the bourgeois revolution half-way from its destination, when freedom has been only half-won, by a deal with the old authorities and the landlords.34

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32 Lenin 1960–70d, pp. 120–2, 125, 128.
33 Lenin 1960–70a, p. 239.
34 Lenin 1960–70c, pp. 334–5. See also Lenin 1960–70b, pp. 49–51.
During the same period, Trotsky took the argument still further, asking in 1906:

> is it inevitable that the proletarian dictatorship should be shattered against the barriers of the bourgeois revolution, or is it possible that in the given *world-historical* conditions, it may discover before it the prospect of victory on breaking through those barriers?

His answer was that such a self-denying ordinance should be rejected by socialists for the strategy of permanent revolution made possible by the growth and interconnectedness of the world economy. Like Engels, Trotsky rejected the idea that the bourgeoisie itself had ever been at the forefront of revolutionary struggle, writing in 1923:

> When the movement of the lower layers overflowed and when the old social order or political regime was overthrown, then power dropped almost automatically into the hands of the liberal bourgeoisie.

Unlike the petty bourgeoisie, who actually carried out the early bourgeois revolutions, they had no need to consciously organise for the seizure of power:

> The liberal bourgeoisie (the French in 1789, the Russian in 1917) can content itself with waiting for the elemental mass movement and then at the last moment throw into the scales its wealth, its education, its connection with the state apparatus, and in this way seize the helm.

Other Marxists associated with the early years of the Third International advanced the analysis further. What if a mass movement of the petty bourgeoisie was not forthcoming? In this connection Georg Lukács made a number of important observations in *History and Class Consciousness* (1922), at one point going beyond even the notion of ‘revolution from above’:

> The true revolutionary element is the economic transformation of the feudal system of production into a capitalist one so that it would be possible in theory for this process to take place *without a bourgeois revolution*, without political upheaval on the part of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. And in that case those parts of the feudal and absolutist superstructure that were not eliminated by ‘revolutions from above’ would collapse of their own accord.

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36 Trotsky 1974a, p. 348.
when capitalism was already fully developed. (The German situation fits this pattern in certain respects.)

In fact, the ‘feudal and absolutist superstructures’ rarely ‘collapsed of their own accord’, but they certainly collapsed. When the Hapsburg Empire disintegrated under the weight of military defeat, and nationalist and working-class pressure, Austro-Hungary fragmented into several different states which were already dominated by the capitalist mode of production to a greater (Austria, Czecho-Slovakia) or lesser (Hungary) extent. No revolution was required and, indeed, the only ones that threatened were socialist revolutions that were in each case defeated. Nevertheless, the essential point is correct: not every country is required to undergo a bourgeois revolution. Once a sufficient number of countries had undergone the process to establish a capitalist world economy, the need to compete within it ensured that most ruling classes would implement a series of incremental adaptations to the new order. This does not imply that the creation of such of a capitalist world economy was in the gift of Britain alone to deliver; it only emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century – indeed, the opening of the imperialist stage of capitalist development is itself indicative of the fact that such an economy had formed. The dominance of capitalist economy does mean that the bourgeoisie has to be in direct control of the state:

The necessary link between the economic premises of the bourgeoisie and its demands for political democracy or the rule of law, which – even if only partially – as established by in the great French Revolution on the ruins of feudal absolutism, has grown looser.

However, as Lukács explains elsewhere, the bourgeoisie, more than any previous ruling class, has never needed to take direct control of the state apparatus; all it required was that the apparatus functioned on its behalf.

Antonio Gramsci independently articulated a similar point in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In his prison writings, Gramsci developed the analysis of Germany which had first been made by Engels. Gramsci draws a comparison between the English and German revolutions which may appear counter-intuitive, but only to those who mistakenly consider sociopolitical developments in the former country to be unique. In fact, as Gramsci suggests, the link is

37 Lukács 1971b, p. 282.
in the continued role of the nobility, in the case of England, where some had already made the transition to capitalist forms of exploitation by the revolutionary era, and in the case of Germany, where a majority saw the necessity to make such a transition. Gramsci extended the analysis to his native Italy, where the kingdom of Piedmont played the role taken by Prussia in relation to Germany:

This fact is of the greatest importance for the concept of ‘passive revolution’ – the fact, that is, that what was involved was not a social group which ‘led’ other groups, but a State which, even though it had limitations as a power, ‘led’ the group which should have been ‘leading’ and was able to put at the latter’s disposal an army and politico-diplomatic strength.40

The concept of ‘passive revolution’ is perhaps the most evocative one to describe the process of ‘revolution from above’ developed within the classical tradition: the dignity of action is reserved, in the main, for the state and the forces which it can bring into play, rather than the masses themselves.

These views were not, however, restricted to the writings of a handful of important theorists. They were widespread in the scholarship of the Lenin era. One work of the early 1920s by O.V. Pletner, *The History of the Meiji Era*, noted that ‘the class of feudal lords remained in power’ in Japan after 1868, but that they ‘rejected all outmoded feudal norms and started the rapid development of capitalism on the new economic basis’. Pletner took the view that it was the consequences that were important rather than the role of the bourgeoisie:

Hence the term ‘revolution’ may be used in relation to the Meiji Ishin only conventionally. It may be called ‘bourgeois’ only from the viewpoint of its results, which does not mean at all that the bourgeoisie played the most important role at that time.41

Perhaps the most interesting comments of all, however, were made relatively late (1932) by Georges Lefebvre, one of the historians often criticised for presenting too heroic a picture of the ‘rising bourgeoisie’. Here, he is criticising the interpretation of the French Revolution associated with Jean Jaurès:

Today this view strikes us as excessively summary. In the first place, it does not explain why the advent of the bourgeoisie occurred at that moment and

40 Gramsci 1971, pp. 82–3, 105.
41 Quoted in Mikhailova 1993, pp. 33–4.
not at some other time, and, more particularly, why in France it took the form of a sudden mutation, whereas it could well have taken the form of a gradual, if not an entirely peaceful, evolution, as occurred elsewhere. . . . It is thus clear that the economic interpretation of history does not commit us to simple views. The rise of a revolutionary class is not necessarily the only cause of its triumph, and it is not inevitable that it should be victorious or, in any case, victorious in a violent manner. In the present case the Revolution was launched by those whom it was going to sweep away, not by those who were to be its beneficiaries.42

I could go on, but it should be clear by now that the classical-Marxist tradition was never committed to the conventional version of the bourgeois revolution, in which a fully conscious bourgeois class announces the abolition of feudalism, executes the king and then proclaims the republic to the thunderous applause of Parliament, the Assembly, or their local equivalents. In so far as the French Revolution could be described in these terms, it was seen as an exception.

In so far as there was a weakness in the classical tradition, it stemmed from adopting a similar polemical strategies of unfavourably comparing the historical and contemporary bourgeoisies that had earlier been adopted by Marx and Engels themselves. In 1905, for example, Trotsky deployed the French example to attack the Russian bourgeoisie, which was then displaying even greater political cowardice than the German bourgeoisie had sixty years earlier. These modern liberals were repelled by their Jacobin ancestors, Trotsky noted, but the working class was not:

The proletariat, however radically it may have, in practice, broken with the revolutionary traditions of the bourgeoisie, nevertheless preserves them, as a sacred tradition of great passions, heroism and initiative, and its heart beats in sympathy with the speeches and acts of the Jacobin Convention.43

In addition to invoking the heroic bourgeois past, Trotsky also introduces a notion to which we will have cause to return, that of the ‘revolutionary traditions’. These could be turned against, not only the modern bourgeoisie, but reformist tendencies within the working class. In ‘Where Is Britain Going?’ (1925) Trotsky was careful to state that Cromwell and the Independents were in no sense forerunners of socialism, but nevertheless uses their revolutionary example to expose claims by Ramsay MacDonald and others that British

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42 Reproduced in Hobsbawm 1990, p. 133.
43 Trotsky 1969, p. 54.
development is characterised by ‘gradualness’. What emerges is the idea – which Trotsky elsewhere rejected – that communists within the working-class movement play the same role as the Independents and Jacobins played within the bourgeoisie: ‘It can be with some justice said that Lenin is the proletarian twentieth-century Cromwell’. 44

Overall, however, the theoretical resources of classical Marxism in relation to this subject are therefore far richer, far subtler, than is usually supposed by most critics. It comes as no surprise to discover, therefore, that whatever their specific conclusions, all attempts to revise or abandon the theory of bourgeois revolution have one aspect in common: the theory which they criticise is significantly different from the one held by Marx and Engels and their followers in the classical-Marxist tradition. What the revisionists are criticising is, therefore, itself a revision, a departure from the complexity of the original position. How and why did it take place?

Theories of bourgeois revolution 3.0: from the Second International to Stalinism

The origin of what I will call the conventional theory of bourgeois revolution also lie within classical Marxism, but not in the discussions that I have just surveyed. Rather, it is derived from the general formula contained in the first section of the Manifesto of the Communist Party: ‘The [written] history of hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’. 45 More precisely, it derives from the codification of this formula within the Second International. In the opening paragraphs of the pamphlet, Marx and Engels give a list of pairs of antagonistic classes. The list is so familiar, the rhetoric in which it is presented so overwhelming, that the difficulties it represents are often overlooked. Partly these stem from inconsistencies within the pairings: as Geoffrey de Ste Croix has pointed out, in so far as the opposing classes are divided between exploiters and exploited, the first couple identified by Marx and Engels should be slave-owners and slaves, rather than freemen and slaves. 46 Nevertheless, with this exception, the pairs listed are indeed ‘exploiter and exploited’. Marx and Engels, however, refer to them as ‘oppressor and oppressed’. Furthermore, they claim that these are binary oppositions in which

44 Trotsky 1974, p. 86.
the victory of one side is associated with ‘either a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes’.\textsuperscript{47} Let us leave aside – for now – questions of whether slaves or serfs were capable of ‘reconstituting society’, and of the absence of the bourgeoisie from the list. The problem is that we are invited to view history, not only as involving a series of class struggles, but as involving a series of class struggles in which one hitherto subordinate class overthrows and takes over from its predecessor, until the working class, the ‘universal class’, overthrows the bourgeoisie and puts an end to the process by initiating the dissolution of all classes. These paragraphs tended to be read together with a set of key texts that appeared to suggest that history was a succession of ever more developed modes of production. In the 1859 Preface to \textit{A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy}, Marx famously wrote that ‘the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society’\textsuperscript{48} Marx is not proposing a universal succession of modes of production. Those listed here are only chronological in two senses. One is that, as Eric Hobsbawm puts it, ‘each of these systems is in crucial respects further removed from the primitive state of man’\textsuperscript{49} The other is that this is the order in which these modes of production arose historically. Neither sense suggests that every social formation is fated to pass under the dominance of each mode of production in succession. Nevertheless, this passage was interpreted to mean that history should be understood as a universal succession of increasingly more developed modes of production – an understanding compatible with broader, non-Marxist, notions of evolutionary progress. In other words, the conventional theory of bourgeois revolution arose as a specific application of the general theory of historical development, in the case where the defeat of the lords by the bourgeoisie leads to (or even is equivalent to) the supersession of feudalism by capitalism.

What made this application more plausible than it might otherwise have been was the fact that Marx, Engels and some later Marxists such as Trotsky did invoke the revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie, for quite specific reasons closely related to the politics of the time. The danger was that, shorn of context or qualification, statements like those I quoted earlier by Marx and Trotsky could be used to license, not only an overly heroic view of the bourgeoisie’s

\textsuperscript{47} Marx and Engels 1973, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{48} Marx 1975, p. 426.
\textsuperscript{49} Hobsbawm 1965, p. 38.
political role, but the notion that the bourgeois revolution was essentially the same kind of experience as the socialist revolution, complete with political leadership and organisation, the only real difference being their class basis. The point here is not to deny the significance of the Independents or the Jacobins, or to dispute their relevance to the bourgeois revolutions, but to question how typical they were of the bourgeoisie and how typical their revolutions were of the ways in which capitalism was consolidated.

The second source of the conventional theory of bourgeois revolution emerged from the historic memory of broader labour movement. The early Atlantic working class was, by experience and instinct, international in orientation, as Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have shown in The Many-Headed Hydra. Nonetheless, as the same authors also demonstrate, after the initial period of formation, it fragmented on an increasingly national basis. As these movements stabilised in the second half of the nineteenth century and moved to establish permanent parties and trade unions, reformism emerged as a coherent form of ideology and organisation. One consequence was the search for predecessors from which to construct a native radical tradition – a tradition that was, by definition, non-working-class. Where Marxism distinguished between historical classes on the basis of different positions within the relations of production and, consequently, the different capacities that each possessed, these traditions made ‘the people’ their central category. What, then, was their unifying theme, if not the succession of classes? It was democracy. It became important to identify struggles that could be retrospectively endorsed and assimilated into a narrative of democratic advance, the closing episode of which had opened with the formation of the labour movement. In most cases, the radical traditions were directly inherited from left liberalism, particularly in those countries – above all Britain, but also France – where Marxism was initially weakest and where liberal connections with labour were political and organisational as well as ideological. In effect, these traditions tended to become a populist alternative narrative to what one early radical liberal historian, John Richard Green, called ‘drum and trumpet’ histories. In Britain, for example, the official ruling class conception of ‘Our Island Story’ highlighted the Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights as the foundations of English liberty; but in ‘the People’s Story’ it was the Peasant’s Revolt and the Cromwellian Commonwealth which featured

50 Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, p. 352.
51 Green 1888, p. xviii.
as the crucial episodes. (Discussion of divisions within the Parliamentary side, notably those between the Levellers and Independents, only really began after the First World War.) The view of history as the unfolding of representative democracy was deeply influential within the emerging workers’ movements over the second half of the nineteenth century – understandably, since gaining the male franchise was one of their main objectives. What is more, of course, there was a Marxist justification for this emphasis since the Manifesto had argued that that winning the ‘battle for democracy’ was the road to working-class power.52 ‘Between the 1860s and the First World War’, writes Geoff Eley, ‘socialist parties became the torchbearers of democracy in Europe’.53

Two strands of thought about historical development had therefore emerged within the socialist and labour movement by the second half of the nineteenth century. One, embedded in the codified Marxism of the Second International but accepted in diluted form far more generally across the movement, saw history as a progression of successively more advanced modes of production, emerging and overtaking their predecessors through the mechanism of the class struggle, and culminating in socialism. The other, which predated the widespread adoption of Marxism by the movement but maintained its influence afterwards, saw history as the ongoing struggle for democratic representation for the majority of the population that would also culminate in socialism. By the period between the founding of the Second International in 1889 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, most national labour movements, even those nominally committed to Marxism, had incorporated both strands, which converged on notions of bourgeois revolution. In the resulting synthesis, the bourgeoisie were presumed to have been the leading actors in the struggle to supplant the feudal lords and to have done so (in alliance with other classes) through the demand for democracy. The failure of the bourgeoisie to establish full democracy meant that it now had to be accomplished by the working class and, in so doing, would open up the road to socialism. The problems with this conception, both in respect of the role of the bourgeoisie in the bourgeois revolutions and the relationship of the bourgeois revolutions to democracy, should not require restatement by now. A more realistic view was maintained by the left wing of Social Democracy, particularly in Russia; yet it was from Russia that the third and final component of the conventional view of the bourgeois revolution was eventually to emerge.

52 Marx and Engels 1973, p. 86.
The Russian Marxist tradition, as it emerged from the 1880s onwards, was virtually the only one within the Second International to devote serious discussion to the question of the bourgeois revolution; unsurprisingly, since Russia was the major area in Europe which still had to undergo this experience. However, with the main exception of Trotsky, almost every tendency within Russian Marxism referred to the forthcoming revolution as bourgeois-democratic in nature – a compound term which had not appeared in the work of Marx or Engels. The use of this term did not mean they necessarily regarded the earlier bourgeois revolutions as having been democratic in either their goals or their accomplishments. It meant, rather, that the Russian Revolution would be both bourgeois in content (that is, it would establish the unimpeded development of capitalism) and that it would introduce democratic politics which the working class could use to further its own demands. In the early 1920s, the Communist International – still a revolutionary organisation at this point, of course – extended this analysis to the colonial or semi-colonial world in which (with some important exceptions like China and India) the working class was even weaker than it had been in Russia forty years earlier. In these countries, socialism was not immediately on the agenda, but democratic rights were a necessary prerequisite for the organisation of movements for socialism and national liberation. (In the early theses on the subject, Lenin insisted that the phrase ‘bourgeois-democratic’ be replaced by ‘national-revolutionary’, as the former tended to disguise the reformist, if not totally accommodating role which the local bourgeoisies played in relation to the colonial powers.\(^54\)) This was a serious strategy at the time, as not even Trotsky believed that permanent revolution was feasible outside of Russia. Furthermore, the conception did not distort the understanding of historical bourgeois revolutions within the Communist International – indeed, as we have seen, this achieved a new level of sophistication, particularly in the work of Lukács.

However, as the Communist International degenerated along with the Russian Revolution which gave it birth, the concept of the ‘bourgeois-democratic revolution’ began to shift from one which advocated allying with bourgeois (or even pre-bourgeois) forces only where they were genuinely involved in fighting imperialism, to a stages theory in which support had to be given to the supposedly ‘revolutionary’ bourgeoisie as a matter of course, in line with Stalin’s foreign policy. This was disastrous enough politically, most of all in

\(^54\) Lenin 1977, pp. 110–11.
the Chinese Revolution of the late 1920s, but it also affected how history was written. From the onset of the period of the Popular Front in 1935, there was effectively a fusion of Stalinist conceptions with the two pre-existing theories of historical stages on the one hand and the struggle for democracy on the other. This involved two retreats from the classical-Marxist conception of bourgeois revolution.

One was that the notion of a ‘bourgeois-democratic’ revolution was now read back into history and applied to England, France, and the other countries where bourgeois revolutions had been identified. The main problem is that, although a minority of the bourgeois revolutions involved episodes of democracy, none resulted in the establishment of permanent representative institutions; most did not involve popular insurgencies of any sort. Nor was this the only distortion. In the Stalinist model, democracy became one of a checklist of ‘tasks’ borrowed from the French Revolution – the others were the agrarian question and national unification – which had to be ticked off before the bourgeois revolution could be declared complete. If these ‘tasks’ were really taken seriously, then the Japanese revolution was incomplete until the agrarian reforms imposed by the US occupiers after 1945. Unfortunately, this introduces further problems since the American Revolution itself was presumably unfinished until the black civil-rights legislation of the mid-1960s. And, in relation to my own country, the Scottish Revolution has presumably still to be consummated in the absence of an independent Scottish state. The absurdity of such notions should be obvious. There are still important unresolved democratic issues in most countries in the world, but they have nothing to do with the accomplishment or consolidation of capitalism. It is important to understand how widely these misconceptions about ‘the tasks of the bourgeois revolution’ were accepted, even by Trotsky, Stalin’s greatest opponent. As we have seen, Trotsky was clear that, in terms of agency, the French Revolution was led by the petty bourgeoisie rather than the bourgeoisie as such; but he still accepted that the ‘tasks’ which it allegedly accomplished were necessary components of any bourgeois revolution. It was for this reason that he tended to treat events such as the Meiji Revolution – which, of course, failed to accomplish all of these ‘tasks’ – as substitutes for, or means of avoiding bourgeois revolutions, rather than bourgeois revolutions themselves.55 However, as Alex Callinicos writes,

Surely it is more sensible, rather than invoke the metaphysical concept of a ‘complete and genuine solution’ [to the tasks of the bourgeois revolution], to judge a bourgeois revolution by the degree to which it succeeds in establishing an autonomous centre of capital accumulation, even if it fails to democratize the political order, or to eliminate feudal social relations.  

The other shift was, if anything, even more damaging to historical understanding. Rather than being the beneficiaries of the revolutions that bear its name – revolutions in which it played a greater or lesser role depending on specific circumstances – the bourgeoisie was presented as the social class directly responsible for bringing them about. But to discuss the bourgeoisie as if it had been a revolutionary class then in the same way that the proletariat is a revolutionary class now is to go beyond making an analogy between bourgeois and proletarian revolutions: it is to claim that they share a common structure.

Isaac Deutscher and the recovery of the classical tradition

I want now to return to my starting point in the work of Isaac Deutscher. As a survivor of the ‘midnight in the century’ who had been personally involved in the communist movement at the end of the classical epoch, he stood in direct line of continuity with the traditions of pre-Stalinist Marxism on bourgeois revolutions. Deutscher’s work is not above criticism; indeed, he, too, claimed that bourgeois and proletarian revolutions shared a common structure, but, in his case, it was because he thought that the proletarian revolution could be assimilated to the bourgeois revolution, rather than the other way round. In other words, the difficulty is with his top-down conception of socialism, not his view of the bourgeois revolutions, which was uncompromisingly realistic and quite unencumbered with fallacious assumptions about the relationship between them and popular democracy. Deutscher specifically wrote about the subject in two lengthy passages. The first is from his 1949 biography, Stalin:

Europe, in the nineteenth century, saw how the feudal order, outside France, crumbled and was replaced by the bourgeois one. But east of the Rhine,
feudalism was not overthrown by a series of upheavals on the pattern of the French Revolution, by explosions of popular despair and anger, by revolutions from below, for the spread of which some of the Jacobins had hoped in 1794. Instead, European feudalism was either destroyed or undermined by a series of revolutions from above. Napoleon, the tamer of Jacobinism at home, carried the revolution into foreign lands, to Italy, to the Rhineland, and to Poland, where he abolished serfdom, completely or in part, and where his code destroyed many of the feudal privileges. *Malgré lui-même*, he executed parts of the political testament of Jacobinism. More paradoxically, the Conservative Junker, Bismarck, performed a similar function when he freed Germany from many survivals of feudalism which encumbered her bourgeois development. The second generation after the French Revolution witnessed an even stranger spectacle, when the Russian Tsar himself abolished serfdom in Russia and Poland, a deed of which not so long before only ‘Jacobins’ had dreamt. The feudal order had been too moribund to survive; but outside France the popular forces arrayed against it were too weak to overthrow it ‘from below’; and so it was swept away ‘from above’.59

Here, Deutscher identifies two different types of revolutions from above. One is where states established by revolutions from below, like those of Cromwell or Napoleon, spread the revolution externally by military intervention. The other is where the *ancien régime* itself – or elements within it – imposes capitalist social relations internally through its control of the existing state apparatus.

The second passage comes from the 1967 Trevelyan lectures, which formed the basis of his last book, *The Unfinished Revolution*:

> The traditional view [of the bourgeois revolution], widely accepted by Marxists and non-Marxists alike, is that in such revolutions, in Western Europe, the bourgeois played the leading part, stood at the head of the insurgent people, and seized power. This view underlies many controversies among historians; the recent exchanges, for example, between Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper and Mr Christopher Hill on whether the Cromwellian revolution was or was not bourgeois in character. It seems to me that this conception, to whatever authorities it may be attributed, is schematic and unreal. From it one may well arrive at the conclusion that bourgeois revolution is almost a myth, and that it has hardly ever occurred, even in the West. Capitalist entrepreneurs, merchants, and bankers were not conspicuous

among the leaders of the Puritans or the commanders of the Ironsides, in the Jacobin Club or at the head of the crowds that stormed the Bastille or invaded the Tuileries. Nor did they seize the reins of government during the revolution nor for a long time afterwards, either in England or in France. The lower middle classes, the urban poor, the plebeians and sans culottes made up the big insurgent battalions. The leaders were mostly ‘gentlemen farmers’ in England and lawyers, doctors, journalists and other intellectuals in France. Here and there the upheavals ended in military dictatorship. Yet the bourgeois character of these revolutions will not appear at all mythical, if we approach them with a broader criterion and view their general impact on society. Their most substantial and enduring achievement was to sweep away the social and political institutions that had hindered the growth of bourgeois property and of the social relationships that went with it. When the Puritans denied the Crown the right of arbitrary taxation, when Cromwell secured for English shipowners a monopolistic position in England’s trading with foreign countries, and when the Jacobins abolished feudal prerogatives and privileges and, they created, often unknowingly, the conditions in which manufacturers, merchants, and bankers were bound to gain economic predominance, and, in the long run, social and even political supremacy. Bourgeois revolution creates the conditions in which bourgeois property can flourish. In this, rather than in the particular alignments of the struggle, lies its differentia specifica.\footnote{Deutscher 1967a, pp. 27–8; Deutscher 1967b, pp. 21–2.}

The second type of revolution from above is important in relation to Deutscher’s more general argument concerning the definition of bourgeois revolutions. These cannot be defined by reference to class position of the social forces that carried them out, since, in neither case, were they composed of capitalists or even members of the bourgeoisie. Nor can they be defined by their intentions, since neither the English Independents nor the French Jacobins were primarily motivated by establishing capitalist relations of production; the Prussian Junkers and Japanese Samurai were concerned with this outcome, but more as a means of strengthening the international political and military positions of their respective states than with the profitability of their individual estates.

Deutscher was not alone in identifying two characteristics of bourgeois revolutions as being (i) ‘revolution from above’ as a possible means and (ii) their consequences as being the decisive factor in assessing whether they had
occurred. Several other writers from the Trotskyist tradition – including those who were the most critical of his views on Stalinism, such as Max Shachtman and Tony Cliff – took essentially the same positions. In relation to the first, Cliff wrote in 1949: ‘The “Bismarckian” path was not the exception for the bourgeoisie, but the rule, the exception was the French revolution’.61 This scarcely suggests an obsessive focus on the French Revolution as a model. In relation to the second, Shachtman wrote during the same year:

Once the work of destruction was accomplished, the work of constructing bourgeois society could proceed automatically by the spontaneous expansion of capital as regulated automatically by the market. To the bourgeoisie, therefore, it could not make a fundamental difference whether the work of destruction was begun or carried out by the plebeian Jacobin terror against the aristocracy, as in France, or by the aristocracy itself in promotion of its own interests, as in Germany.62

These remarks were made in the course of a very critical review of Deutscher’s *Stalin*, but, on this point, both the criticised and the critic were as one. What this indicates, I think, is that in this, as in so many other respects, Trotskyism was responsible for preserving important elements of the classical-Marxist tradition which would otherwise have been even more deeply buried than they were.

In 1965, Edward Thompson wrote that

mill-owners, accountants, company-promoters, provincial bankers, are not historically notorious for their desperate propensity to rush, bandoliers on their shoulders, to the barricades. More generally they arrive on the scene when the climatic battles of the bourgeois revolution have already been fought.63

At the time, these comments may have seemed simply another example of the iconoclasm with which Thompson tended to approach what he regarded as Marxist dogma. In this occasion, however, it was actually Thompson, rather than the targets of his critique (Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn) that was nearer to the classical tradition.

It was rare for Thompson to theoretically converge with Trotskyism. It is ironic, therefore, that one of the first historians outside the ranks of that

61 Cliff 1984, p. 66.
63 Thompson 1965, p. 325.
movement to recognise the importance of Deutscher’s comments on the bourgeois revolution was one of Thompson’s comrades from the Historians’ Group of the Communist Party of Great Britain: Christopher Hill. Hill is an historian usually identified as one of the stalwarts of the conventional model of bourgeois revolution and it is true that his early writings – particularly his famous essay of 1940, ‘The English Revolution’ – are in this mode. The problem here is not in his claim that the revolution allowed free capitalist development, but in the idea that it placed the bourgeoisie in power. Yet it is also true that Hill abandoned this aspect of his interpretation, and much more quickly than is usually thought. In writings from the 1950s, such as Economic Problems of the Church (1956) and ‘Recent Interpretations of the Civil War’ (1958), he had already separated capitalism and democracy. It was in an essay of 1971 commemorating Deutscher’s work as a historian of revolution, however, that Hill noted the significance of the former’s conception of ‘revolution from above’ (‘although he never seems to have worked it out fully’) and his consequentialism, commenting that ‘Deutscher was quite right to say that historians of seventeenth century England have spent too much time in analysing the participants rather than the consequences of the Revolution’.64 By 1974, Hill had came to regard Deutscher’s comments on his own earlier work in The Unfinished Revolution as legitimate criticism and subsequently quoted them in defence of his revised definition.65 Finally, by 1980, Hill had abandoned the conscious role of the bourgeoisie entirely: “Bourgeois revolution” is an unfortunate phrase if it suggests a revolution willed by the bourgeoisie’. In the same essay, Hill noted that he drew on Deutscher, not as an innovator, but as a representative of the classical-Marxist tradition.66 And, as we have seen, in this respect, he was entirely accurate.

Ellen Wood claims that the term ‘bourgeois revolutions’ has ‘undergone many redefinitions’, to the point that it now means ‘any revolutionary upheaval that, in one way or another, sooner or later, advances the rise of capitalism, by changing property forms or the nature of the state, irrespective of the class forces involved’.67 If these claims were true, then attempts to defend the theory of bourgeois revolution would be examples of what Imre Lakatos called a ‘degenerating research programme’, involving the construction of endless

65 Hill 1974, pp. 279–80;
auxiliary hypotheses to protect an inner core of theory which has in fact little or no explanatory value.\textsuperscript{68} Fortunately, we can see that they are completely false. In fact, writers who regard the theory as retaining its scientific value have returned to the original research programme, after decades in which it was gradually abandoned. Far from ‘redefining’ the term bourgeois revolution, we have in effect rediscovered the pristine meaning of the term.\textsuperscript{69} Nor is the term simply an all-embracing redescriptions of the events which preceded the establishment of capitalism in individual countries: the class forces involved are limited to two main configurations, each with their own distinct forms of the revolutionary process, both of which were directly connected with the transformation of the state into one capable of fostering capitalist development. It is possible to add a third variant, which only emerged during the twentieth century in the postcolonial world. But even so, this scarcely involves the infinite permutations suggested by Wood.

\textbf{The place of the bourgeois revolution in history}

Is there a general process through which societies move from the dominance of one mode production to another? If so, what aspects are specific to the bourgeois revolution? Marx initially considered the issue solely in relation to the transition from capitalism to socialism:

\begin{quote}
While this general prosperity lasts, enabling the productive forces of bourgeois society to develop to the full extent possible within the bourgeois system, there can be no question of a real revolution. Such a revolution is only possible at a time when two factors come into conflict: the modern productive forces and the bourgeois forms of production.\textsuperscript{70}
\end{quote}

Subsequently, he generalised the argument to transitions more generally, most famously in the 1859 Preface:

\begin{quote}
At a certain stage of development, the material forces of society come into conflict with existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{68} Lakatos 1970, pp. 117–18.

\textsuperscript{69} Indeed, the problem with even the most important recent discussions of the theory – and an indication of how far the insights of the classical-Marxist tradition have been lost in this respect – is their failure to recognise the extent to which they are revisiting positions that had been established and lost in an earlier period. See, for example, Blackbourne and Eley 1984; Callinicos 1989; and Anderson 1992.

\textsuperscript{70} Marx 1973c, p. 131.
same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.71

Marx is describing here what Daniel Bensaïd calls a ‘law of tendency’ (Bensaïd is thinking of ‘the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall’ introduced by Marx in the third volume of Capital): ‘In an open system, like political economy, the empirical regularities and constant conjunctions of events are in fact manifested as tendencies’.72 There are reasons specific to the German politics of the period why Marx emphasised structure rather than agency in these passages, but, even so, it does not represent a fundamental break from or retreat behind the positions he and Engels had worked out in the late 1840s.73 For the sake of variety I will take an example from outwith the Brenner school, in this case by Cornelius Castoriadis, once a leading figure in the French post-Trotskyist group, Socialisme ou Barbarie. Castoriadis argues that the contradictions between the forces and relations of production do not apply to any period of history except that of the bourgeois revolution:

It more or less faithfully describes what took place at the time of the transition from feudal society: from the hybrid societies of western Europe from 1650 to 1850 (where a well-developed and economically dominant bourgeoisie ran up against absolute monarchy and the remains of feudalism in agrarian property and in legal and political structures) to capitalist society. But it corresponds neither to the breakdown of ancient society and the subsequent appearance of the feudal world, nor to the birth of the bourgeoisie, which emerged precisely outside of and on the fringes of feudal relations. It corresponds neither to the constitution of the bureaucracy as the dominant order today in countries that are in the process of industrialization, nor finally to the evolution of non-European peoples. In none of these cases can we speak of a development of the productive forces embodied in the

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71 Marx 1975, p. 426.
73 Marx was anxious to make his work available to workers in the German lands, where he still considered his main audience to be, particularly since his rival Ferdinand Lassalle appeared to be gaining support there. In order to guarantee that A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy would reach them, however, he had to ensure that it would not be banned from publication by the censors, hence the absence of reference to the class struggle in the somewhat mechanistic formulations in the Preface. See Prinz 1969.
emergence of a social class within the given social system, a development which ‘at a certain stage’ would have become incompatible with the maintenance of the system and would have led to a revolution giving the power to the ‘rising class’.74

This is more generous than most critiques, since it at least grants that the bourgeois revolution can be explained in such terms; most critics would deny even that. Yet the problem is essentially the same: critics assume that Marx is illegitimately generalising from the experience of the transition to capitalism and the bourgeois revolutions that both resulted from and further stimulated this process. In fact, what Marx is saying is far less prescriptive than is usually thought. He did not think, for example that the ‘eras of social revolution’ had taken the same form in the past or would do so in the future. Eras of social revolution – understood as the decisive moment in the transition between one mode of production and another – are, in any case, extremely rare, as few and far between as modes of production themselves, and class struggle has not always played the decisive role in bringing them to a conclusion. As Perry Anderson notes:

The maturing of such a contradiction [between the forces and relations of production] need involve no conscious class agency on either side, by exploiters and exploited – no set battle for the future of economy and society; although its subsequent unfolding, on the other hand, is likely to unleash relentless social struggles between opposing forces.75

The outcome of such a crisis can vary. What is decisive?

In the first place historical materialism specifies the structural capacities possessed by agents by virtue of their position in the productive relations, i.e. their class position. Secondly, it claims that these capacities, and also the class interests which agents share, have primacy in explaining their actual behaviour.76

The decisive issue is therefore the role played by social classes and, in particular, by their very different capacity to transform society in their own interests. In other words, to what extent were these different social revolutions brought about by the triumph of one class over another?

74 Castoriadis 1987, pp. 18–19.
Given the centrality of class struggle for historical materialism, it is surprising how often the complexity of the Marxist position is ignored, in favour of treating the opening paragraphs of the *Manifesto* as the last word on the subject. As I have already suggested, these resounding passages are, in some respects, misleading. It is indeed important to understand that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles, but it is equally important to understand that these struggles have taken two different forms.

One is where the classes involved are exploiter and exploited. The issues here are relatively straightforward. Slave-owners extract surplus from slaves, feudal lords and tributary bureaucrats do the same to peasants, and capitalists do the same to workers. In each case, the exploited class resists to the extent that material conditions allow, but it is not always possible for them to go beyond resistance to create a new society based on a different mode of production. Exploited classes, in other words, do not always have the structural capacity to make a social revolution: slaves did not; the peasantry did not; the working class does, and, in this respect – among several others – it is unique among the exploited classes in history.

The other is where the classes involved are oppressor and oppressed. The issues here are considerably more complex. For one thing, while all exploited classes (slaves, peasants, workers) are oppressed, not all oppressed classes are exploited and may even be exploiters themselves. The class struggle can therefore be between two exploitative classes, but nevertheless still be the means of bringing about social revolution, provided that the modes of production represented by these classes are different. However, the number of oppressed classes which have the capacity to remake society is as limited as the number of exploited classes with that capacity. Among oppressed classes, it is the bourgeoisie which is unique.

The class struggle in history has, therefore, taken multi-faceted forms. It is a permanent feature of the relationship between exploiting and exploited classes, but can also occur between dominant and subordinate exploiting classes, or between existing and potential exploiting classes. And these different class struggles have taken place simultaneously, intertwining and overlapping. The precise combinations have been or (in the case of socialism) will be different in relation the case of each of the great social revolutions.
(i) The fall of the Roman Empire and the transition to feudalism

The first transition involved the passage from primitive communism through ‘Asiaticism’ to a variety of social formations dominated by different modes of production: a relatively short-lived slave mode, the tributary mode or its feudal variant, or combinations of some or all of these. Can we therefore speak of a feudal revolution? In parts of the North and far West of Europe, such as Scandinavia and Scotland, clearly not: feudalism evolved spontaneously out of primitive communism and through the Asiatic mode. However, even if we accept (as I do) that feudal relations of production also existed within the territories of the Roman Empire in the West before the Fall, it is clear that feudalism only became the dominant mode there after 500 AD. The rise of feudalism in the former territories of the Empire therefore represents the first direct passage in history from one exploitative mode of production (slavery) to another. How was it accomplished? For our purposes, there are five important aspects in this initial transition from one exploitative mode of production to another.

First, the impetus for the transition came from the increasing failure of the previously dominant slave mode of production to sustain, let alone increase, levels of ruling class income. The decisive element in the crisis was, therefore, the inability of the existing ruling class to further develop the forces of production. The decline of slavery began towards the end of the second century AD. What caused it? Once the territorial limits of the Empire were reached, the only way that landowners could expand was by acquiring land from other, usually smaller landowners who would then be reduced in status. From the reign of Augustus, the freedom of the peasant-citizen began to be eroded as the state no longer permitted him to vote or required him to fight, with the restriction of the franchise to what were now openly called the honestiores (‘upper classes’) and the recruitment of armies by enlistment rather than as a duty of citizenship. Increasingly taxed to pay for the wars and the burgeoning bureaucracy, including that of the Christian Church, peasants began to seek the protection of great landowners, protection which came at the price of their independence and what remained of their citizenship. In other words, an unfree labour force now began to emerge which rendered slavery redundant. The end result, through a series of mediations too complex to trace here, was the collapse of political superstructure of the Roman Empire in the West, and the failure of subsequent attempts, notably by Charlemagne, to recreate it on anything like the original basis. The slave-owners transformed their former slaves into serfs or peasants with tenure in order to maintain or
increase productivity; the latter were prepared to try new methods of production as their own subsistence – or at least continued tenure – now depended on their doing so in a way that it did not for slaves; their success in achieving greater productivity encouraged the slave-owners-cum-lords to orient still further towards non-slave agriculture. ‘Slavery became extinct against a background of almost continuous and increasingly more marked development of the forces of production’.77

Second, as these remarks suggest, the exploited class on which the dominant slave mode of production was based was not responsible for overthrowing the slave-owners. Indeed, we know of only three major slave revolts in Roman history, two in Sicily during the second century BC and the most famous, that of Spartacus, on the Italian mainland during the first century BC. Other, smaller revolts have more recently come to light, but the fundamental picture remains unchanged. The class struggle in the Roman world was conducted between the free citizens, standing over an overwhelmingly passive slave population. Nevertheless, the inheritors were no more the peasants and plebeians of Ancient Rome than they were the slaves (although the slaves who obtained their freedom clearly benefited). The new ruling class was rather an alliance of the two forces which had actually been responsible for the Fall: from within, the landowners who withdrew support the state in opposition to its increasing demands for taxation; from without, the tribal chiefs and their retinues who led the barbarian invasions. The struggles of the exploited and oppressed classes obviously continued throughout the process, but contributed little to the outcome.

Third, the transition was, therefore, not an accidental or unintended consequence, but one consciously achieved through a series of pragmatic adaptations in the ways production and exploitation took place. The former slave-owners consciously changed the relations of production by lifting up the slaves they owned to the status of serfs while forcing down the free peasants tenanted on their land to the same level, as a response to the growing shortage of captured slaves and the expense of raising them. The tribal chiefs were unconsciously evolving into settled communities with stable and inherited social divisions between the warrior caste and the peasantry, a process hastened by the establishment of permanent settlements on the former territories of the Empire. Both were moving from different directions towards what would become, over several hundred years, a new feudal ruling class. There was

also a two-way movement of the exploited, particularly between the ninth and eleventh centuries. On the one hand, the supply of slaves dried up and those that did remain were settled as serfs. On the other, the previously free peasants were increasingly brought into a servile condition.

Fourth, the process took place first at the socio-economic level and, only towards the very end, gave rise to the political and ideological forms (the estates monarchy, the ‘three orders’) which we now regard as characteristic of feudalism. Indeed, we might say that the transition to feudalism is the feudal ‘revolution’; there is no seizure of power – from who could it be seized given that ruling class personnel were simply changing their roles? – but a gradual transformation of political forms to meet new socio-economic realities. What George Duby, Guy Bois and other refer to as the ‘feudal revolution’ around 1000 AD is, in fact, the final episode in a process that had taken over five hundred years to complete.

Fifth, the societies that were transformed on feudal lines occupied a relatively small region of Western and Central Europe (although a similar society also developed independently in Japan). Feudalism did not contain an inherent tendency towards expansion and did not require a world or even continental system either for exploitation (the territorial acquisitions of the Crusaders in the Middle East and later of the Hispanic states in the Americas were ‘opportunities’ rather than ‘necessities’) or for self-defence (since the great tributary states of the East were almost completely uninterested in these undeveloped formations, so obviously inferior to them in every respect except that of warfare).

(ii) The socialist revolution

The socialist revolution will differ from the feudal ‘revolution’ in each of these five aspects. Clearly we are at a disadvantage here since, unlike the transition to feudalism we are discussing a process that has still to occur. The only socialist revolution to have sustained itself for years rather than months, the Russian Revolution of October 1917, was thrown into reverse by the triumph of the Stalinist counter-revolution by 1928, and the transition it initiated has still to be successfully resumed. Nevertheless, from that experience and those of the brief but illuminating moments both before (the Paris Commune) and after (Germany 1918–23, Spain 1936, Hungary 1956, Portugal 1974–5, and so forth), it is possible to make some general comments.
First, the impetus for the transition arises not only from the meaningless, alienating repetitions experienced at the point of production, but a tendency for the capitalist system to regularly go into crisis and consequently subject the working class to insecurity, poverty, social breakdown, disease, repression – and, ultimately, starvation and war. Capitalism has no purely economic limits; unlike slavery or feudalism, it cannot reach the limits of the productive forces, although, once unleashed, they can destroy the world through war or environmental collapse. These are excellent reasons to dispense with it, but – and here the question of consciousness is paramount – the duty of revolutionaries and their organisations is to persuade other members of the working class that capitalism is responsible for existing disasters and those that threaten us in the future.

Second, the exploited class under capitalism – the working class – will achieve the socialist revolution, or it will not be achieved at all. The working class is the first exploited (as opposed to oppressed) class in history which is able to make a revolution on its own behalf. Unlike the peasantry, the working class is structured collectively and is, therefore, the basis of a new form of social organisation in a way that the peasantry can never be. Unlike the bourgeoisie, the working class itself has the numerical size and structural capacity to rebuild the world on its own behalf, without using another class as a battering ram to break down the existing system on its behalf. The working class is not an alternative exploiting class to the bourgeoisie and it will not be transformed into one by victory. (Even those writers who believe that socialism is impossible and that revolution will only lead to a new form of managerial or bureaucratic society do not claim that the proletariat itself will constitute the ruling class, but, rather, that it will consist of a technocratic elite or ‘new class’.) Consequently, the ‘everyday’ class struggles between exploiters and exploited, and the ‘transformative’ struggles for social revolution are linked by the fact that the same classes are involved. This is what Lenin meant by saying that the germ of revolution was present in every strike. Clearly, the working class will not be the only class involved in the socialist revolution, although its potential allies have changed in the course of the last hundred years – if the Russian Revolution had successfully spread after 1917, then the peasantry would have played a far greater role than they will now, just as the ‘new’ middle or technical-managerial class will play a far greater role now than they would have done in 1917.
Third, and because the transition starts with the seizure of power, it must be a conscious process. No socialist economy will blindly emerge from the struggle to develop the productive forces, or to find new ways of exploiting the direct producers who set those forces to work. The struggle for power by the working class requires organisation to awaken, consolidate and maintain class consciousness. However, it also requires an organisation to counterpose to that of the state. If there is any comparison between working-class organisation and that of the bourgeoisie, it does not involve their respective revolutionary organisations. As Trotsky wrote in 1923:

Consciousness, premeditation, and planning played a far smaller part in bourgeois revolutions than they are destined to play, and already do play, in proletarian revolutions. . . . The part played in bourgeois revolutions by the economic power of the bourgeoisie, by its education, by its municipalities and universities, is a part which can be filled in a proletarian revolution only by the party of the proletariat.78

In short, what the proletariat has to match is not the organisational structures within which the bourgeoisie conducted their struggle for power (in the minority of examples where, as with the Independents and the Jacobins, it did in fact play this role), but the centralising role the state and ideological forms established by the bourgeoisie after its ascendancy.

Fourth, the process begins with the smashing of the old state and the construction of the new. If the feudal ‘revolution’ was a process of socio-economic transition out of whose completion new political forms eventually emerged, then the socialist revolution will be a sociopolitical struggle for power whose completion will allow a new economic order to be constructed. Because the working class is non-exploitative, there is no prior development of an alternative socialist or communist mode of production. As Lukács noted:

. . . it would be a utopian fantasy to imagine that anything tending towards socialism could arise within capitalism apart from, on the one hand, the objective economic premises that make it a possibility which, however, can only be transformed in to the true elements of a socialist system of production after and in consequence of the collapse of capitalism; and, on the other hand, the development of the proletariat as a class. . . . But even the most highly developed capitalist concentration will still be qualitatively different, even economically, from a socialist system and can neither change into one

78 Trotsky 1975, p. 252.
Eight months after the October Revolution, Lenin noted that the Russian economy still contained five intermingled ‘socio-economic structures’: patriarchal or ‘natural’ peasant farming, small commodity production, private capitalism, state capitalism and socialism. His point — sadly lost on subsequent generations of would-be Leninists — was that state ownership of the economy did not define the nature of the workers’ state; the workers’ state is defined by whether the working class is in political control of the state. Democracy is not merely a desirable feature, but a necessity for socialism. Indeed, such a state will be defined by the way in which democracy becomes the basis for those aspects of human existence from which either the market or the bureaucratic state currently exclude it.

Fifth, the socialist revolution is a global event. As long as it remains isolated, it remains susceptible to counter-revolution, either from without or from within. The latter point perhaps bears some elaboration. The threat to the Russian Revolution, which was eventually realised, was not simply the backwardness of the economy, but the fact that in the capitalist world system, the pressures of competitive accumulation would ultimately make themselves felt, to the point of determining what happened in Russian factories.Crudely, if the West has tanks and missiles, then so must we. Greater levels of economic development might enable a state to hold out from internal degeneration longer than Russia was able, but cannot ultimately protect against this process. That is why the international nature of the socialist revolution is a necessity, not a desirable but optional extra. Space has implications for time: the greater the territorial extent of the socialist revolution, the weaker the pressures exercised by the capitalist world system, and the longer revolutionary territories are likely to survive without adapting to their environment.

(iii) The transition from feudalism to capitalism and the bourgeois revolution

Between these two polar extremes of social revolution represented by the transition to feudalism and the socialist revolution lies the bourgeois revolution itself. Behind many attempts to deny the historical existence of the bourgeois

79 Lukács 1971c, p. 283.
80 Lenin 1960–70e, pp. 335–6. It was, of course, Trotsky who first redefined the definition of a workers’ state from one in which the working class held power to one in which property was nationalised. For an account which is rightly critical, but sensitive to the pressures which pushed him in this direction, see Cliff 2003, pp. 3–4.
revolution lies a conception which identifies all social revolutions with the socialist revolution – a fully conscious class subject setting out to overthrow the state as a prelude to transforming all social relations. Because the bourgeois revolutions do not conform to this model, do not share these structures, it is easy to reject their revolutionary provenance, and dissolve them back into the broader process of the transitions to capitalism. These arguments are valid in relation to the transition from slavery to feudalism, where, as I have argued, ‘revolution’ does indeed have a metaphoric character. Nonetheless, to treat the events that I continue to call the bourgeois revolutions in this way is to reduce all the great religious, military, social and political struggles over five centuries to superstructural or epiphenomenal status. The bourgeois revolutions may not resemble the revolutions that we are trying to make, but they were revolutionary for all that. They do not share the same structure with either their feudal predecessors or their socialist successors, in some respects looking back to former, in others looking forwards to the latter and in still others being distinct from them both.

First, the impetus for the bourgeois revolutions also has two sources. The first examples, extending in this case down to the French, were in response to the crisis of the absolutist state, a crisis manifest in the attempts to impose both economic and ideological controls over society. However, this crisis had still deeper roots in the periodic stagnation and decline of the feudal economy. If the ‘revolutions from below’ were less-than-fully-conscious mechanisms for breaking out of the cycle of feudal decline, the ‘revolutions from above’ which followed 1848 were attempts to avoid military and economic eclipse by those states that had already made the transition.

Second, a single class did not make the bourgeois revolutions. Michael Mann has suggested that a variation of the schema supposedly advocated by Lenin in What Is to Be Done? (1902) – whereby ideological leadership can only be brought to the working class ‘from outside’ – might in fact be relevant in relation to the bourgeoisie: ‘Left to itself the bourgeoisie was only capable of economism – in the eighteenth century of segmental manipulative deference’.81 It is nevertheless possible to argue that only outsiders, only people without direct material interests in the process of production could

81 Mann 1993, p. 229. Mann claims to have discovered this concept in the work of Lucien Goldmann, but the latter’s discussion of leadership is more specific to the Jansenist movement in seventeenth-century France than to the bourgeoisie as a whole. See Goldmann 1964, p. 117.
supply the leadership for bourgeoisie who were, by definition, divided into segmented interests. The bourgeoisie includes both urban and rural capitalists – in the literal sense of those who owned or controlled capital – but also encompassed a larger social group over which this class was hegemonic. Hal Draper describes the bourgeoisie in this sense as ‘a social penumbra around the hard core of capitalists proper, shading out into the diverse social elements that function as servitors or hangers-on of capital without themselves owning capital’.

The bourgeoisie needs this penumbra. According to Anderson

\[\text{his mass is typically composed . . . of the gamut of professional, administrative and technical groups that enjoy life-conditions to capitalists proper – everything customarily included in the broader term ‘bourgeoisie’ as opposed to ‘capital’}.\]

Nevertheless, the distinction between capitalist and bourgeoisie is not the only one operative here. As Anderson continues, ‘this same bourgeoisie will normally lack a clear-cut frontier with layers of the petty bourgeoisie below it, for the difference between the two in the ranks of the small employer is often quantitative rather than qualitative’.

But this relationship could not persist. As Gareth Stedman Jones writes:

\[\text{In general, the more industrial capitalism developed, the stronger was the economic power of the grande bourgeoisie in relation to the masses of small producers and dealers from which it had sprung, and the greater the distance between their respective aims. Conversely, the less developed the bourgeoisie, the smaller the gulf between ‘bourgeois’ and ‘petit bourgeois’, and the greater the preponderance and cohesion of the popular movement.}\]

The earliest successful examples of bourgeois revolution, in the Netherlands and England, did involve leadership by mercantile, agrarian and even industrial capitalists (although the latter tended to be based in the colonies rather than the metropolitan centres), but – precisely because they belonged to a minority, exploiting class – they were forced to involve other forces, who were exploited by both feudal lords and themselves, in order to overthrow the absolutist state. However, this reliance brought with it the danger that these other forces would seek to pursue their own interests. The English capitalist class had learned the lesson as early as 1688, when it called on a Dutch invasion to

\[^{82}\text{Draper 1978, p. 169.}\]
\[^{83}\text{Anderson 1992, p. 112.}\]
\[^{84}\text{Stedman Jones 1977, p. 87.}\]
complete their work for them, precisely to avoid the upheavals that had characterized the years from 1640–60. For the European bourgeoisie who developed later, it was the French Revolution which provided the lesson. The actual involvement of capitalists was actually less in France than in the earlier events in the Netherlands or England, partly because capitalist development had been consciously restrained by the absolutist state, but partly because those capitalists which did exist were more inclined to reform, not least because of the risk which revolution posed to property, which, in their case, was more industrial than agrarian or mercantile. The petty bourgeoisie therefore play a far greater role, and where this is shared with classes higher in the social structure, it is with the broader bourgeoisie – the journalists, lawyers, and schoolteachers remote from the actual productive process – rather than with capitalists in the purely economic sense. Further shifts followed. The political semi-paralysis of the European bourgeoisie after 1849 meant that the only social forces capable of forcing through revolutionary change without having to rely on the ‘dangerous’ classes were sections of the existing ruling class, like Prussian Junkers or Japanese Samurai. In the absence of even this instrument, Lenin thought that the working class would have to accomplish the bourgeois revolution. As we know, this was not required, but there is at least a case for arguing that the counter-revolution of the Stalinist bureaucracy after 1928 was the functional equivalent of the Russian bourgeois revolution, adding another, and final, class force to the list of those responsible.

Third, the bourgeois revolutions display a range of different levels of consciousness, depending on the classes involved and the period during which each one took place. As Alex Callinicos suggests, it is in this respect that the intermediary role of the bourgeois revolutions is most pronounced:

The balance between the role played by structural contradictions and conscious human agency in resolving organic crisis has shifted from the former to the latter in the course of the past 1,500 years. The transition from feudalism to capitalism occupies an intermediate position in this respect between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Russian Revolution.85

Although the earliest revolutions did involve actual capitalists to an extent that was later rare, their motivations were far more concerned with religious or constitutional liberties than with allowing them to exploit their workforce more effectively, although – through several mediations – that was indeed

85 Callinicos 1987, p. 229.
the outcome. The reason for this lies in the very fusion of the economic and political (and the ideological) which was characteristic of feudalism and which reached its apogee in the absolutist state. Whatever the reason social actors had for destroying absolutism, once its integrated structures collapsed, the only viable economic alternatives left standing were those of capitalism. Full consciousness was not required in the early ‘revolutions from below’ because behind the revolutionaries lay the solid basis of capitalist economic development. Insofar as the capitalist leaderships were conscious of their underlying economic aims, they could scarcely declare these openly to their allies in other classes, who were the very ones likely to be faced simply with a change of master. In the later ‘revolutions from above’, the protagonists were interested in capitalist development as a means of competing militarily with their more advanced rivals. The only examples where a fully conscious capitalist bourgeoisie set out to establish capitalism were in the transformation of Scottish agriculture after 1746 and in the American Civil War where, exceptionally, the bourgeoisie was also an industrial bourgeoisie. In both cases, their ability to do so was dependent on prior control of an overarching territorial state apparatus.

Fourth, the bourgeois revolution is both a product and a cause of the transition to feudalism. Ellen Wood asks, ‘[w]as a revolution necessary to bring about capitalism, or simply to facilitate the development of an already existing capitalism? Was it a cause or an effect of capitalism?’. The answer, of course, is that, depending upon which stage of the transition a specific bourgeois revolution takes place in, it can be either. In some cases, it was primarily a means of facilitating the development of capitalism (the Dutch Revolt, the English Civil War, the French Revolution, the American Civil War), and in others it was primarily a precondition for the emergence of capitalism (the Scottish Revolution, the Italian Risorgimento, German Unification, the Japanese Meiji Restoration), but in no case was capitalism either completely dominant or completely non-existent, even in Scotland. Early capitalist developments had been thrown back in the Italian city-states and Bohemia, and once the initial breakthroughs took place in the Netherlands and England, the forces of European absolutism mobilised both in both their own domains and on a continental scale to prevent any further revolutions taking place along these lines. Consequently, in no other country after England did a

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capitalist economy grow up relatively unhindered until the point where the classes associated with it could lead an assault on feudal absolutism. Even in the case of England, the French state tried for decades to undo the effects of 1688, mainly by supporting Jacobite reaction in Scotland, an intervention which only stopped with their decisive defeat at Culloden in 1746. As a consequence of the relative success of the absolutist régimes in retarding the development of capitalism, when Prussian, Piedmontese and Japanese ruling-class fractions did move to establish unified states whereby to compete with Britain and France, they were starting from much further back than their competitors had done at a comparable stage in their development as capitalist economies.

Fifth, the bourgeois revolution as whole has to be wider than a mere regional phenomenon like feudalism, but does not have to resolve at a global level like socialism. Feudalism was essentially a more backward variant of the tributary mode and consequently posed no real threat to the states in which it was dominant – indeed, absolutism can be seen as the mutation of European feudalism into state forms comparable to the Chinese and Byzantine. Capitalism was fundamentally different from both the Eastern tributary states and – more immediately – the Western absolutist states. That is why the Spanish tried so hard to suppress the Dutch Revolt and why the French tried even harder to overthrow the English Revolution; their rulers realised, without fully understanding why, that these new forms were their deadly enemies, were ultimately incompatible with their system. The Soviet historian Alexander Chistozvonov has argued for the importance of the concept of ‘irreversibility’:

the process of the genesis of capitalism may assume, and does assume, a reversible character whenever there are only some of the combined factors of the genetical transformational series in the country, when they happen to be subjugated to factors of the formational reproduction series and embrace only some centres (regions, branches), while the ruling feudal class and the political superstructure of the feudal society are able for the time being to regulate the development of the process with the aim of preserving the feudal basis, and to overcome or suppress socio-economic conflicts.

This did not imply that the entire world had to be transformed along capitalist lines for the bourgeois revolution to be safe, let alone complete. On the
contrary, for at least part of the history of the system, the capitalist states depended on the existence of areas that were forcefully prevented from repeating the experience of bourgeois revolution. The imposition of global capitalism is only really happening now, but the moment when the bourgeois revolution ended can be dated with some precision to October 1917 – in other words, when it became evident that socialism is now possible, rather than simply being an aspiration for some future point. There were, of course, individual and often extremely important national transitions after that date, usually along state-capitalist lines, but the existence of an alternative signalled that epoch in which the bourgeois revolution was a relatively progressive phenomenon was now over.

Conclusion
I want to conclude with some considerations on why Marxists should be so anxious to dismiss the bourgeois revolutions, these events which did so much to shape the contemporary world. There is probably no single answer to this question. One is a healthy reaction against social-democratic and – especially – Stalinist stages theories. Another reason, however, appears precisely to be the question of ‘relative progressiveness’, to which I have just referred. I detect an increasing unwillingness to credit historical capitalism and, by extension, the bourgeoisie, with any positive contribution to human development. Understandable though this position is, given the horrors for which the system continues to be responsible, Marxists must nevertheless reject it. Without capitalism, we would have no possibility of developing the forces of production to the extent that will enable the whole of the world’s population to enjoy what is currently denied most of them – a fully human life. In fact, without capitalism there would be no ‘us’ – in the sense of a working class – to seriously consider accomplishing such a goal in the first place. To me, at any rate, it seems to be completely implausible to think that if only capitalism had not come into existence we could all be living in a happy hobbit-land of free peasants and independent small producers. You may think that I exaggerate, but at least two of the very finest Marxist historical works of recent years – James Holstun’s Ehud’s Dagger and Peter Linebaugh’s and Marcus Rediker’s The Many Headed Hydra – are undermined, in my opinion, by literally incredible claims about the possibilities of bypassing capitalism for non-exploitative societies of small commodity producers, possibly in alliance with
the indigenous peoples of the Americas, whose ‘communism’ is supposed to have affinities with European ‘commonism’. It is true that capitalism was not inevitable, of course, but the alternative was probably a world divided between endlessly warring absolutist and tributary states without even the possibility of escape that capitalism provides.

This is only a more extreme example of a reaction to the Stalinist celebration of the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class that seeks to find more revolutionary forces with which contemporary radicals can identify. Hence, in an English context, the attempts to diminish the role of Oliver Cromwell in favour of the Levellers and of the Levellers in favour of the Diggers, and so on. (The latter two groups, which are often spoken of together, were of course different in ideology, class composition, size of membership and virtually every other respect.) This seems to me to be both completely mistaken and completely unnecessary. In Discovering the Scottish Revolution, I argue that we have to distinguish between two different sets of historical actor in the bourgeois revolutions. One set consists of our socialist predecessors – that is, those who looked towards collectivist solutions which were unachievable in their own time, like the Diggers in England or the Conspiracy of Equals in France. The other set consists of our bourgeois equivalents – that is, those who actually carried the only revolutions possible at the time, which were, whatever their formal goals, to establish the dominance of capital. Clearly, our attitude to these groups is very different. Nevertheless, since one aspect of bourgeois revolutions is to establish the most successful system of exploitation ever seen, it is scarcely surprising that the people who carried them through should, like Cromwell, leave a complex and contradictory legacy.

I want, however, to end on a note which recognises the fact that the bourgeoisie, in the hour of its greatness, did more for the possibility of human liberation than simply provide the material basis for future socialist development. I think here of the universalism of Enlightenment thought at its best. In the context of my own country, the thinkers of the Scottish bourgeoisie were engaged in changing their world, not merely interpreting it – The Wealth of Nations is a programme for transforming Scottish society as much as it is a history of the world economy. Unfortunately, what Smith and his colleagues wanted – ‘commercial society’, in their terminology – was not the same as the capitalist society they eventually helped bring into being.

Lukács once wrote of the Enlightenment hope that ‘democratic bourgeois freedom and the supremacy of economics would one day lead to the salvation of all mankind’. As we know only too well, it did not. I think that the more perceptive of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers – above all, Smith himself, Adam Ferguson and John Millar – were aware of this and that awareness is responsible for their studied ambiguity towards ‘actually existing capitalism’ as it emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century. To paraphrase William Morris, the thing they fought for turned out to be not what they meant, and other people have since had to fight for what they meant under another name. We in the movements against globalisation and imperialist war are those ‘other people’. But what we fight for is not to accomplish outstanding ‘tasks of the bourgeois revolution’ in the sense I have already rejected, but for those universal principles of freedom and justice which the bourgeois revolutions brought onto the historical agenda but, for all their epochal significance, were unable to achieve.

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Deborah Cook

The Sundered Totality of System and Lifeworld

Habermas borrowed his idea of the lifeworld from Edmund Husserl, but, to understand the role this idea plays within his theory, one needs to turn to the work of Georg Lukács, where the ‘humanity’ or ‘soul’ of workers allegedly protects them against the full effects of reification.¹ The lifeworld concept is expressly designed to counter the view that the encroachment of exchange relations on human life has been an unmitigated disaster. With this concept, Habermas takes aim at first-generation critical theorists who claim that human beings are not only increasingly reified, but that reification meets little or no resistance from its victims. If the optimal organisation of relations of production requires the co-ordination of people from whom all vestiges of life have been drained, individuals now satisfy this requirement in order, paradoxically, stay alive. Under late capitalism, ‘[t]he will to live finds itself dependent on the denial of the will to live: self-preservation annuls all life in subjectivity’.² Stating, in an interview, that his primary concern in The Theory of Communicative Action was to ‘develop a theoretical

¹ Lukács 1971, p. 172.
² Adorno 1974, p. 229.
apparatus with which the phenomenon of “reification” (Lukács) could be addressed’, Habermas claims that the view of reification offered by first-generation critical theorists fails to ‘exhaust the analytic resources’ of modernity that he articulates in his theory of communicative action.3

At the end of the first volume of The Theory of Communicative Action, Habermas contrasts Lukács’s view of reification to that of Adorno and Horkheimer in Dialectic of Enlightenment. Although he will also modify Lukács’s claim that something in the ‘subjective nature of human beings’ resists reification,4 Habermas nonetheless concurs with the Hungarian philosopher that reification has limits. Against Adorno and Horkheimer, then, who ‘do not agree with Lukács’ view that the seemingly complete rationalization of the world has its limit in the formal character of its own rationality’,5 Habermas argues that the functionalist rationality of the economic and political subsystems is restricted by its very one-dimensionality. It confronts a ‘unity of rationality’ that lies ‘beneath the husk’ of everyday practice.6 The univalent rationality of the subsystems conflicts with the multivalent communicative rationality that characterises action in the lifeworld. Although it can undoubtedly be damaged by them, communicative rationality inherently resists the colonising incursions of functionalist systems.

Habermas explicitly bases his distinction between system and lifeworld on Emile Durkheim’s distinction between two modes of societal integration: system integration and social integration. Communicative action in the lifeworld is integrated ‘by a normatively secured or communicatively achieved consensus’, whereas action in the economic and political subsystems is integrated ‘by a nonnormative regulation of individual decisions that extends beyond the actors’ consciousnesses’.7 However, system and lifeworld are distinguished in other important ways as well. Characterised by functionalist rationality, the economic and political subsystems also secure the material reproduction of society as a whole. By contrast, the lifeworld is geared towards the symbolic production and reproduction of its structural components: culture, society, and personality. Symbolic reproduction is achieved through ‘a cooperative process of interpretation’ in which lifeworld members ‘relate simultaneously to something in the objective, the social, and the subjective

3 Habermas 1993, p. 170.
4 Habermas 1984, p. 368.
5 Habermas 1984, p. 377.
6 Habermas 1984, p. 382.
7 Habermas 1987a, p. 117.
worlds, even when they thematically stress only one of the three components in their utterances.8 Owing to the historical process of rationalisation, communicative rationality has become sufficiently differentiated in its internal structures to ensure that consensus can be reached about aspects of these three worlds.

These explicit distinctions between system and lifeworld in terms of their modes of integration and reproduction and their types of rationality actually cut across, and refer to, one another. The economic and political subsystems exhibit different modes of societal integration only because they are also characterised by a different type of rationality that holds sway in a qualitatively distinct sphere of reproduction.9 Furthermore, these mutually entwined distinctions suggest further ones. As I shall argue in this paper, with his system/lifeworld distinction Habermas also implicitly opposes the sphere of unfreedom (or necessity) to the sphere of freedom, the realm of work to the realm of leisure, and the sphere of manual labour to the sphere of mental labour. Without wishing to rely on postmodernist jargon, I shall argue that the distinction Habermas makes between system and lifeworld rests on binary oppositions like these and that these oppositions should be ‘deconstructed’. Once deconstructed, however, Habermas’s claims about the inherent limits to reification can also be questioned.

I.

Although Maeve Cooke observes that Habermas does not always consistently maintain the distinction between functionalist rationality and cognitive-instrumental rationality, she remarks that functionalist rationality characterises the operations of the economic and political subsystems, whereas instrumental and strategic rationality characterises the actions of agents within these systems. As workers or employees, individuals adopt an instrumental relationship towards nature and a strategic orientation towards each other in order to further their own success. Within the subsystems, then, workers assume ‘an objectivating attitude toward the action situation’; they also behave strategically,

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8 Habermas 1987a, p. 120.
9 See for example, Habermas 1987a, pp. 232–3: ‘Social integration presents itself as part of the symbolic reproduction of a lifeworld that, besides the reproduction of memberships (or solidarities), is dependent upon cultural traditions and socialization processes; by contrast, functional integration is equivalent to a material reproduction of the lifeworld that is conceived as system maintenance’.
affecting the decisions of others ‘in a purposive-rational [zweckrational] manner’\textsuperscript{10}. For their part, the functionally rational subsystems combine the results of these strategic and instrumental actions in such a way that they further the ends of the subsystems themselves rather than the aims consciously sought by their agents. According to Habermas, the market economy has emerged as a self-regulating mechanism that stabilises ‘nonintended interconnections of action by way of functionally intermeshing action consequences’. The functionally rational economic subsystem ultimately secures the ‘nonnormative steering of individual decisions not subjectively coordinated’.\textsuperscript{11}

The picture that emerges from Habermas’s all-too-brief account of functionalist rationality bears a striking resemblance to Adam Smith’s description of the capitalist economy in \textit{The Wealth of Nations}. Recognising that the actions of agents in the subsystems are strategically oriented towards private success, both Smith and Habermas claim that these actions are actually beneficial to society as a whole, because their consequences are combined in such a way that they unintentionally promote the goal of the material reproduction of the lifeworld.\textsuperscript{12} Yet, though he states that the differentiation of the functionally rational subsystems from the communicatively-rational lifeworld allows material reproduction to be carried out more efficiently, Habermas does not attempt to explain how the subsystems effectively promote the material welfare of society. He does not, for example, argue with Smith that the subsystems benefit society by driving prices down to their ‘natural’ level. Rather, Habermas simply makes the unsupported assertion that, by combining action consequences independently of the will of their agents, the self-regulating subsystems ‘better fulfill the tasks of materially reproducing the lifeworld’. Admitting that the monetarisation of labour was by no

\textsuperscript{10} Cooke 1994, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{11} Habermas 1987a, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{12} In his interview with Habermas, Torben Hviid Nielsen pointedly asks why Habermas neglects ‘the arguments developed by institutionalist economic theory to demonstrate that the model of purely strategic and utilitarian action died out at the latest with Adam Smith’s “invisible hand”’. Without tackling the problem of the invisible hand \textit{per se}, Habermas simply replies that he uses the concepts of system and lifeworld to refer to social orders that differ in terms of their modes of integration. Actions in the lifeworld ‘intermesh’ by virtue of the intentions of their agents. By contrast, actions in the subsystems are integrated ‘“over the heads of the participants,” as it were, through the functional interlocking and reciprocal stabilization of consequences of action of which the agents need not be aware’. See Habermas 1993, p. 166.
means a painless process, Habermas also asserts that, though originally achieved through force and violence, the new organisational forms of labour proved their worth by their ‘greater effectiveness and superior level of integration’.  

The uncoupling of the subsystems from lifeworld allegedly benefits the lifeworld in yet another way. For, in the course of their development, ‘the politically supported, internal dynamics of the economic system result in a more or less continuous increase in system complexity – which means not only an extension of formally organized domains of action, but an increase in their internal density as well’. Now largely independent of lifeworld contexts, the increasingly complex subsystems have beneficently unburdened lifeworld members of the costs and risks of achieving consensus about how best to steer them. This, in turn, allows lifeworld members to devote themselves exclusively to the symbolic reproduction of their culture, society, and personalities. Indeed, Habermas frequently stresses the advantages that accrue to lifeworld members from the differentiation of system and lifeworld. If increases in the complexity of the subsystems were originally ‘dependent on the structural differentiation of the lifeworld’, Habermas further argues that, once the economic and political subsystems relieved the lifeworld of tasks of material reproduction, the lifeworld could ‘become more differentiated in its symbolic structures’. Subsequently, the lifeworld could ‘set free the inner logic of development of cultural modernity’. Freedom from tasks of material reproduction also freed lifeworld members for the symbolic tasks of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialisation.

On Habermas’s view, then, the uncoupling of system from lifeworld is an entirely positive historical development. Lifeworld members experience a loss of freedom only when the functionally-rational subsystems colonise their activities of symbolic reproduction with a view to correcting ‘critical disequilibria in material reproduction’. Freedom is threatened only when ‘economic and administrative rationality’ penetrates into areas of action that resist being converted over to the media of money and power because they are specialized in cultural transmission, social

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13 Habermas 1987a, p. 321.
14 Habermas 1987a, p. 351.
15 Habermas 1987a, p. 173.
16 Habermas 1987a, p. 385.
17 Habermas 1987a, p. 305.
integration, and child-rearing, and remain dependent on mutual understanding as a mechanism for coordinating action.18

Indeed, while Habermas certainly needs a broader notion of the loss of freedom, and occasionally seems to deploy such a notion himself, it is nonetheless the case that he explicitly identifies the loss of freedom with distortions and disturbances in the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld. He reinterprets Weber’s thesis of the loss of freedom so that it refers exclusively to the ‘systemically induced reification of communicatively structured domains of action’.19 Moreover, Habermas implies here that communicative action within the lifeworld is largely free. Colonisation cannot completely compromise this freedom because economic and political imperatives necessarily ‘clash with independent communication structures’ in the lifeworld.20 When functionalist rationality encroaches upon it, ‘the lifeworld evidently offers stubborn and possibly successful resistance’21 because ‘communicative rationality... gives an inner logic... to resistance against the colonization of the lifeworld’.22

To say the least, Habermas has an idiosyncratic view of both freedom and unfreedom. For, when critical theorists refer to the loss of freedom in the West, they usually refer to the independent and occult operations of politically sustained economic forces and their debilitating effects on individuals under late capitalism. Consequently, where Habermas views the autopoietic functioning of the subsystems as beneficial, criticising the economy and the state only when they colonise the lifeworld, Marx, Lukács, and Adorno target the loss of freedom that arises when the economic system operates over the heads and through the heads of individuals. For his part, Lukács thought that capitalism was inherently irrational because the only law governing it is the ‘“unconscious” product of the activity of different commodity owners acting independently of one another’.23 As long as market forces are driven by their own ‘immanent, blind dynamic’,24 they will continue to control and shape the lives of individuals. According to Adorno, ‘freedom remains no less delusive than individuality itself’ because the ‘law of value comes into

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18 Habermas 1987a, p. 330.
20 Habermas 1987a, p. 391.
21 Habermas 1987a, p. 351.
22 Habermas 1987a, p. 333.
23 Lukács 1971, p. 102.
play over the heads of formally free individuals’ who have become ‘involuntary executors of that law’.25

Although workers unintentionally sustain an economic system whose operations combine the results of their actions in ways they can neither predict nor control, Habermas seems to believe that freedom is lost only when the subsystems reify communicatively structured domains of action. At the same time, however, he implicitly contrasts action in the subsystems to action undertaken in the lifeworld; the lives of workers are tacitly played off against the lives of members of communicatively engendered lifeworlds. As workers, individuals are unfree. At one point, Habermas openly acknowledges this unfreedom when he writes that, within the subsystems, the ‘objective meaning of a functionally stabilized nexus of action . . . makes itself felt as a causality of fate in the experiences and sufferings of actors’.26 Among other things, workers experience labour as a serious disruption of their ethical lives. Although J.M. Bernstein appears unaware of this description of workers’ experience in The Theory of Communicative Action, he has demonstrated that Habermas makes use of the Hegelian trope of the causality of fate throughout his work.27 In The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, for example, Habermas remarked that the dynamics of the causality of fate result

from the disruption of the conditions of symmetry and of the reciprocal dependencies of an intersubjectively constituted life-context, where one part isolates itself and hence also alienates all other parts from itself and their common life.28

Bernstein rightly observes that we have long since found other names for such ‘transgressions from the moral totality – alienation, reification, rationalization, nihilism’.29

With this contrast between our unfree lives as workers and our free lives as lifeworld members, Habermas implicitly reformulates the classical distinction between the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity. And, as André Gorz observes, this distinction has had a long history. Citing Hannah Arendt’s The Human Condition, Gorz writes:

26 Habermas 1987a, p. 311.
28 Habermas 1987b, p. 29.
29 Bernstein 1995, p. 84.
The idea that liberty, that is, the human realm, only ‘begins beyond the realm of necessity,’ that Man is only capable of moral conduct when his actions cease to express his pressing bodily needs and dependence on the environment and are solely the result of his sovereign determination is one which has persisted since the time of Plato.

Those individuals are free who are largely unburdened from material cares and concerns. Like Habermas, who remarks that system and lifeworld ‘appear in Marx under the metaphors of the “realm of necessity” and the “realm of freedom”’,30 Gorz notes that Marx also draws on this distinction. In Volume III of *Capital*, Marx wrote that ‘the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases’. Freedom ‘lies beyond the sphere of actual material production’; it consists in activity that has become an end in itself.31

Of course, Marx thought that true freedom would be achieved only with the advent of socialism. Against this, Habermas seems to believe that a realm of freedom already exists within Western societies. This realm emerged as the lifeworld was rationalised, and developed its own distinct internal structures while disengaging from material reproduction. As a result of this process, the lifeworld under late capitalism is largely unconstrained by necessity and ‘mundane’ considerations linked to self-preservation. As opposed to the realm of unfreedom, in which action is unhinged from communicatively achieved consensus and formally regulated by organisations in the service of profit and power,32 the lifeworld represents a sphere of freedom integrated almost exclusively ‘through consensus, whether normatively guaranteed or communicatively achieved’. Consensus cannot be brought about by force, or by manipulative, strategically motivated action. The use of force compromises consensus because consensus ultimately rests on the ‘uncoerced recognition of criticizable validity claims’.33 Consequently, to the extent that lifeworld members are not coerced or manipulated into agreeing with propositional

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31 Gorz 1989, p. 14. As Moishe Postone explains, however, the fact that labour will never be completely free, that it will always be undertaken out of need, does not imply that labour must always be completely unfree. Even within the realm of ‘necessity’, a form of freedom may arise in which ‘the associated producers can control their labor rather than being controlled by it’. See Postone 1993, pp. 381ff.
32 Habermas 1987a, pp. 310–11.
33 Habermas 1987a, p. 150.
truth claims, normative validity claims, and claims about subjective truthfulness, they are free in Habermas’s sense of that term.

Uncoerced agreement among lifeworld members about validity claims fosters social integration which is essential to society as a whole. But the reproductive process of social integration not only sustains society, it helps to reproduce the two other structural components of the lifeworld: culture and personality. With its contributions to culture, social integration enables lifeworld members to secure for themselves ‘a continuity of tradition and coherence of knowledge sufficient for everyday practice’. Through social integration, the ‘central stock of value orientations’ on which culture relies is ‘immunized’. Social integration contributes to personality formation by reproducing those patterns of social membership through which individuals develop personal identities. Finally, the key function of communicatively engendered social integration is to co-ordinate action within the lifeworld by means of intersubjectively recognised normative validity claims. Social integration is achieved to the extent that lifeworld members reach uncoerced agreement about what is normatively right within a given social context. It is primarily by means of such agreement about normative validity claims that social solidarity is promoted within the lifeworld.

Again, Habermas explicitly bases his distinction between lifeworld and system on the distinction between social integration and system (or functionalist) integration. Today, system integration is largely detached from socially integrative practices oriented towards reaching agreement on validity claims. Habermas frequently describes the systemically integrated subsystems as norm-free, or ethically neutralised. Action co-ordination in the subsystems does not depend on communicatively achieved consensus about validity claims. Instead, the steering media of money and power replace communicative action ‘with a symbolic generalization of rewards and punishments’. If the communicative freedom that characterises interaction in the lifeworld also entails responsibility, to the degree that lifeworld members can be held

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34 As I shall discuss later, Habermas also argues that the continued existence of the systemically integrated economy and state relies on the social integration of lifeworld institutions (such as the family and the public sphere) because the economy and the state are anchored in these institutions (Habermas 1987a, pp. 385–6).
35 Habermas 1987a, p. 140.
36 Habermas 1987a, p. 144.
37 Habermas 1987a, p. 183.
accountable for orienting (or failing to orient) their actions towards criticisable validity claims, the delinguistified media of money and power in the subsystems ‘connect up interactions in space and time into more and more complex networks that no one has to comprehend or be responsible for’. Freely reached agreement in the lifeworld now contrasts with amoral systemic action that either succeeds or fails; success is measured exclusively by profit in the economy, and by sovereignty or power in the political realm.

The lifeworld has reacted to its differentiation from the capitalist economy and the liberal-democratic state by opposing to their systemically-integrated areas of action its own socially-integrated areas of action which ‘take the shape of private and public spheres’. These private and public spheres have ‘a complementary relationship to one another’. The dog-eat-dog work-world stands in sharp contrast to life within the family and the public sphere. Having been relieved of its earlier ‘productive functions’ (such as raising animals and growing plants for food, making clothing, building houses, and so forth), the family now specialises ‘in tasks of socialization’ related to child-rearing. In the socially integrated family, communicative infrastructures are currently ‘developing that have freed themselves from latent entanglements in systemic dependencies’. For its part, the socially-integrated public sphere, which stands over against the systemically-integrated liberal-democratic state, makes it possible

*for a public of art-enjoying private persons to participate in the reproduction of culture, and for a public of citizens of the state to participate in the social integration mediated by public opinion.*

Having focussed critically on the public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas returns in his last major work to a far less critical discussion of the public sphere as ‘a highly complex network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local and subcultural arenas’ ranging from

the *episodic* publics found in taverns, coffee houses, or on the streets; through the *occasional* or ‘arranged’ publics of particular presentations and events,

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38 Habermas 1987a, p. 263.
39 Habermas 1987a, p. 184.
40 Habermas 1987a, p. 274.
41 Habermas 1987a, p. 319.
42 Habermas 1987a, p. 387.
43 Habermas 1987a, p. 319.
such as theatre performances, rock concerts, party assemblies, or church congresses; up to the abstract public sphere of isolated readers, listeners and viewers scattered across large geographical areas, or even around the globe, and brought together only by the mass media.44

As workers, individuals are company men and women whose strategically motivated actions are regulated by formal rules and combined functionally in unforeseeable and uncontrollable ways. But, if most individuals must devote a large portion of their daily lives to strategic pursuits in order to provide for their needs with the wages or salaries they receive in exchange for their labour, Habermas tacitly opposes to the gritty and competitive work-world a realm of leisure that affords individuals the time and opportunity freely to reach agreement about aspects of the world around them, about the moral norms that should govern their actions, and about their ethical values. The lifeworld is not only a sphere of freedom, or of uncoerced communicative interaction; it is equally a sphere of leisure that is extraterritorial with respect to the workplace where individuals must struggle to ensure they have enough money to pay the rent, put food on the table and clothes on their backs.

If they are only free when their agreement to validity claims is not coerced, it is only when they are not working that adults can engage in symbolic activities. Outside of the realm of work, where they must dance to the drumbeat of their employers, individuals may go to the pub to chat about local politics, debate issues like the war in Iraq over dinner, attend musical events, watch television, volunteer in community organizations, read books to their children, and so on. In contrast to domains of action that are oriented exclusively towards economic and political functions, the lifeworld is geared to such economically and politically unproductive activities. Moreover, these leisure activities are not only said to be the more evolutionarily advanced, they are also supposed to be the ground or basis on which the economy and state rest. Recognising the primacy of the economy in the West today, Habermas nonetheless asserts that ‘the lifeworld remains the subsystem that defines the pattern of the social system as a whole’45 because its institutions anchor the money-steered economy and the power-driven liberal-democratic state.46 For Habermas, the fact that money and power ‘have to be anchored in lifeworld

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45 Habermas 1987a, p. 154.
46 Habermas 1987a, p. 168.
institutions speaks prima facie for the primacy of socially integrated spheres of action over objectified systemic networks’. 47

The world of work is grounded, or anchored in, the world of leisure; the realm of unfreedom finds its institutional anchor in the realm of freedom. For Habermas also claims that the activities that maintain the economic and political subsystems are ‘superstructural’ with respect to activities that serve symbolically to reproduce the lifeworld. In The Theory of Communicative Action, he argues that the leading system mechanism in Western countries, the capitalist economy, is institutionally anchored in the family. 48 For its part, the public sphere serves as the institutional anchor for the liberal-democratic welfare state. Even as they ‘create their own, norm-free social structures jutting out from the lifeworld’, then, the economic and political subsystems remain linked to it. Here, of course, Habermas attempts to stand Marx on his head. On his view, Marx ‘devalued’ the lifeworld by turning it into a ‘sociocultural superstructure’. 49 If, for Marx, freedom and leisure can only be enjoyed when the labour needed for material sustenance ceases, Habermas often seems to believe that the labour needed for material reproduction is ‘won’ only when the multivalent activities involved in the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld have been carried out.

With his distinction between system and lifeworld as realms of material reproduction and symbolic reproduction respectively, Habermas again rigidly distinguishes between labour, with its strategic and instrumental orientations pitting individuals against both each other and the natural world, and communicative interaction geared towards mutual understanding. In Between Facts and Norms, he continues to emphasise the historical priority of the lifeworld, writing that ‘the money-steered economy and a power-steered administration develop out of, and only out of, the “society” component of

47 Habermas 1987a, p. 312.
48 Habermas 1987a, p. 319. As the institutional ‘base’ for the economy, the family also ‘defines the scope for possible increases in complexity in a given social formation’; it poses those ‘system problems that can be resolved only through evolutionary innovations, that is, only when a higher level of system differentiation is institutionalized’ (Habermas 1987a, p. 168). Despite his later claims about the anchoring role of the family, Habermas writes that money – the leading steering mechanism of the economy – is not only anchored in ‘family status’ and ‘the authority of office’, but also in ‘bourgeois private law’ (Habermas 1987a, p. 173). However, he adds that, over time, the legal system itself became grounded or anchored in ‘basic principles of legitimation’, or ‘basic rights and the principle of popular sovereignty’. These rights and principles are ‘the bridges between a de-moralized and externalized legal sphere and a deinstitutionalized and internalized morality’ (Habermas 1987a, p. 178).
49 Habermas 1987a, p. 185.
the lifeworld’, that is, they develop out of lifeworld institutions.\textsuperscript{50} In fact, Habermas had earlier argued that the only functional domains that can be differentiated out of the lifeworld by means of steering media such as money and power are those of material reproduction.\textsuperscript{51} Somewhat problematically, however, he also claimed that, while ‘more or less relieved of tasks of material reproduction’,\textsuperscript{52} the lifeworld does reproduce ‘the material conditions of its existence’. Failing to specify the processes through which the lifeworld materially reproduces itself, Habermas immediately adds:

yet whether these processes have become so opaque and complex as to be inadmissibly foreshortened by being examined from this perspective and can thus be better explained under the aspect of system depends on the degree of differentiation within a society.

Given the high degree of differentiation in the West, Habermas opts for a systems perspective on these unnamed ‘opaque and complex’ material processes.\textsuperscript{53} Throughout \textit{The Theory of Communicative Action}, he attributes the material reproduction of the lifeworld to the subsystems and, by extension, to labour.

More important, when he divides society into distinct reproductive activities, attributing largely symbolic functions to the lifeworld and largely material functions to the subsystems, Habermas renders problematic the degree and nature of the priority that the lifeworld actually enjoys because he also admits that ‘maintenance of the material substratum of the lifeworld is a necessary condition for maintaining its symbolic structures’.\textsuperscript{54} Here, the lifeworld is described as grounded in a material substratum without which it could not even begin symbolically to reproduce itself. As a result, it is difficult to understand in what precise respects the lifeworld has primacy with respect to the functionalist subsystems. In his discussion of Talcott Parsons, Habermas

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{50} Habermas 1996, pp. 55–6.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Habermas 1987a, p. 261.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Habermas 1987a, p. 385.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Habermas 1991, p. 253. Similar remarks are made in \textit{The Theory of Communicative Action}: ‘To be sure, the material reproduction of the lifeworld does not, even in limiting cases, shrink down to surveyable dimensions such that it might be represented as the intended outcome of collective cooperation. Normally it takes place as the fulfillment of latent functions going beyond the action orientations of those involved. Insofar as the aggregate effects of cooperative actions fulfill imperatives of maintaining the material substratum, these complexes of action can be stabilized functionally, that is, through feedback from functional side effects. This is what Parsons means by “functional,” in contrast to “social,” integration’ (Habermas 1987a, p. 232).
\item \textsuperscript{54} Habermas 1987a, p. 151.
\end{itemize}
states that the lifeworld’s material substratum consists in both physico-chemical nature ‘with which society is connected up via the metabolic processes of the human organism’, and in ‘the genetic makeup of the human organism with which society is connected via processes of sexual reproduction’.\textsuperscript{55} Here as well, he seems to argue that the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld has an unspecified, tangential, dependence on its material reproduction through functionally co-ordinated labour.

Habermas also describes the integration of society as ‘a continuously renewed compromise between two series of imperatives’, namely the moral and ethical imperatives derived from agreement about validity claims and ‘external survival imperatives’.\textsuperscript{56} Material reproduction corresponds to a realm of activity whose primary function is to satisfy external survival imperatives. The lifeworld’s material substratum ‘has to be maintained by social labour drawing upon scarce resources’; its material reproduction is ensured through purposive or instrumental activities that ‘take place through the medium of goal-directed interventions into the objective world’. The survival imperatives that labour satisfies ‘require a functional integration of the lifeworld, which reaches right through the symbolic structures of the lifeworld’.\textsuperscript{57} By contrast, with its orientation to symbolic reproduction, the lifeworld is preeminently a world of mental labour. It symbolically maintains the species through ‘the socially coordinated activities of its members . . . established through communication’.\textsuperscript{58} Here, again, the distinction between system and lifeworld can be cast in the form of a binary opposition. As Habermas puts it at the end of Volume One of \textit{The Theory of Communicative Action}:

\begin{quote}
The social-life context reproduces itself \textit{both} through the media-controlled purposive-rational actions of its members \textit{and} through the common will anchored in the communicative practice of all individuals.\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

Although Habermas barely touches on this issue, and usually characterises labour in terms of its strategic and cognitive-instrumental rationality, he briefly acknowledges that labour has a material character; society is connected to external nature through ‘metabolic process of the human organism’.\textsuperscript{60} By

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Habermas 1987a, p. 255.
  \item \textsuperscript{56} Habermas 1987a, p. 233.
  \item \textsuperscript{57} Habermas 1987a, p. 232.
  \item \textsuperscript{58} Habermas 1984, p. 397.
  \item \textsuperscript{59} Habermas 1984, p. 398.
  \item \textsuperscript{60} Habermas 1987a, p. 255.
\end{itemize}
contrast, symbolic reproduction is oriented primarily to reaching understanding through communicative action. However, the opposition between material and mental labour is not as clear-cut as the oppositions between freedom and unfreedom and leisure and work, because mental labour – in science, for example – is often harnessed to the sphere of material reproduction and accounts for technological advances within that sphere. An expert culture, science exhibits a more developed and refined form of the cognitive-instrumental reason that also characterises one dimension of communicative action within the lifeworld. Yet, precisely because it is a one-dimensional form of mental labour, science cannot stand in for mental labour per se. With the rationalisation of the lifeworld, the spheres of cognitive-instrumental, normative, and aesthetic-expressive validity were not only differentiated (thereby promoting the development of science, ethics, and aesthetics) but remain linked to each other to the extent that each type of validity claim simultaneously makes reference to the other two. It is this holistic, multivalent rationality characteristic of communicative action in the lifeworld that has allowed Western societies to reach their allegedly superior (post-conventional) level of development. Consequently, communicative action in the lifeworld more adequately represents mental labour and can be contrasted briefly, though with qualifications, to the ‘manual’ or material (physico-chemical) labour undertaken within the subsystems.

To be sure, the division of mental and manual labour was criticised by Marx, who attributed the origin of private property to it. Adorno was equally critical of this distinction:

Ever since mental and physical labour were separated in the sign of the dominant mind, the sign of justified privilege, the separated mind has been obliged . . . to vindicate the very claim to dominate which it derives from the thesis that it is primary and original – and to make every effort to forget the source of its claim, lest the claim relapse.

Nevertheless, Habermas does not make mental labour the privilege of an elite or the upper classes; he does not allocate mental labour to the happy few whose lives depend on the dehumanising manual labour of the many. Instead, he divides society into spheres of mental and manual labour in which

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61 I would like to thank Lenny Moss at Notre Dame University for his helpful remarks about the role of mental labour in the sphere of material reproduction.

everyone participates. The freedom and leisure needed for the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld allegedly belong to all equally; and all members of society supposedly engage in the material reproduction of their lifeworlds through labour.

At the same time, however, Habermas certainly appears to believe that mental labour – in the form of the multivalent symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld – has priority over manual labour. In this, he shares the classical view that mental labour is superior to manual labour. Although the nature of its primacy remains mysterious, given that the lifeworld must certainly also be reproduced materially, Habermas not only gives historical priority to the symbolically self-reproducing lifeworld, the priority he ascribes to it has a normative dimension as well. The lifeworld occupies pride of place within society as a whole precisely because it is a sphere devoted to free, self-determining and self-actualising activities. By contrast, the sphere of material reproduction is often depicted as subservient to symbolic reproduction. If it is obvious that we must provide ourselves with adequate food, shelter and clothing before we can engage in rational discussion and debate, Habermas places far greater value on communicative interaction than on the labour required to fulfil these basic needs. In fact, he speaks derisively (if not paradoxically) of the ‘denaturing of the self’ that accompanies activities associated with ‘blind’ self-preservation. In contrast to labour, with its one-dimensional cognitive-instrumental orientations that are functionally combined by the economy in the interest of material survival, Habermas insists that ‘communicative reason cannot be subsumed without resistance under a blind self-preservation’. Unlike mundane instrumental labour, which is bound to the realm of necessity, communicative action in the lifeworld carries with it the ‘utopian perspective of reconciliation and freedom’.

II.

The distinction between system and lifeworld tacitly rests on a series of binary oppositions that pit the realm of freedom against the realm of unfreedom, leisure against work, and mental labour against manual labour. These dichotomies were never grounded ontologically (or quasi-ontologically) as some commentators have maintained. Rather, the aporetic relationship

63 Habermas 1984, p. 398.
64 Habermas’s distinction between system and lifeworld does not entail an ontological,
The Sundered Totality of System and Lifeworld

between system and lifeworld has always had a purely ideological cast. Habermas uncritically describes and endorses a completely sundered society where individuals are simultaneously free and unfree, unconstrained by material concerns in their leisure activities and denatured by the struggle to survive in the workplace, fully human in their social intercourse and dehumanised in their labour. The lifeworld represents a kingdom of ends, a world without compulsion, which stands opposed to the functionally co-ordinated realm of work. To paraphrase Adorno, who thought that free time, or leisure, was shackled to its contrary to the point where unfree time, or labour, shaped some of the essential characteristics of leisure,\(^6\) the lifeworld is shackled to the political and economic subsystems to such a degree that it can be fully understood only through its contrast with them.

In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas remarks on the important advantages enjoyed by lifeworld members under late capitalism. With the rationalisation of the lifeworld and its uncoupling from the subsystems, each of the lifeworld’s structural components has evolved in a positive direction. Habermas claims that, if we single out of prevailing trends only the degree of freedom gained by the structural components of the lifeworld, the following vanishing points result: for culture, a condition of the constant revision of traditions that have been unhawed, that is, that have become reflexive; for society, a condition of the dependence of legitimate orders upon formal and ultimately discursive procedures for establishing and grounding norms; for personality, a condition of the risk-filled self-direction of a highly abstract ego-identity.

or quasi-ontological, opposition between instrumental work and allegedly non-instrumental symbolic interaction in the lifeworld. Although labour is both instrumental and strategic, Habermas is more interested in *The Theory of Communicative Action* in the functional co-ordination of instrumental and strategic labour by the subsystems such that the latter operate over the heads and through the heads of workers (hence the unfreedom of work). Furthermore, it should be noted that cognitive-instrumental rationality is also one of the three valences of communicative rationality in the lifeworld; lifeworld members themselves exhibit strategic and instrumental orientations. Consequently, despite the confusion about the nature of systems rationality that mars *The Theory of Communicative Action*, I do not think that Habermas can be accused of positing an ontological dualism with his distinction between system and lifeworld. Recently, in *Rethinking the Normative Content of Critical Theory: Marx, Habermas and Beyond*, Bob Cannon again raises the spectre of Habermas as an ontological dualist (Cannon 2001, pp. 123ff.). Though his own argument against such interpretations is itself problematic, David S. Owen rightly objects that interpretations like Cannon’s are mistaken (Owen 2002, p. 84ff.).

Summarising these points, Habermas argues that the freedoms acquired with the rationalisation of the lifeworld amount to an enhancement of critical consciousness, an increase in autonomy, and heightened individuation.\textsuperscript{66} But, for each advance in freedom in the lifeworld, there is a corresponding retreat when individuals assume the role of organisation members in the labour force. Within organisations, there is a general indifference to personality; organisations render themselves independent from concrete disposition and goals, in general from the particular contexts of life that might otherwise flow from the socializatory background of personality traits and impede their steering capacity.

The high degree of individuation achieved in the lifeworld is put out of play in the workplace. As members of organisations, persons are ‘stripped of personality structures and neutralized into bearers of certain performances’.\textsuperscript{67} Individual autonomy, which consists in free or uncoerced consent to validity claims, is also neutralised when individuals assume their roles as organisation members and subordinate themselves to the rules and regulations of factories and bureaucracies. Finally, culture, which has a high degree of reflexivity in the lifeworld, is robbed of its ‘binding power and converted into raw material for purposes of ideology planning, that is, for an administrative processing of meaning constellations’.\textsuperscript{68} Even as the lifeworld develops in the direction of greater reflexivity, autonomy, and individuality, then, the subsystems rescind these developments in the name of profit and power.

Where workers must submit to the functionalist rationality of the subsystems as soon as they enter the factory or office, the same individuals currently enjoy an unparalleled degree of freedom in the lifeworld. Once again, with his distinction between system and lifeworld, Habermas unintentionally brings the contradictions of modern life to the fore in a novel but ideologically inflected way. He not only splits life into two distinct and mutually incompatible halves – freedom rules one, and unfreedom the other – he restricts the sphere of freedom to that of so-called ‘leisure time’. We are truly free only when we are not working. Of course, as Moishe Postone has observed, Marx also commented on the ideological character of the ‘modern opposition between

\textsuperscript{66} Habermas 1987b, p. 345.
\textsuperscript{67} Habermas 1987a, p. 308.
\textsuperscript{68} Habermas 1987a, pp. 308–9.
the free, self-determining individual and an extrinsic sphere of objective necessity’. Marx claimed that this opposition first appeared
with the rise and spread of the commodity-determined form of social relations, and is related to the more general constituted opposition between a world of subjects and a world of objects.

This opposition affects individuals themselves; they are internally divided:

individuals are not only self-determining ‘subjects,’ acting on the basis of will; they are also subjected to a system of objective compulsions and constraints that operates independent of their will – and in this sense, are also ‘objects’.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that Habermas does acknowledge that the ‘contrast between the *homme* who is educated to freedom and humanity in the intimate sphere and the *citoyen* who obeys functional necessities in the sphere of social labour was always an ideology’. Yet, he does not succeed in distinguishing his own view from this ideological one. Far from denying that his view of modern life is ideological, Habermas seems to imply that he has only given a ‘different meaning’ to this ideological account. In fact, he claims that the contrast now refers to the polarisation of communicatively-structured family life and formally-organised domains of action.

Concerned to distinguish himself from Marx, Habermas also consistently downplays the significant role that labour plays in human life while simultaneously exaggerating the amount of leisure time enjoyed by individuals in the West. Even as he does so, he constantly denigrates labour. Labour is not the potentially creative, self-actualising activity that Marx thought it might become under socialism. Indeed, Habermas argues that Marx’s assimilation of social labour to the model of autonomous activity in the sense of creative self-realization could derive a certain plausibility at most from the romantically transfigured prototype of handicraft activity.

Although he claims that Marx later abandoned the romantic view of labour as craft-like praxis, Habermas also believes that Marx largely retained in his

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69 Postone 1993, p. 164. Although Marx himself makes use of this ideological distinction in Volume III of *Capital*, he also claims that freedom and necessity will manifest themselves differently under socialism.

70 Habermas 1987a, p. 387.
later work the positive normative value he ascribed to labour. Habermas criticises this positive ascription, putting forward his view of work as ‘heteronomously determined’, burdensome, denaturing, dehumanising. Habermas holds out no such hope. Apparently, labour will always fall exclusively within the sphere of necessity. It would also appear as though individuals must accept the condition of unfreedom for much of their lives. Curiously, however, Habermas does not seem to be concerned about the fact that individuals must constantly migrate between the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity. The two realms are said to stand opposed to each other; system imperatives affect the lifeworld only ‘from outside’, because they are supposed to be completely different in kind from the concerns that motivate individuals as lifeworld members. Since he has already characterised the subsystems as qualitatively distinct from the lifeworld in terms of their types of rationality, reproductive processes, and modes of integration, it is all the easier for Habermas to argue that these imperatives conflict with independent communication structures. Highly developed personalities within the family and the public sphere but depersonalised automatons at work, immanently social beings at home but asocial, strategically motivated workers, reflective in their leisure activities and mindless company men on the job, individuals under late capitalism lead double lives as members of the lifeworld, on the one hand, and organisation members, on the other.

Claiming that work is better studied from an objectivating system perspective than from the standpoint of workers themselves, Habermas downplays the lived experience of individuals qua workers. Moreover, on the few occasions when he does pay attention to it, he seems to believe that the experience of being caught within a ‘functionally stabilized nexus of action’ that ‘can no longer be brought into the intersubjective context of relevance of subjectively meaningful action’, has been compensated by welfare-state benefits and

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71 Habermas 1987b, pp. 65–6.
72 Habermas 1987a, p. 349.
73 Habermas 1984, p. 398.
74 Habermas 1987a, pp. 308–9.
75 Habermas 1987a, p. 311.
76 Habermas 1987a, p. 308.
77 Habermas 1987a, p. 391.
78 Habermas 1987a, p. 311.
guarantees, higher wages and salaries, and improved working conditions. Burdens associated with work have been made ‘subjectively bearable’ either by ‘“humanizing” the workplace’ (despite the dehumanising character of work itself), or by ‘providing monetary rewards and legally guaranteed securities’.79 Burdensome work is further compensated by the leisure activities in which individuals engage when they are not working. In other words, there is a payoff for reified activity in the workplace. Indeed, far from denying that labour is reified in the sense described by Lukács, Habermas implies that the experience of work is one of an ‘alienated’ subjectivity that has broken with the common life’.80 However, he appears to accept the reification of human activity within the subsystems as the price that must be paid for freedom within the lifeworld.

Unlike Marx, who railed against the commodification of work and workers, Habermas readily admits that labour is commodified, but finds no fault with the transformation of concrete work into abstract labour: ‘concrete work’ simply ‘has to be transformed into abstract labour so that it can be exchanged for wages’.81 Since labour fills economic functions related to the material reproduction of the lifeworld, it must be commodified. Conceding only that this process of abstraction must not extend beyond the workplace to private life, Habermas believes that reification is not problematic when it is contained or confined within the economic system. At the same time, he seems to assume that such abstraction is largely contained within the economic subsystem. He virtually ignores82 the extent to which ‘the imperatives of profitableness in

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79 Habermas 1987a, p. 349.
80 Ibid., p. 29.
81 Habermas 1987a, p. 322. Here I disagree with Helmut Reichelt, who claims that Habermas ‘argues neo-classically’ because he thinks that exchange concerns ‘not commodities, but goods’ (Reichelt 2000, p. 124). If Habermas is indeed relying on neoclassical economic theory when he characterises capitalism as steered by the medium of money which substitutes or replaces some linguistic functions, as Reichelt claims – though it is also questionable whether neoclassical economic theory depicted capitalism in this way – Habermas does recognise that labour is commodified before it is exchanged for wages. However, because this abstraction takes place in the economic realm, it allegedly does not harm the lifeworld. In fact, such abstraction supposedly ensures the efficient material reproduction of the lifeworld (labour is commodified ‘for our own good’). It is also beneficial because the functional co-ordination of commodified labour unburdens lifeworld members from the need to engage in time-consuming discussions about how to steer the increasingly complex economy.
82 Furthermore, Habermas has recourse to a questionable ploy when he claims that empirical studies, which he fails to cite, show that this problem cannot be solved ‘deductively’. In an apparent non sequitur, he goes on to dismiss the problem with the claim that ‘the basic characteristic of the action orientations of members is not purposive rationality but the fact that all their actions fall under the conditions of organizational membership’ (Habermas 1987a, p. 310).
business, which capitalist enterprises must (more or less) follow, leave their mark on the action orientations of the operating staff. Quoting Luckmann, he concedes that social relations are separated from the identities of the actors in the workplace but nonetheless insists that identity problems are unavoidable only on the counterfactual condition that there is 'an irresistible tendency to an ever-expanding bureaucratization'. Later, he baldly declares without argument that individuals can 'switch from morally defined contexts of action oriented to mutual understanding over to legally organized spheres of action without endangering their own identities'.

Yet this very point is moot for theorists who decry the extension of exchange relations to everyday life. Habermas by no means argues effectively against them because he never demonstrates conclusively that workers do not take their work home with them, so to speak, in the form of the instrumental orientations they must adopt within the workplace. Moreover, he has not shown that the process of abstraction to which workers must submit qua workers does not carry over into their activities in the lifeworld. In fact, his unsupported declaration that it does not is highly suspect. To win their freedom, Habermas insists that human beings subordinate themselves to an 'alien necessity' for at least half their conscious waking lives, that they become (to cite Adorno) mere agents 'of the social process of production'. Against Habermas, it could certainly be argued that the freedom he equates with settling questions by appealing to the 'unforced conviction of a rationally motivated agreement' will inevitably be undermined and tainted by the unfreedom of our lives as agents of the subsystems and by the strategic motivations we must adopt to ensure our material survival.

I would also argue that Habermas unwittingly shows that it is work that sets us free. Freedom is bought at the price of alienated submission to the subsystems. Only by denaturing ourselves through labour to satisfy survival imperatives do we acquire the leisure to engage in the pursuits that have contributed to our allegedly high level of rational development. In an interesting twist, then, human labour could be said to have an emancipatory function. There is no freedom without compulsion, or without subjugation to heteronomously determined labour. Consequently, when he claims that the

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83 Habermas 1987a, p. 311.
84 Habermas 1987a, p. 318.
85 Adorno 1993, p. 46.
86 Habermas 1993, p. 151.
lifeworld has priority both historically and normatively as a kingdom of ends, Habermas reverses the real priority of the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom. For he not only acknowledges that the lifeworld must be reproduced materially through labour (while prevaricating on the precise relationship between material and symbolic reproduction), he also recognises that it is only by virtue of the uncoupling of system and lifeworld (which allowed the subsystems to generate their own autonomous functionalist logic) that lifeworld members have been relieved of tasks of material reproduction and freed for activities undertaken without compulsion and constraint.

Finally, if the condition of the possibility of freedom is unfreedom – and this seems to follow from Habermas’s own arguments – then all the problems that earlier critical theorists associated with the reification of human life remain both urgent and unresolved. For it is simply implausible to maintain that we can completely segregate our unfree lives as workers from our self-determining and self-actualising lives as lifeworld members. And, of course, when Habermas refuses to allow individuals *qua* workers the autonomy he is willing to grant them as lifeworld members, he also rules out the prospect of any sort of reconciliation between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom. If individuals experience their labour in the way Habermas himself describes, namely as dehumanising, denaturing, and depersonalising, they may not seek to repair the damage if this would risk impeding the efficiency of the economic system. Having sundered system from lifeworld, Habermas unwittingly reveals the foundations of our modern freedom. Whenever ‘the universality of an uncoerced consensus arrived at among free and equal persons’\(^7\) in the symbolically self-reproducing lifeworld has the potential to interfere with the system imperatives of making money and wielding power, money and power remain paramount. For Habermas, unfreedom prevails over freedom, the burdensome imperatives of work supersede the enjoyment of leisure, and alienated manual labour outstrips self-actualising mental labour.

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\(^7\) Habermas 1987b, p. 40.


Fotini Vaki

Adorno contra Habermas: The Claims of Critical Theory as Immanent Critique

The present paper was to a major extent stimulated by the genuinely fruitful debate between Deborah Cook and Gordon Finlayson in Historical Materialism. The debate was about whether it is Habermas’s or Adorno’s version of the theory of modernity that can make the stronger claim as a critical theory of society. More specifically, the crucial question at issue is whether it is Habermas’s theory of modernity in terms of the rationalisation of the lifeworld, or Adorno’s appropriation and reformulation of the Hegelian concept of determinate negation (which constitutes the core of his Negative Dialectics) that can grasp society from the viewpoint of its possible transformation, through a historically specific theory of social constitution.

Arguing that Habermas already applauds the realisation of reason in contemporary society in his work, Between Facts and Norms, legitimating thereby the existent state of affairs and rendering social criticism superfluous, Deborah Cook turns to the Adornian arsenal of dialectical concepts such as contradiction.

1 Finlayson 2003; Cook 2003.
and determinate negation in order to account for the normative basis of social criticism.

On the contrary, for Finlayson, it is Adorno’s ‘negativism’ which rules out the possibility of critique. This is because Adorno argues repeatedly that society has become completely reified. This means that domination has increased to such an extent that, by controlling everything, it prevents the formation of any critical consciousness and therefore a critical theory – including that of Adorno himself. Thus, for Finlayson, the only viable path to a normative basis of social criticism is that offered by Habermas’s theory of communicative action.

The latter ties the criteria and conditions of social criticism to the rational potential implicit in the everyday practices of linguistic communication. Habermas’s normative theory of society, which poses the conditions of possibility of justice and autonomy, takes the form of a pragmatic theory of meaning whose crux consists in the insight that linguistic understanding [Sprachverstehen] and reaching understanding with another person [Verständigung] are indissolubly interwoven. As Maeve Cooke has convincingly argued, the Habermasian performative evaluation of reasons inherent in the so-called illocutionary speech-acts is significant in two respects: on the one hand, it lays the ground for a deliberative conception of democracy, ‘in which personal and public autonomy are key values, in which citizens hold one another rationally accountable and in which potentially transformatory public deliberation is given a central place’. On the other, it points to a post-metaphysical yet non-defeatist conception of rationality in a twofold sense. First, rationality is anchored in this world and can be rationally translated into a universal feature of human interaction. Second, the immanent rather than otherworldly account both of truth and justice (moral validity), does not make them conditional on the contingency of historically and culturally specific forms of life. On the contrary, it claims a context-transcendent conception of truth and justice, in the sense of being universally applicable and cognitively interpreted. This idea of a context-transcendent rationality is mainly inspired and governed by the cleavage between the idealising presuppositions of argumentation and actually existing practices. The Habermasian subscription to a context-transcendent conception of truth and moral validity is linked to his attempt to formulate a standard for criticising...
existing norms and principles. That standard is a discursively achieved consensus as to the universalisability of moral norms.\(^3\)

Clearly, the problem is not merely to choose between Adorno and Habermas or to demonstrate the plausibility of the charge of Adorno’s negativism. The point is, rather, to show whether or not critical theory as immanent critique, namely as the historically specific, self-reflexive critique of society, is open as a possibility. The present paper will undertake to show that this possibility is to be found in Adorno’s *Negative Dialectic*. By reinforcing and further elaborating Cook’s Adornian thesis, I will claim that Adorno’s appropriation of Hegelian dialectics, and, in particular, the concept of determinate negation, paves the way to the possibility of a critical theory of society with emancipatory intent. I will take the following steps. Firstly, I will briefly sketch the Cook-Finlayson debate over the normative basis of social criticism. In agreement with Finlayson, I will show that ‘negativism’ is indeed present in some parts of Adorno’s *oeuvre*, in particular the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The reason for that negativism is a transhistorical interpretation of instrumental reason, conceived of as an attribute of labour *per se*, namely the interaction of man and nature always and everywhere. This interpretation by Adorno of instrumental reason has been appropriated by Habermas, who is forced then, in order to avoid the pessimist implications of that thesis, to ground critique either in a quasi-transcendental manner – in language or interaction *per se* (as in his early works) – or in an abstract ‘discourse of modernity’, interpreted as the realisation of reason in history. In that respect, and contrary to Finlayson, I will claim (paradoxical as it may sound) that it is Habermas himself who is open to the criticism he advances against Adorno: that of negativism or a self-performative contradiction which implies the thesis that society, of which critical theory is supposed to be an element, lacks contradictions. Finally, I will show that Adorno’s ‘anti-system’, as it figures in *Negative Dialectics*, can offer a basis for critical theory as immanent critique. Here, I am in agreement with Cook, and, in a further development of her argument, I will focus on Adorno’s re-reading of Hegel, one in which he seeks to reveal the ‘truth moment’ of the dialectical method.

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\(^3\) Maeve Cooke, among others, has elucidated that point. See Cooke 2001, p. 16. See also Baynes 1989, pp. 122–44. Baynes shows here how Habermas’s project of the rational reconstruction of social action lays the basis for social criticism, eliminating at the same time relativist or historicist versions of rationality such as that of Macintyre, which ‘fails to provide any specific principles or criteria for determining whether a resolution is rational’ (p. 132).
I. Adorno or Habermas? On the normative foundations of critical theory

In her recent article in *Historical Materialism*, entitled ‘Critical Stratagems’, Deborah Cook focuses mainly on Habermas’s late magnum opus, *Between Facts and Norms*, in which he completes the project, started as early as *The Theory of Communicative Action*, of the ‘detranscendentalisation’ of reason, or – to put it in different terms – of the breaking down of the barrier between facticity and validity, between ‘empirically existing constitutional democracies and their worthiness to be recognised, or legitimacy’.

Cook rightly argues that Habermas’s thesis that the realisation of reason ‘is no longer a task but a fact’ legitimates contemporary liberal democracies, just as the late Hegel legitimated the Prussian state.

Cook correctly advances the claim that Habermas’s conception of the realisation of reason in history renders superfluous both ideology critique and critical theory itself, since it constitutes a refined version of the much-discussed ‘end of history’ thesis. For what does this imply if not the ‘stationary state’ of history, the advent of a system whose fundamental rules of reproduction constitute a final framework – in the words of Voltaire’s Pangloss, ‘the best of all possible words’? The anthropological version of that almost ‘immaculate’ social universe becomes the social actor who has reached the ‘post-conventional’ stage of moral consciousness, according to which one is able to distance oneself and critically reflect upon the norms of one’s society. As Cook ironically puts it:

As heirs to the process of rationalisation, we have become much too savvy to be duped by ideological mystifications or distortions. Habermas’s end-of-ideology thesis ultimately rests on the view that we have gained a degree of intellectual maturity that cannot be revoked.

Thus Cook invokes the Adornian arsenal of Hegelian dialectics as necessary if the critique of ideology, the normative basis of critique, is in any way to be salvaged. In Adorno’s view, the being of things, their very content, is never

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 It is well known that Habermas appropriates the theory of the stages of moral consciousness from Piaget and Kohlberg. A more elaborate analysis of that theory, as well as a criticism of the philosophy of history it implies, will be provided below.
8 Cook 2000, p. 77.
closed or predetermined. It does not constitute an eternal order. It must be read instead, ‘as a text of their becoming’.9 Contradiction and determinate negation, as the very heart of dialectics, protest against every hypostatisation and immutability – these being the delusions of ontology or the so-called philosophy of first principles. The movement of the concept is the labour of negativity, which breaks the concept open by revealing its inconsistency. Via the path of reflection, each concept passes into its otherness. To anticipate what will be elaborated in the final section of this essay, the object cannot be ‘held’ within the confines of a fixed concept, given its constant movement, the becoming of its determinations. Conversely, the subject is not a timeless, fixed abstraction, an empty ‘in-itself’ which plays the role of the fixed camera in relation to moving objects. In Adorno’s words, ‘rather, the subject itself also moves, by virtue of its relationship to the object that is inherently in motion – one of the central tenets of Hegel’s Phenomenology’.10 Cook convincingly argues that the critique of ideology, for Adorno, consists in the denunciation of identity thinking.11 Identity thinking, in all its versions, is rejected as an ideology, sanctioning things as simply ‘existing’, with no possibility of change.

In his reply to Cook, Finlayson defends Habermas’s long effort to renew the normative foundations of critical theory via the concept of communicative action.12 The ‘thin’, context-transcending, validity claims, as well as the pragmatic norms of symmetry, and the equality presupposed in every existing communicative action, are the best we can get in our complex societies. However, Finlayson’s defence of Habermas relies more on an attack on Adorno’s ideology critique than on the elaboration of Habermas’s theory. Repeating the stereotypical Habermas-inspired charge of the so-called performative contradiction, Finlayson argues that Adorno’s account of ideology critique is ‘totalising’ precisely because it argues that all thought is an expression of power. Thus, if this is the case, why must Adorno’s thought itself be exempted from that charge and regarded as critical?13 This argument is reinforced by Finlayson’s attack on Adorno’s concept of the non-identical as the standpoint of critique, which Finlayson erroneously identifies with the non-conceptual. And since, for Finlayson, identity and ideology are bound

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11 Cook 2000, pp. 68 and 78.
12 Finlayson 2003.
13 Finlayson 2003, p. 175.
up with conceptuality itself, he is consistent in arguing that the non-ideological, like the non-conceptual, is doomed to be ineffable and indescribable; it cannot be thematised as a rational discourse dealing coherently with society precisely because every utterance of a judgement or claim requires the concept.

Cook’s short rejoinder to Finlayson consists in a repetition and further elaboration of the Adornian reformulation of the Hegelian determinate negation as a remedy to the Habermasian affirmation of the existent, as well as a fertile effort to reconsider the problem of the normative foundations of critical theory. In her own words:

Adorno’s speculative, utopian enterprise consists in thinking what it is almost impossible to think given the damage that has been done to life under late capitalism: the rational potential latent in modernity. There are fragments of good in the world but these only appear through a glass darkly: they are glimpsed only by those who resist (in thought, behaviour, or both) prevailing forms of injustice, unfreedom, intolerance, and repression. Modernity’s rational potential manifests itself wherever individuals confront and contest the limits to their freedom, in conditions that reduce them to mere cogs in the wheel of economic machinery, or in their struggles against the multifarious forms of state oppression. This is why Adorno calls pain and negativity ‘the moving forces of dialectical thinking’.

In his concluding considerations, Finlayson remarks that ‘to defend Adorno’s conception of ideology, as Cook does, is, at the very least, an unpromising way to attack Habermas’. I would claim that this holds true for Finlayson in reverse: to defend Habermas’s communicative reason, as Finlayson does, is, at the very least, an unpromising way to attack Adorno. For Finlayson, endorsing the transcendental account of the communicative function of language provided by Habermas is somewhat better than the pessimistic diagnosis of the present as totally administered and non-contradictory which is characteristic of Adorno’s theory.

In the next section, I will argue against Finlayson that Habermas’s charge of negativism against Adorno, although not completely untenable insofar as parts of the late Frankfurt corpus are concerned, holds also for Habermas himself. This is because Habermas uses concepts derived from the very

14 Cook 2003.
15 Cook 2003, p. 192.
16 Finlayson 2003, p. 186.
Frankfurt school predecessors whom he seeks to overcome, for example, that of labour interpreted in terms of instrumental reason. The quasi-transcendental or quasi-anthropological account of interaction as the basis of critique in early Habermas, as in his later disguised philosophy of history, culminating in the glorious end of the realisation of reason in our modern society, become the antidote to the pessimist implications of the endorsement of the concept of labour as instrumental reason. Yet Habermas achieves this at the cost of grounding critique in a sphere outside what it criticises, that is, society, thus ruling out the possibility of critique as historically specific and ‘immanent’.

In what follows, I will try to explicate that claim via a detour through the so-called Frankfurt school’s ‘critique of instrumental reason’, which characterises the period from 1940 to 1945, and which may be open to the charge of self-performative contradiction. I will examine both the critical theory of early Habermas as well as his *Theory of Communicative Action* in order to show that there is an invisible thread bringing together such divergent projects as the late Frankfurt school’s critique of instrumental reason and Habermas’s ‘linguistic turn’. This connection also links the incurable pessimism of Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or *The Eclipse of Reason* to Habermas’s untenable optimism about the infinite possibilities of the communicative function of language.

II. The critique of instrumental reason and its aporiae

It is true that, at some points in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the validity of the standpoint of critique is put into question. Theory becomes exhortative. As the text argues, ever since the Homeric hero Odysseus, the suppression of one’s inner nature is the price to be paid for developing a unitary self, necessary for the sake of self-preservation and the control of nature as externality and ‘otherness’. The correlate of the unitary self is a reason that is instrumentalised for the purpose of self-preservation, this being treated as an absolute end. That transformation of reason into positivism, ‘into the mythology of what the facts are’\(^\text{17}\) points towards a state of society in which the ideal of the autonomous individual becomes more and more of an anachronism and is likely to disappear, or to merely survive at the fringes of depersonalised systems. According to the authors themselves, ‘the development

\(^{17}\) Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, p. ix.
towards total integration, acknowledged in this book, has been interrupted but not terminated’.18

Yet the association of instrumental reason with labouring activity as such, namely the historically indeterminate, technical interaction between man and nature, explains the growing domination of value-free means over substantive goals as an endless, linear, inevitable process that nothing can prevent.19 Human history appears as hopelessly godforsaken, as a ‘pile of debris growing skyward’. But, if the plight of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* only reveals the growing instrumentalisation of the world inherent in labour *per se*, has not the critique of the dialectic of Enlightenment, carried out with the tools of that very same rationality, ‘become as totalizing as the false totality it seeks to criticise?’20 To repeat Habermas’s ‘tired charge of performative contradiction’,21 since Nietzsche, the answer has always been the same: the radical critique of reason proceeds self-referentially; critique cannot simultaneously be radical and leave its own criteria untouched.22

One could then only wonder in amazement who the subject of critique might be, and from what vantage point such a subject could denounce instrumental rationality while situating herself above the ‘barbarous human species’. And if, as Adorno himself admits, critique is ‘dragged into the abyss by its object’,23 it is forced to take a step outside history and to posit a privileged position for critical thinkers whose knowledge seems miraculously to escape social deformation. Such an approach, however, represents an inconsistent mode of social critique that cannot account for its own existence and ends up in a tragic avant-gardism.

It is also true that the motto of the ‘total integration’, characteristic of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, repeats itself in few other works by Adorno, thereby partly justifying the Habermasian charge of performative contradiction. Indeed, when the reader comes across pessimistic fireworks such as that ‘social

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18 Ibid.
19 It is, of course, Horkheimer in his later works who argues for a close association of instrumental reason and labour per se. See in particular Horkheimer 1974, pp. 21, 50 and 102.
20 Benhabib 1986, p. 166.
21 The expression belongs to Cook. See Cook 2003, p. 194.
22 Benhabib, Bonss and McCole 1993, p. 57.
23 Adorno 1983, p. 34.
structure has become total and completely melted together’;\textsuperscript{24} or that ‘absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely’;\textsuperscript{25} she cannot but join forces with those, like Finlayson, who charge Adorno with negativism, be it strong or weak. Nevertheless, the above bleak image of Adorno’s negativism is only partly true, and emerges when quotes, mainly of a figurative kind, are abstracted from their context and seen in isolation from the rest of the text. To anticipate in a sentence what will be analysed in detail in the final part of the present work, the very ‘substance’ of \textit{Negative Dialectics}, which is that of ‘becoming’, completely contradicts the so-called ‘negativism’ of Adorno, which implies the almost deadly inertia and closure of society as it merely ‘is’.

Yet, even if one endorses the argument that the Adornian approach infringes upon the claim of critical theory as immanent critique, this can in no way lead straightforwardly to a subscription to Habermas’s account of communicative action as the sole legitimate ‘guardian’ of critique, especially since Habermas himself adopts conceptions he seeks to overcome. One of them is the conception of instrumental reason, which is often called subjective reason, or philosophy of consciousness, and is interpreted as an attribute of labour in itself, that is, in terms of a historically and socially indeterminate category that purportedly describes the interaction between humans and nature in all societies and at all times.\textsuperscript{26} In Habermas’s words:

\begin{quote}
Subjective reason regulates exactly two fundamental relations that a subject can take up to possible objects. Under ‘object’ the philosophy of the subject understands everything that can be represented as existing; under ‘subject’ it understands first of all the capacities to relate oneself to such entities in the world in an objectivating attitude and to gain control of objects, be it theoretically or practically. The two attitudes of mind are representation and action. The subject relates to objects either to represent them as they are or to produce them as they should be.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

It seems that labour is instrumental reason and action merely by virtue of the fact that it is the subject-object productive relation. Indeed, Habermas

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} The problematic character of the grounding of instrumental reason on labour \textit{per se} has been acutely diagnosed by Moishe Postone. See Postone 1996, Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{27} Habermas 1984, p. 387.
himself defines labour as ‘the invariant relation of the species to its natural
environment, which is established by the behavioural system of the instrumental
action’.28

The problematic character of such approach becomes obvious, however,
when Habermas discusses technology. Following Arnold Gehlen, he analyses
the process of production and the patterns of technological development and
economic expansion of modern society as an extension of the basic structure
of all purposive-rational action.29 Since work is a permanent, constitutive
‘human interest’,30 it is possible to model ‘the history of technology on the
ontogenetically analyzed stages of cognitive development’.31

However, the Habermasian conception of work and technology as
fundamental attributes of human nature, abstracted from the socio-historical
formation, leaves unanswered two fundamental questions. On the one hand,
if work and technology are ‘immanent’ in human nature itself, how can
Habermas account for the extraordinary acceleration of technology in modernity,
which seems to delegitimate as unresolvable, and merely subjective, genuinely
practical and political questions? Why was it only in modernity that the ideal
of the mastery of nature, ‘began to occupy a qualitatively different position
on the social agenda’?32

The transhistorical character of labour, or the development of production
understood technically, cannot itself explain the rapid growth in the domination
of value-free means over substantive values, which is characteristic of
the modern era. Could it not be the case (to think with Marx against Habermas
and the Frankfurt school) that what is called instrumental reason is implied
by the historically specific character of commodity-determined labour
as a means?33 The process of instrumentalisation, logically implied by
commodity-determined labour in capitalism, particularly manifests itself in
what Marx calls ‘formal subsumption of labour under capital’ (characterised
by the commodification of labour itself as labour-power), and ‘real subsumption’
(which takes place when surplus-value shapes concrete labour in its image).34

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28 Habermas 1971, p. 35.
29 ‘Arnold Gehlen has pointed out in what seems to me conclusive fashion that
there is an immanent connection between the technology known to us and the structure
of purposive-rational action’ (Habermas 1979, p. 87).
30 Habermas 1979, p. 87.
31 Habermas 1979, p. 169.
33 Postone 1996, Chapter 3.
With real subsumption, the abstract domination of value as the goal of capitalist production (which is actually a means) moulds the material process of its realisation. The person becomes a means.\(^3\)\(^5\) Hence, labour in capitalism may be a form of instrumental action, but not merely by virtue of the fact that it is productive activity. Instrumentality is rooted in the historically and socially specific character of labour in capitalism.\(^3\)\(^6\) So far as methodology is concerned, the explication of instrumental reason and action in terms of production \textit{per se}, namely in terms of the subject-object relation, would rule out critical theory as immanent critique, since theory would then approach its object with the aid of historically indeterminate categories that purportedly grasp the interaction between subject and object always and everywhere.

Furthermore, if instrumental action is not the result of a historically specific, hence contingent and reversible, process, but is categorically identified with labour \textit{per se}, or even more so, with ‘the organisation of human nature itself’ how can the ‘system’ and its large-scale technology be challenged? The identification of instrumental action with labour \textit{per se}, that is the subject-object interaction, explains the growing instrumentalisation of the world – the growing domination of value-free means over substantive values and goals – as a linear and interminable process bound to the development of material activity as such. Habermas’s rejection of the social embeddeness of work or technology prefigures a technocratically organised system in harmony with Gehlen’s behavioural system of action, the Weberian ‘iron cage’ or, ironically, with the late-Frankfurt conception of the one-dimensional, unitary, ‘totalitarian’ totality, implying an ‘end of history’.

This might sound like a paradox, since it is common sense that the main motive of Habermas’s re-inscription of the normative basis of criticism via the linguistic turn consists in the overcoming of the pessimism of his mentors, which brought critique to a standstill. But how is it possible both to retain the conception of instrumental reason as an attribute of an untranscendable human nature and, at the same time, to demand the resuscitation of an immanent critical theory with emancipatory intent? Only via a sophisticated

\(^{35}\) For Marx, the actual raw materials of the process of production are no longer the physical materials that are transformed into material products, but the worker himself. In Marx’s words: ‘It is no longer the worker who employs the means of production, but the means of production which employ the worker’ (Marx 1976, p. 425).

\(^{36}\) As I will show in the last section of the present paper, some sections of Adorno’s \textit{Negative Dialectics} suggest a similar approach, implying thereby a materialist programme although in a rather undeveloped form.
legerdemain could the above conception of instrumental reason be in harmony, not with the inferno of a reified, totalitarian society, but with the melodious, almost heavenly notes of the interlocutors in an ideal speech situation, which both presupposes and promises a better world. Habermas’s sleight of hand involves the positing of the sphere of communicative action as radically distinct from the domain of work or instrumental action or ‘system’, since it is anchored in a different principle and therefore untouched by the pathologies of instrumental reason. Such a move might guarantee a (perhaps untenable) theoretical optimism but surely not the claim of critical theory as immanent critique. For Habermas’s version of critical consciousness as a basis for critique is not a historically determinate possibility but, rather, one which is extrinsic to the social process and ‘undamaged’ by its deformation or reification. The next section will attempt to demonstrate this thesis via a detour through the adventures of the concept of language in the Habermasian corpus.

III. From interaction to the theory of communicative action

Habermas holds that any conversation involves two speakers ‘reaching understanding [Verständigung]’. This notion of ‘arriving at mutual understanding’ involves reference to a shared body of rules governing linguistic meaning as the precondition of any communication whatsoever. In speaking, we mainly refer to three domains of reality: a cognitively interpreted external reality, a normatively interpreted social one, and an individually interpreted subjective sphere. These are the pragmatic presuppositions of our speech acts. We manage to understand the speech acts of others when we know the conditions under which they could be accepted as valid for any hearer. Our effort to communicate implicates us in claims on each other that, by simply speaking, we are obligating ourselves to being able to ‘redeem’. We can thematise the validity claims of the truth of propositions, referring to the objective world, the rightness of norms, referring to society, and the authenticity or sincerity of a speaker’s reference to her inner world.37 Habermas’s theory does not allow questions of meaning to be separated from those of validity. The everyday practices of linguistic communication already embody implicit and unavoidable appeals to reason. In Habermas’s words: ‘[c]ommunicative actions always require an interpretation that is rational in approach’.38

38 Habermas 1984, pp. 106, 295–305.
[Verstandigung] always presupposes the ability to continue and re-establish a lost consensus via argumentative processes in which reasons are advanced and evaluated.  

Furthermore, this communicative competence inherent in language as such is said to serve as the medium of the coordination of social action, the reproduction of cultural meanings and individual socialisation. Language becomes its own medium of reflection. However, by implanting into individuals the ‘mute generality’ of a miraculous ‘linguistic mechanism’ by means of which the species is supposed to liberate individuals and allow them to achieve reconciliation and conquer freedom, Habermas cannot escape the charge of the retreat from the ground of a historically given situation. The ‘universal species competence of communication’ as the standpoint of his ‘emancipatory critique’ is grounded ‘quasi-transcendentally’ rather than historically. In order to establish it, he has to ‘assume what must be shown, namely that orientation towards understanding is the basic aim of communication’. In other words, the fiction of ‘unconstrained communication’ is projected as the a priori guarantee of success. Yet the question arises as to whether we should look for the realisation of the claim to autonomy in the norms implied in the use of ‘language’ as such. Such norms themselves reflect democratic institutions and practices. After all, communicative competence cannot generate legitimate power and institutions, but only legitimate institutions could set free communicative action as a mechanism of social co-ordination. The normative ideal of autonomy can exist only as a democratic form of life. The interest in rational discourse is itself one which precedes rational discourse, and is embedded in ‘the normative structures inherent in cultural traditions and the processes of identity formation themselves’.

Habermas seems to ignore that, by posing the ideals of symmetry and reciprocal recognition as ‘unavoidable presuppositions of communicative action’ he projects as a priori what he has to prove to be a practically feasible strategy given the system of domination. He also seems to ignore that the margins of communicative action of the real speakers as against ‘competent speakers’ (that is, speakers who obligingly conform to the Habermasian definitional assumptions) are structurally prejudged in favour of the prevailing

40 Thompson 1982, p. 126.
41 Benhabib 1986, p. 319.
42 Delanty 1997, p. 56.
well-entrenched socioeconomic power relations. As one of Habermas’s sympathetic critics writes:

[w]hat Habermas’s assumption of symmetry seems to neglect . . . is that the constraints which affect social life may operate in modes other than the restriction of access to speech acts, for example by restricting access to weapons, wealth or esteem.44

Furthermore, Habermas’s reconstructive enterprise produces another philosophy of history, although a ‘post-metaphysical’ one.

In establishing his ‘quasi-transcendental’ or ‘empirically-reconstructive’ account of communicative rationality, Habermas utilises arguments from cognitive-developmental theories such as the psychological models of moral development in Kohlberg and the genetic structuralism of Piaget.45 In the Piagetian tradition, stages of interactive competence correspond to developmental stages of moral consciousness. At the pre-conventional stage, ‘only the consequences of action are evaluated in cases of conflict’.46 At the conventional level, the validity of moral principles is identified with the standpoint of a particular social collectivity. Moral validity and social acceptance are conflated. Finally, at the post-conventional level, the validity of moral norms and principles is examined independently of the authority of a particular social group. The post-conventional stage involves the ability to distance oneself from, and criticise, deeply entrenched intuitions. It is the ‘milieu’ within which the Habermasian dialogue can take place.

Accordingly, Habermas adopts Kohlberg’s model of six stages of moral judgment, which forms an ‘invariant, irreversible, and consecutive sequence of discrete structures’.47 This means that, in a normal course of development, the individual will make the transition from one stage to another in a sequence which is irreversible. But this naturalistic understanding of ‘developmental stages’ begs most of the serious questions at issue – for example, whether a certain stage is superior or not. As Giddens asks, what would have happened if Habermas relied on Lévi-Strauss for his genetic structuralism, and not Piaget?48

44 Thompson 1982, p. 298.
46 Habermas 1979, p. 156.
Habermas’s evolutionary-developmental model reproduces a speculative philosophy of history in a scientific, naturalistic language. By adopting the language of ‘heightened capacities’ for learning, and ‘greater reflexivity’, as if they were matters of organic maturation and not controversial views on autonomy, Habermas projects the future as the necessary and normal outcome of a course of development.

The *Theory of Communicative Action* attempts to be a corrective to the defects of the early theory by pointing in the direction of a more socially worked-out theory of interaction, articulated in terms of a discourse on modernity as a process of ‘rationalization’, namely the realization of reason in history. In what follows, I will give a brief outline of Habermas’s complex argumentative strategy in the *Theory of Communicative Action*. I will claim that, despite his effort to lay the foundations for a historically specific, socially-grounded, critical theory of modernity, Habermas cannot finally be absolved from the charge of the pathos of universal history. For the socio-historical grounding of his concept of communicative action presupposes the conception of modernity as a universal, binding, evolutionary process, at the end of which, the conceptual structures of our world appear as constituents of rationality *tout court*. Habermas’s approach to modernity presents itself as another version of the end of history, which tends to present the social order as ‘rational’ and seems to push into the background the historically specific objective contradictions.

The conceptual point of departure for Habermas’s critical theory of modernity is an immanent critique of Weber’s theory of rationalization. Weber interpreted modernisation in terms of a process of societal rationalization that relied on the institutionalisation of purposive-rational action in Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. For Weber, this process of rationalisation results in the increasing transformation of society into an ‘iron cage’, characterised by a ‘loss of freedom’ due to the institutionalisation of cognitive-instrumental rationality in the economy and the state as well as by a loss of meaning, involving the destruction of the unity of reason in the modern world.

Habermas appropriates the Weberian interpretation of modernity in terms of processes of rationalisation; yet he argues that the ‘iron cage’ is not the necessary feature of all forms of modern society. What Weber attributes to

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49 Habermas 1984, p. 216.
rationalisation as such has to be seen as a selective pattern of rationalisation in capitalism which leads to its ‘pathological’ aspect, namely the growing domination of quasi-autonomous, formally organised systems of action.\textsuperscript{51}

The process of rationalisation not only entails the growth of cognitive-instrumental rationality but is primarily associated with the development of communicative rationality. Habermas grasps the latter in procedural terms as referring to a new mode of socialisation, or a new principle of social organisation, according to which action-orienting norms and principles would be generated in processes of public and unrestricted discussion. Having already grounded communicative action ‘quasi-transcendentally’ or ‘quasi-anthropologically’ in his early works, Habermas now undertakes to situate it historically and to provide a genetic account of its development by apprehending the universal-historical rationalisation process in terms of the rationalisation of the lifeworld.\textsuperscript{52} Lifeworld is complementary to communicative action. It is only through communicative action that the lifeworld is reproduced; and conversely, communicative action unfolds only against the background of a semantically interpreted social lifeworld. In a sense, the lifeworld is both constitutive of and constituted by communicative action. Here I can only briefly sketch the so-called rationalisation of lifeworld suggested by Habermas.

Habermas argues that modernity entails an increase in reflexivity. For that, he turns to Durkheim’s analysis of the change in the form of societal integration from mechanical to organic solidarity. Habermas argues that the cultural achievements of modernity, which destroy the legitimising power of theological and metaphysical worldviews initiate the ‘linguistification of the sacred’.\textsuperscript{53} He characterises this process as one in which the rationality potential of communicative action, the ‘rationally binding force of criticisable claims to validity’, is released and supersedes the older sacred normative core as that which affects cultural reproduction, social integration and rationalisation. Tradition is constantly subject to questioning and there are increasing disputes over the interpretation of norms and their reasoned justification.

However, for Habermas, this approach captures only one dimension of modern society. It can explain the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld but not the reproduction of society as a whole. What characterises modernity is that important dimensions of social life (for example the economy and the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{51} Habermas 1984, pp. 181–3.
\bibitem{52} Habermas 1984, pp. 70 and 336.
\bibitem{53} Habermas 1987, pp. 46 and 110.
\end{thebibliography}
state) are integrated in a quasi-objective way. They take the form of reified, semi-autonomous spheres, dominated by an intrinsic logic and impervious to the wishes and desires of social actors. They cannot therefore be grasped by action theory but must be understood systemically. Thus Habermas proposes a theory of social evolution according to which society becomes differentiated into system and lifeworld.\textsuperscript{54} Interaction in modernity becomes co-ordinated in two very different ways; either via the rationality potential of communicative action, or by means of what Talcott Parsons characterised as the steering media of money and power, the quasi-objective social mediations that encode purposive-rational attitudes and detach interchange processes from the normative contexts of the lifeworld. This results in the distinction between system integration (effected by the steering media of money and power) and social integration (effected by communicative action).

The extension of the cognitive-instrumental rationality beyond the economy and the state into the lifeworld is characterised by Habermas as ‘colonization’. Unlike the ‘normal’ form of modernisation, wherein a progressively rationalised lifeworld is uncoupled from the system, the ‘colonization’ of the lifeworld is regarded as a ‘pathological’ form of modernisation resulting in disturbances in the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld.\textsuperscript{55}

It is true that the analysis of modernity in terms of the rationalisation of the lifeworld tries to offer a more socio-historically articulate account of ‘communicative action’. By doing so, it aspires to show that the destruction of the unity of reason results in a loss of meaning but that this loss also strengthens those communicative processes through which alone a sense of validity can be regained. As a result of this, the possibility of an immanent social critique that can move beyond the bleak Weberian diagnosis of the ‘iron cage’ becomes open. I would agree with Finlayson that Habermas’s version of modernity ‘presents an opportunity for subjects to establish the legitimacy of institutions, customs and practices on the basis of validity-claims’.\textsuperscript{56}

Nevertheless, the whole edifice relies on the belief in the ‘project of modernity’, which does not merely denote a historical category but a philosophical-normative ideal – the expectation of a constant social and moral betterment. Thus, there is a redrafting of critique into an abstract discourse.

\textsuperscript{54} Habermas 1987, p. 153ff.  
\textsuperscript{55} Habermas 1987, p. 303ff.  
\textsuperscript{56} Finlayson 2003, p. 179.
of modernity, defined in terms of the transcendence of the ‘deformed realization of reason in history’ through the reflexivity inherent in communicative action. However, and paradoxically, the effect is that critique takes on a timeless character which is nevertheless directed towards the future on account of its definitional opposition to ‘tradition’. From a methodological point of view, Habermas’s discourse of modernity in terms of the rationalisation of the lifeworld runs up against self-sustaining circular definitions. For the thesis that modernity entails the rationalisation of the lifeworld, which implies the increase of reflexivity, begs the question of its own validity. It can only ground itself on the identification of modernity with rationality and reflexivity tout court. This, in turn, can only be sustained on the premise of a philosophy of history, namely the representation of history as progress, implying the linearity and irreversibility of time as well as the idea of moral improvement. Habermas adopts an evolutionary logic of history as the standard against which the realisation, the ‘fulfilment’, of the ‘unfinished project of modernity’ can be judged. Indeed, Habermas distinguishes between the universal inner logic of the historical development of worldviews and the empirical dynamic of worldview development which depends on external factors. This distinction allows him to separate what has been empirically actualised in capitalist society from the possibilities contained in the modern structures of consciousness that result from the process of disenchantment. In this reading, capitalism, merely identified with functionalist reason, is regarded as a deformation of what had become possible as a result of a universal inner logic of historical development.

Thus Habermas relies on a schema in which a distinction is made between what is empirically actualised in capitalist society and the possibilities inherent in the modern structures of consciousness. It is by virtue of this schema that Habermas avoids the pessimistic implications of the concept of instrumental reason which he appropriates from his Frankfurt-school teachers. However, without this schema, Habermas’s theory of modernity would read as another version of the ‘end of history’, relying on the acceptance of the ‘iron cage’ of

\[57\] Habermas 1984, pp. 179–97.
\[58\] Habermas 1984, p. 198.
\[59\] For an emphasis on the distinction between developmental logic and historical dynamic which implies an evolutionary theory rather than an immanent critique see the brilliant insights of Postone (Postone 1996). At this point, the distinction should be drawn between functionalist and cognitive-instrumental reason. While the former refers to the political and economic systems, the latter denotes the actions of agents within these systems.
modern industrial labour as the necessary form of technologically-advanced production. This is because Habermas perceives ‘economy’ and the ‘state’ in systems-theoretic terms (‘steering media’), and this implies the thesis that they exist in a quasi-objective, quasi-reified manner. They are presented as historically final and necessary, the result of ‘differentiation’ per se, and therefore unable to provide the basis for a critique of the existing forms of economy or polity. The possibility of an immanent social critique is then excluded, unless the realm of economy and polity, which is grasped in systems-theoretic terms, is complemented with that of the rationalised lifeworld constituted by communicative action, which exists alongside but is not intrinsically part of capitalism, since it is rooted in a very different ontological principle. The abstract and generic discourse of modernity, under which the

60 Against that line of thought, James Bohman strongly defends the distinction between system and lifeworld in Habermas’s late work. For Bohman, not only is the distinction defensible but also ‘analytically, empirically and methodologically necessary for any critical social theory of modern society’ (Bohman 1986, p. 383). The system/lifeworld distinction, Bohman argues, should be dictated by the need to break once and for all with the so-called ‘totalizing’ concepts plaguing social theory and depriving it of its emancipatory potential. The ‘totalizing approach’, he argues, views ‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’ as ‘real’ totalities thereby implying strongly metaphysical claims. As opposed to this, Bohman tries to defend a ‘holistic’ line in social theory, one which views concepts such as ‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’ as ‘macro-level structures like grammar or institutions which are responsible for social order and which are not reducible to individual’s beliefs, intentions or actions’ (Bohman 1986, p. 383). Yet such holism ‘holds that macro-level structures are only analytically distinct from the level of agency and actors’ beliefs’ (Bohman 1986, p. 383). Bohman’s strong objections to the concept of ‘totality’, as it figures in a long itinerary of Marxist thought, derive especially from his identification of totality with an ontological category, namely with ‘an internal structure with an objective existence’, which ‘excludes any possibility . . . of transformative agency over social structures and of reflective distance from socially formed beliefs’ (Bohman 1986, p. 383). In that respect, ‘totality’ as an ontologically independent reality seems to prefigure a reified social order, which (in a way which Bohman considers as similar to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus) transforms agents into its instruments. Thus, a multi-levelled and complex critical social theory can only account for itself as such if it employs the analytic and methodological distinction between system and lifeworld. I would claim, however, that Bohman entirely misconceives the idea of totality as this has shaped a considerable amount of a critical social theory. He falsely equates ‘totality’ with the Parsonian-inspired concept of the system as a ‘bloc’ of norm-free sociality which, uncoupled from the lifeworld, has been organised by non-linguistic media like money and power and therefore rules out conditions of agency and reflection. However fair Bohman’s criticism of the Habermasian employment of systems might be, it entirely misses the point when ‘system’ is identified with ‘totality’. For the latter is not merely ‘a tightly structured whole, like organisms’ (Bohman 1986, p. 392) but a contradictory one, each moment of which is socially and historically constituted – hence transformable – and mediated by its opposite. In Marx’s late works, capitalism is analysed in terms of a form of social mediation, constituted by the double, contradictory character of capitalist social forms, i.e. abstract labour and concrete labour, use-value and value, value and material wealth, etc., inscribed in the main structures which constitute capitalist society, such
contradictions of the present are subsumed after having been translated into ‘complexities’, relies on the semi-ontological distinction between system and lifeworld, which is fully compatible with Habermas’s early distinction between ‘labour’ and ‘interaction’. As Deborah Cook writes at the end of her rejoinder to Finlayson, ‘material reproduction must be relegated to the autopoietic subsystems and fairly shielded from the inherently rational demands of the symbolically self-reproducing lifeworld’.61

IV. Critical theory criticised

My argument is thus that Habermas does not finally manage, despite his intentions to the contrary, to overcome the ‘negativism’ of his predecessors. The reason is that he adopts the very same framework that he seeks to criticise. This is the conception of instrumental reason as an attribute of labour per se, that is, of labour as a historically indeterminate category referring to the interaction of man and nature in general. He can only bypass the pessimist implications of that conception by positing a standpoint of critique which is extrinsic to the historical process. This is either a semi-transcendental, semi-anthropological account of interaction in his early works, or, in his late works, an abstract discourse of modernity carrying the overtones of a philosophy of history.

as capital and commodity. It is clear that the differences between that type of approach, as compared with one based on the identification of totality with the system, are the following: first, the commodity-determined society is marked by a quasi-natural, objective [sachlich] structure of domination constituted by labour, which becomes a sort of second nature and has no real personal or concrete institutional locus. Yet, although capitalist totality is analysed as possessing a quasi-autonomous logic by being treated at the same time as socially constituted and historically specific, it provides a powerful point of departure for grounding socially the systemic characteristics of modernity and indicating that the modern world can be transformed. For, although capitalism becomes an abstractly universal, necessary and complex global system, it originates in specific historical circumstances. Thus, the transformable character of totality seems to be missing entirely from the social-theoretical concept of ‘system’. Secondly, Bohman’s analysis seems to ignore the notion of contradiction as the sine qua non of the possibility of totality. Capitalist society is not a homogeneous non-contradictory totality; it is, instead, made possible by the contradiction between its abstract structures and the individuals, capital and living labour, and so on. An adequate analysis of the contradictions of capitalist society would exceed the scope of the present work. Suffice it to say, however, that it is precisely the idea of contradiction as the hallmark of totality which renders possible critical revolutionary consciousness and theory.

61 Cook 2003, p. 196.
In broad terms, one could argue that the adoption of the above conception of instrumental reason as an attribute of labour as such, confronts critique with the following epistemological dilemma. On the one hand, critique is rooted ontologically and transcendentally – or at least in elements of social life that are claimed to be free from the pathologies of capitalism. On the other, by treating its object, that is, capitalist society, as unitary and ‘one-dimensional’, it implies the functionalist notion that only consciousness which affirms or perpetuates the existent is socially formed. Differently stated: either critique is ‘ahead’ of society within the framework of which it is supposed to be formulated, or ‘follows’ it, in the sense of its full ‘integration’. Expressed in a more philosophical language, the former case implies a kind of ‘theodicy of progress’, insofar as it refers to a ‘free-floating’ revolutionary subjectivity, which, by hovering over the repressive here and now and remaining untouched by it, is destined to realise itself in the course of time. The latter implies a modern version of negative metaphysics, since capitalism is perceived as a non-anthropomorphic, ‘subjectless’, all-too-powerful system, rather similar to the Heideggerian Gestell, which ‘produces’ subjects, and therefore integrates every form of consciousness opposed to it. However, in both of the above scenarii, the standpoint of critique, if any exists, is historically indeterminate rather than immanent to its object.

The conclusion to be drawn is that critique cannot resort to formalist, historically indeterminate categories as the basis of its standpoint (for example, labour as such, or language as such, or the moral progress of the human species) without contradicting itself as a historically specific, ‘immanent’ critical theory of society. Such a conclusion is one element in the Hegelian legacy of critique. The core of the Hegelian type of critique relies upon the idea that in the act of thinking the object of knowledge is not static but, rather, because of its immanent ‘contradictory’ nature, attempts to go beyond itself and thereby transforms its identity and boundaries. A form of knowledge that does no more than apply an Archimedean standpoint – decontextualised and extrinsic to what it investigates, the static potential of formal logical categories – cannot adequately grasp the object’s self-movement. The Hegelian critique is therefore immanent in the sense that it is not an abstract principle that remains fixed and inalterable, and into whose schema one has to squeeze reality. For Hegel, the condition of possibility of knowledge is the subject’s self-formative process, painful and negative, which occurs on the plane of
becoming, that is, within history.\textsuperscript{62} Thus, the question of the adequacy of critical theory as immanent critique can only be formulated in terms of claims about the historical specificity of its categories and the nature of its object. This is what distinguishes it from ‘traditional theory’, to recall the famous distinction drawn by Max Horkheimer.\textsuperscript{63}

Nevertheless, while through dialectics as the ‘labour of negativity’ or ‘becoming’ Hegel strives to overcome a fixed conception both of the subject and the object, at the same time, he ‘imprisons’ their ceaseless movement within the confines of a closed system. The latter is patterned upon the model of a collective, singular subject that externalises itself and subsequently ‘reappropriates’ what it has externalised.\textsuperscript{64} The concept of ‘reappropriation’ however, only makes sense if we assume the presence of a collective singular subject that actualises itself in history. History is the unfolding of the capacities of a meta-subject. The standpoint of critique is the Absolute, which when unfolded is the result of its own development. The point of departure of the critique presupposes its result and this implies its historically indeterminate character. Dialectics contradicts itself as such, that is, as the protest of ‘becoming’ versus an Archimedean fixed point.

The resuscitation of the claim of critical theory as immanent critique means returning to its very origin, that is, dialectics, which must be purged of its ‘untruth’, namely its confinement within a closed system. Reconstructing the normative basis of social criticism implies a return to Hegel’s dialectics and the disclosure of its moment of truth, which is that of determinate negation. This is the theme of Adorno’s\textit{Negative Dialectics} – a relentless self-criticism of Hegel through means provided by the Hegelian philosophy itself.

\textbf{V. Negative Dialectics, or, thinking with Hegel against Hegel}

Adorno repeatedly argues that the untruth of philosophy is located in the search for the ideal of an absolute first principle.\textsuperscript{65} The recognition of the insufficiency of any ‘given’ identification opens the path of dialectical thinking.

\textsuperscript{62} For an illuminating exposition of Hegel’s criticism of the Kantian epistemology, see Habermas 1971, pp. 7–24.
\textsuperscript{63} Horkheimer 1972.
\textsuperscript{64} This is what Habermas calls ‘philosophy of the subject’. For the Habermasian definition of the ‘philosophy of the subject’, see Habermas 1984, pp. 387 and 389. For a Habermasian approach to the philosophy of the subject, see Benhabib 1986, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{65} Adorno 2001, p. 147.
What Adorno means by ‘negative dialectics’ is the ‘repeated experience of this implicatedness or “mediatedness” of whatever is offered up as something pure, “immediate” or self-sufficient’. Dialectics protests against identity or classificatory thinking. In Adorno’s own words, ‘dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint’.

This could be the possible rejoinder of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, not only to Habermas’s critique, which is based on the standpoint of ‘language’, but, ironically, to aspects of Adorno’s own thinking, in particular, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, according to which the reification of society is not only total but also irreversible precisely because it is inherent in labour as such, thereby rendering critical consciousness and theory impossible. For Adorno, identity thinking is the search for an absolute first principle to which everything can be reduced. From the perspective of a theory of knowledge, identity thinking propounds the absolute correspondence of concept and thing. The meaning of that claim is twofold: either it relegates the concept to the role of a camera that merely depicts an immutable objective world order that merely ‘is’ (as in pre-modern ontology), or it relegates the object to a thought-product by elevating the ‘I think’ to the precondition of everything that exists (as in transcendental idealism). While the former views man as a humble creature doomed to gaze ‘upon a black sky in which the star of the idea, or of Being, is said to rise’, the latter views everything that exists as the ‘product’ or ‘projection’ of the subject, be it consciousness or Spirit.

By elevating into the status of an absolute either the object (ontology) or the subject (idealism), both forms of what Adorno calls identity thinking claim that thought and being, subject and object, concept and thing are identical, and hence sanction things as they ‘are’. For Adorno, identity thinking is mythological since the mythical is that which never changes.

By criticising identity thinking as mythological or reified thinking, Adorno is also criticising German idealism. The latter articulates a claim to autonomy in opposition to the relations of domination of a theological past from which it believes itself to be emancipated. Adorno’s argument is that the way in which German idealism grounds that claim ontologically has the effect that idealism – the philosophical discourse of modernity par excellence –

68 Adorno 1973, p. 140.
69 Adorno 1973, p. 56.
nevertheless unwittingly reproduces within its own terrain its theological, ontological, enemy.

The weapon the Enlightenment uses in its fight against the dogmatic past, is \textit{ratio} as the ego principle, the pure method which grounds the modern philosophical system. Indeed, the philosophical discourse of modernity, its promise of autonomy and critical reflection, would be unthinkable without the idea of the philosophical system. Critique cannot exist without a system.\textsuperscript{70} The latter is perceived as a coherent deductive unity, founded upon a first principle, a central point that can ‘construct’ reality. Kant writes in the second edition of the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}:

> Transcendental philosophy is only the idea of a science, for which the critique of pure reason has to lay down the complete architectonic plan. That is to say, it has to guarantee, as following from principles, the completeness and certainty of the structure in all its parts. It is the system of all principles of pure reason.\textsuperscript{71}

Yet Adorno is right when he characterises this as idealism’s \textit{πρότερον \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \̣ \...
would, in reality, be a kind of thought ‘that is tied to nothing but pure thought itself’.\footnote{Adorno 2001, p. 15.}

Nevertheless, Adorno never abandons the context of German idealism. For the latter is the philosophical expression of the claim to social and political emancipation, the modern claim \textit{par excellence}, which is yet to be realised. In this sense, idealism becomes ‘the shadow hanging over the modern world; it continues to loom because in reality it has been neither realised nor replaced’.\footnote{Bernstein 2001, p. 239.} The challenge is therefore, ‘not to be against idealism but to rise above it. This means that the themes of idealism should be integrated into theory, but without their being given the status of absolutes’.\footnote{Adorno 2001, p. 136.}

This is precisely what Adorno’s ‘project’ (if we can use this term) in \textit{Negative Dialectics} is about: the possibility of critique without a system. This means a ‘consistent’, ‘modern’ critique of ontology rather than its replacement with another ontology. If the modern ideals of autonomy and critical self-reflection are grounded only within the confines of the system, which, ironically, then becomes a ‘secularised’ version of the theological idea of the \textit{creatio ex nihilo}, Adorno’s negative dialectic aims at the realisation of the philosophical discourse of modernity by ‘purging’ it of its enemy, namely ontology. And this is the protest against the untruth of identity. The name of that protest in the language of dialectics is ‘contradiction’. The concept does not exhaust the thing conceived once and for all. But this takes us back to Hegel. In Adornian terms, one must ‘rescue’ Hegel from himself.\footnote{Adorno 1993, p. 83.}

As early as the Introduction to \textit{Phenomenology of Mind} Hegel comes close to a sense of the negativity of the dialectical logic he is expounding. That Introduction bids us purely observe each concept until it starts moving, until it becomes unidentical with itself by virtue of its own meaning – in other words of its identity.\footnote{Adorno 2001, p. 136.}

What the Hegelian method of the determinate negation or contradiction indicates is the fact that the concept can never exhaust the thing conceived, precisely because the distinction between subject and object is dynamic and has the character of a process that enters into history. It is not given for all time and should not therefore, be made into an absolute. Adorno writes,\footnote{Adorno 1973, p. 156.}
‘[w]hat dissolves the fetish is the insight that things are not simply so and not otherwise, that they have come to be under certain conditions. . . . It is when things in being are read as a text of their becoming that idealistic and materialist dialectics touch’.79

To mistrust identity means to give preponderance to the object. Yet, the preponderance of the object – be it a physical object, a text, a discourse, or society itself – has to be read along materialist lines, opposed to the idealist spectre of an absolute, pure cognition, which overcomes all finite, sensuous cognitions. It is in no way the avowal of a being-in-itself outside the totality of cogitative definitions. It is not an essence, a mere hypostatisation. Here, again, it is Hegel who paves the way: ‘Hegel’s doctrine of the objectivity of essence postulates that Being is the mind that has not yet come to itself’.80

Hence, unlike the postmodern trend towards the liquidation of the subject or its replacement with another absolute first, that is, nature, Adorno remains within the framework of the concept. For the problem is not the determination of phenomena by their concept. Adorno never succumbs to a naïve romanticism which celebrates a pre-modern Garden of Eden, a utopia of absolute immediacy. The problem is precisely the ontologisation of the concept, its elevation into an in-itself prior to any content. The problem, in other words, is not with the concept but with the archaism of the concept of the concept. And this is the inconsistency at the heart of all German idealism.

Looked at from this perspective, Adorno is thinking with Hegel against Hegel. He uses the Hegelian determinate negation in order to reveal the untruth of the Hegelian system. The deficit of Hegel’s idealism can be healed through its own premises: ‘Concepts alone can achieve what the concept prevents. Cognition is a τρωπος ωσεται [i.e. by wounding it heals]’.81 The object is ‘sanctioned’ as such only when it becomes an object of cognition. An object is valid as object when, surprisingly enough, ‘its physical side is spiritualized from the outset by translation into epistemology’.82 As Adorno eloquently puts it:

Mediation of the object means that it must not be statically, dogmatically hypostatized but can be known only as it entwines with subjectivity; mediation of the subject means that without the moment of objectivity it would be

81 Adorno 1973, p. 53.
literally nil. An index of the object’s preponderance is the impotence of the mind – in all its judgments as well, to this day, in the organization of reality.\textsuperscript{83}

In other words, there would never be a thing without mediation: ‘[d]ialectics lies in things, but it could not exist without the consciousness that reflects it – no more than it can evaporate into that consciousness. If matter were total, undifferentiated, and flatly singular, there would be no dialectics in it’.\textsuperscript{84}

Conversely, there would never be mediation without this ‘something’ to be mediated. In Adorno’s words: ‘[p]hilosophical reflection makes sure of the nonconceptual in the concept. It would be empty otherwise . . . in the end, having ceased to be a concept of anything at all, it would be nothing’.\textsuperscript{85}

Negative dialectics is another name for the ‘secularisation’ of dialectics. Its revolt against the glorious ‘happy end’, which is brought about by the negation of the negation as something positive and presupposes implicitly a ‘first’. Negative dialectics is open and never-ending. Thus, it is not sustained by the compulsion of the system which admits nothing heterogeneous within itself and eliminates all contradictions. Negative dialectics does not aim at the integration of the dissonant. It is instead ‘the logic of disintegration’.\textsuperscript{86} Negative dialectics means thinking in contradictions, or, differently stated, it arises when a promise is broken. It is determinate negation, which, as Cook nicely puts it in her reply to Finlayson, ‘reveals that what exists is not yet what it ought to be, and what ought to be does not yet exist’.\textsuperscript{87} For example, we speak about modernity because, as an achievement, modernity is yet to be realised. This means that its ideals – such as freedom, equality, and so on – are not actual in its practices, although the latter cannot take place without resorting to those ideals.\textsuperscript{88} In a manner akin to the Marxist critique of Enlightenment ideals, Adorno argues that the freedom and equality of modern individuals implies their freedom to sell their labour-power in the market as well as their ‘freedom’ from ownership of the means of production (other than their own labour-power). This type of freedom transforms the individual into a slave of her own labour and a mere cog of the productive apparatus. In this sense, the ideal of freedom is being used in the service of unfreedom. To put it otherwise, the social process of production based on the principle of exchange

\textsuperscript{83} Adorno 1973, p. 186.
\textsuperscript{84} Adorno 1973, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{85} Adorno 1973, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{86} Adorno 1973, p. 145.
\textsuperscript{87} Cook 2003, p. 193.
\textsuperscript{88} Bernstein 2001, pp. 238–9.
can only realise itself on the basis of the very principle it negates, namely the *principium individuationis*. While capitalist modernity requires the form of individuation, ‘individuals are relegated to the role of mere executive organs of the universal’.\(^89\) It involves the ‘reduction of human labour to the abstract universal concept of average working hours’.\(^90\)

Conversely, if thinking in contradictions means that everything is mediated by its very opposite, then ‘freedom itself and unfreedom are so entangled that unfreedom is not just an impediment to freedom but a promise of its concept’.\(^91\) It is precisely at this point that we are confronted with the ‘message in a bottle’ of a ‘negative dialectic of norms’, according to which freedom sanctions itself as such only via its opposite, that is, repression. In Adorno’s words: ‘[f]reedom turns concrete in the changing forms of repression. There has been as much free will as there were men with the will to be free’.\(^92\)

At the same time, the above approach implies more than anything else that the values and norms with which a critical theory or consciousness interprets reality can never be seen *in abstracto*, disengaged from their own dialectical development. In his lectures on the *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Adorno argues that, in periods of crisis, the mere replacement of a set of values with another, if it fails to elucidate the reality underlying each, may lapse into a more obsolete state of affairs.\(^93\) It is clear that critical theory as a critique of ideology or immanent critique should first and foremost be a critique of false absolutes and positivities – what the young Hegel had called ‘the positive nature of the moral beliefs’ – and this implies a reflection on the antinomies of thought which, after all, are expressions of social contradictions.

To summarise: Adorno reveals the ‘inconsistency’ of the philosophy of modernity, that is German idealism, which lies in its self-grounding upon an ontological conception of the subject, be it spirit or consciousness. Adorno denounces as false that type of thinking, which he calls identity thinking, and criticises it from the standpoint of the non-identical, which is synonymous to the Hegelian-inspired concepts of mediation and contradiction. However, one might justifiably ask at this point whether Adorno’s epistemological reflections on the dialectics of subject and object, or concept and thing, are adequate insofar as the issues raised in the prior sections are concerned, that

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\(^89\) Adorno 1973, p. 343.
\(^90\) Adorno 1973, p. 146.
\(^91\) Adorno 1973, p. 265.
\(^92\) Ibid.
\(^93\) Adorno 2000, p. 123.
is, in terms of the normative basis of a critical theory of modernity. I have also raised the question of whether or not Adorno’s negative dialectic is a convincing alternative to Habermas’s position, which is based on the standpoint of communicative action. My claim is that Adorno’s reflections, although sometimes abstruse and stylistically difficult, can indeed point in the direction of an immanent critique of modernity.

VI. The fetishism of the concept and the fetishism of the commodity: the subject and the law of value

For Adorno, identity thinking does not merely denote what Habermas would call the self-reassurance crisis of modernity, which forces modernity ‘to borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch’.94 Neither is identity thinking regarded by Adorno as no more than an inadequate epistemology. In the end, following Marx, Adorno views epistemological and philosophical categories as displacements of social ones. The inconsistencies, contradictions or ‘deficits’ of thought echo the contradictions of society. In Adorno’s words: ‘[t]he only way to pass philosophically into social categories is to decipher the truth content of philosophical categories’.95 Identity thinking is reified thinking. It is a mode of thinking characteristic of commodity society which functions on the basis of the law of value. This however, needs further clarification.

Identity thinking is the mode of thinking of capitalist society, that is, the society in which the commodity is ‘the necessary social form of the product’,96 and the ‘elementary form of wealth’.97 The commodity is a use-value, a good or service which is simultaneously a value. Commodities, produced and exchanged, are not only useful material objects corresponding to human needs, but also possess another quality, which is immaterial but no less objective – that of being values.98 The dual form of the commodity is grounded on the double character of the labour it incorporates. As a particular use-value, the commodity is the product of concrete labour; as a value, however, it is the objectification of abstract labour.99 Material wealth results

94 Habermas 1990a, p. 7.
96 Marx 1976, p. 949.
97 Marx 1976, p. 951.
from concrete labour, while value is the objectification of abstract labour alone. Nature does not enter into value’s constitution at all.\textsuperscript{100}

One’s labour has therefore a dual function: on the one hand, it is a particular sort of labour that produces specific goods for others, while on the other, labour becomes independent of its specific content and becomes the means by which the products of others are acquired. The labour of all commodity-producers taken together is a collection of various concrete labours, which appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’\textsuperscript{101} in the form of use-values, that is, a heterogeneous totality made up of particulars. At the same time, all of their labours constitute a social mediation – value – abstracted from all material specificity. Since each individual labour functions in the same socially-mediating way that all others do, their abstract labours taken together do not constitute a collection of various abstract labours but a general social mediation, namely socially-total abstract labour.

Clearly, labour constitutes a social mediation, not by virtue of the fact that it is the metabolic interaction of subject and object, but because of its status as abstract labour, that is, as labour, which, abstracted from its concrete product, serves the producer as the social means to acquire the products of others. Nevertheless, precisely because the social relations in capitalism are mediated by labour and not by the relations of personal or direct domination that characterise precapitalist social formations,\textsuperscript{102} they do not appear as social and historically specific but ‘natural’, trans-historical and semi-ontologically grounded social forms.\textsuperscript{103} Although the social ‘essence’ of capitalism is a historically specific function of labour as a medium of social relations, that historical ‘essence’ appears as an ontological form, common to all societies – labour \textit{per se}. Abstract labour, as the historically specific category which mediates capitalist society, appears in the form of concrete labour, just as the commodity appears to be a mere thing although it is a social relation. This is what Marx refers to by the term ‘fetishism of commodity’.\textsuperscript{104} The social relations structured by commodity-determined labour give rise to an ‘objective’, ‘a-social’ framework that seems to be ontologically given rather than socially or contextually constituted. Put simply, ‘the form of

\textsuperscript{100} Marx 1976, p. 138.
\textsuperscript{101} Marx 1976, p. 125.
\textsuperscript{102} Polanyi 1944.
\textsuperscript{103} Postone 1996.
\textsuperscript{104} Marx 1976, pp. 164–5.
social contextualization characteristic of capitalism is one of apparent
decontextualization’.105

That unique social mediation conditions perceptions of the natural and the
social world. It produces not only representable objects but also social
representations of objects. Identity thinking, claiming the correspondence of
the thing and the concept, implying thereby that reality is ‘objectified’, reified,
admitting of no change or movement, is a mode of thought characteristic of
commodified society. The fetishism of the concept, which is elevated into an
absolute or an in-itself, reflects the fetishism of commodity.

For Adorno,

theories of cognition are a kind of reflex of the labour process, in the sense
that, when consciousness reflects upon itself, it necessarily arrives at a
concept of rationality that corresponds to the rationality of the labour
process.106

Looked at in this way, by considering itself to be constitutive of all knowledge
and experience without relating to anything external to it, the hypostatised
concept of the subject in German idealism (the modern version of identity
thinking) is nothing but society.107 Indeed, abstraction and universality as the
characteristics of the transcendental subject are also the characteristics of
abstract labour as the form of social mediation in capitalism. In Adorno’s
words:

the abstraction characteristic of this transcendental subject is nothing but
the internalized and hypostatized form of man’s domination of nature. This
always comes into being through the elimination of qualities, through the
reduction of qualitative distinctions to quantitative forms. It is therefore
objectively always abstract in character.108

And a few lines before, Adorno, referring to the dimension of universality,
writes that:

only the global social subject – not the contingent individual subject –
possesses that character of universality, of all encompassing totality, that
Kant ascribes to the transcendental subject. We may add that behind the

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107 Ibid.
The idea of constitution stands that of labour as social labour – and not just isolated individual labour.$^{109}$

The ontologisation of the subject, the delusion that the subject is an Archimedean fixed point, be it the Baconian master of all things or their idealistic creator, stands for abstract labour as the mediating principle of the capitalist whole. That ‘a priori keeps the subjects from being subjects and degrades subjectivity itself to a mere object’, making therefore ‘an untruth of the general principle that claims to establish the subject’s predominance. The surplus of the transcendental subject is the deficit of the utterly reduced empirical subject’. $^{110}$

In commodity-determined society, people find themselves dominated by their labour. The form of mediation constituted by labour promotes the development of socially general forces of production while incorporating them as its attributes. The very condition of the possibility of social wealth is the ‘poverty’ of individual existence and labour.

Nevertheless, by regarding as the basis of identity thinking the forms of social relations mediated by a historically specific form of labour, that is, abstract labour, such as commodity, value and so on, Adorno not only provides a socio-historical theory of cognition but also argues that the existent is fundamentally transformable. The system-like qualities of the fundamental structures of modernity are effected by historically determinate forms of social practice. Although these forms of practice become quasi-independent of the people engaged in them, the fact that they are constituted by a historically specific type of labour renders them transformable. Hence this type of thinking breaks with the ‘negativism’ of the late Frankfurt school, implicitly endorsed by Habermas, which, by identifying instrumental reason with labour as such, claims that domination is universal and irreversible and therefore compels critique to adopt a standpoint extrinsic to reality. Instrumental reason, and identity thinking as its epistemological corollary, should be grounded in the historical character of commodity-determined labour rather than in the subject-object relation, always and everywhere. Ironically, the negativism of the late Frankfurt school and of Habermas is itself a symptom of identity thinking, or, in Marxist terms, of commodity fetishism: the character of labour in capitalism is hypostasised as a characteristic of labour in-itself.

Thus, despite the standard charges of ‘negativism’ and ‘pessimism’, Adorno refuses to subscribe to the end of history. *Negative Dialectics* encompasses the hope for change.

**VII. Hegel after Adorno? Weaknesses and dilemmas of Negative Dialectics**

The present paper has been concerned with the possibility of critical theory as immanent critique in the works of Habermas and Adorno. Both the early and the late work of Habermas were discussed in order to show that he fails to account for critical theory as a historically determinate theory of society. This is because the possibility of critique is either rooted anthropologically or transcendentally in his early work, or presupposes a ‘post-metaphysically’ disguised philosophy of history in his late works. Thus, critique can only take a standpoint outside the present or, at the very least, in elements of social life that are claimed to be unaffected by social pathologies.

The previous section of the article argued that the germ of critical theory as immanent critique can be traced in Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*. There, Adorno resuscitates the claim to critical theory via a return to Hegel’s determinate negation. The latter, which originates in Spinoza’s *omnis determinatio est negatio*,\(^{111}\) and becomes the necessary condition of possibility of identity, ‘progresses’ by turning against itself – by rejecting and discarding whatever is ‘unnecessary’. What is meant by this is that the concept is not identical with its object. The self-understanding or self-determination of the object does not, in other words, coincide with its identity. The ‘labour of the negative’, instead, sets the object against its own internal tensions, contradictions and inconsistencies, manifesting thereby the object’s failure to fulfil its own concept.

However, this is only the first dimension of Hegel’s determinate negation. There is a second one, endowed with a constitutive dimension, according to which the Hegelian negation (unlike the scepticism of ancient philosophy, which relies on the dissolution of all the certainties and everyday practices of common sense) leads finally to more coherent and complete forms of life and consciousness. Thus, determinate negation encompasses a logical necessity. History appears as a rational theodicy. In this reading, there is a stationary endpoint of final reconciliation consisting in the absolute identity of subject and object.

\(^{111}\) Hegel 1951, p. 168.
One could argue somewhat crudely and schematically that the *raison d’être* of all the versions and re-inscriptions of critical theory is the effort to retain the first dimension of the Hegelian negativity without the second. As mentioned in the previous section, *Negative Dialectics* is the denunciation of the unnegatable truth of the Absolute Spirit as Hegel’s fundamental inconsistency. Thus, *Negative Dialectics* is the attempt to salvage Hegelian negativity, in other words, to restore its truth and resistance, and by doing so to recover the claim to critical theory. For there cannot be critique without negativity, without a ‘not’ in the sense of a ceaseless immanent becoming which liberates thinking from the bonds both of crude empiricism and static a priorism. The labour of the negative in Adorno is constitutive of his account of knowledge and truth. The latter ‘is inseparable from the illusory belief that from figures of the unreal one day, in spite of everything, real deliverance will come’.\textsuperscript{112} At the same time, truth becomes the philosophical synonym of hope.

The Adornian re-translation or re-invention of Hegelian dialectics seems to fulfill the claim of critical theory much more than Habermas’s formalistic account of communicative action, or the narrative of the rationalisation of the lifeworld in our brave modern world. Yet by no means does this thesis imply that the project of *Negative Dialectics* is impervious to criticism. In what follows, I will elucidate some of the weaknesses of *Negative Dialectics*. In particular, I will focus on the normative-utopian ‘deficit’ of Adorno’s speculative criticism. This has to do with the lack of a second negation in his project, and is mainly due to his interpretation of the Hegelian Absolute as a mere positivity or hypostatisation which has to be discarded for the sake of uncovering the ‘truth’ kernel of dialectics. I will begin with a somewhat different interpretation of the Hegelian Absolute, or second negation, than that offered by Adorno, and I will then argue that the lack of such a reading in Adorno’s work results in a vague and unspecified account of utopia.

**VIII. Hegel revisited**

First of all, one could ask how far Adorno’s criticism of Hegel is justifiable. Far from constituting the standstill of history, or a qualitatively new mode of thought entirely contradicting the previous ceaseless movement of the negative, could not the Absolute be viewed as the retrospective reconstruction or the rational re-ordering of all previous forms of consciousness? In this

\textsuperscript{112} Adorno 1974, pp. 121–2.
reading, the retrospective reconstruction of events sheds light on the rationality of the real, yet not in the sense of legitimating as rational whatever is. On the contrary, far from implying social quietism, it urges the realisation of reason – that what is actual should become rational. Be it a potentiality or probability or just a mere exhortation, the Hegelian project has justifiably been regarded as the ‘algebra of revolution’. Why then should we view the Absolute as the very end of history, as a halt to which the movement must come, as a hypostatisation presupposed from the very beginning of the dialectical process, and not as a new beginning, a new point of departure, an absolute negativity?\footnote{This reading has been advanced by Raya Dunayevskaya and others. See Dunayevskaya 1983, Chapter 1, pp. 3–46.} After all, just as Hegel strictly separated his own system from all other philosophical systems, he also separated his Absolute from the ‘empty Absolutes’ of other philosophers who failed to comprehend philosophy as the thinking of its own time. In Hegel’s own words:

> they are most accurately called systems which apprehend the Absolute only as substance . . . they represent the Absolute as the utterly universal genus which dwells in the species or existences, but dwells so potently that these existences have no actual reality. The fault of these modes of thought and systems is that they stop short of defining substance as subject and as mind.\footnote{Hegel 1971, p. 573 (my emphasis).}

Why then, should we not view the Absolute as a ‘given’, abstract and unmediated, but as concrete – the basis and starting point of new departures? The movement of the Absolute Idea has two ‘moments’. While the first consists in the awareness of oppositions, which are not treated as ‘fixed’, the second consists in viewing them as transitions. Thus the Absolute Idea as the new concrete totality already contains self-differentiation within itself. It will also undergo self-determination.\footnote{Dunayevskaya 1983, pp. 29–30.} Translated into social and political terms, this interpretation of the Absolute as a new beginning or a kind of second negation (one which has nothing to do with the crude conception of the negation of negation as ‘positivity’ or ‘synthesis’) refuses to see social emancipation as the mere negation of the class structure, bringing to a grinding halt the dialectics of transformation. Which is why, as Dunayevskaya writes,

> the young Marx in the 1844 Manuscripts kept stressing that ‘communism, as such, is not the goal of human development, the form of human society’,
and the mature Marx in *Capital* spelled out freedom and classlessness as ‘the development of human power which is its own end’.\(^{116}\)

The Hegelian Absolute could thus be seen as the Marxian social individual, that is, the unimpeded development of individuality in virtue of the universal which no longer confronts the individual as the Other, as a ‘second nature’, unwilled and often unknown by him. And, although the negation of capitalist relations is admittedly a necessary presupposition of an emancipated society, it is not enough: there is always needed a second ‘negation’ referring to new forms of social relations.

Adorno’s formulation of dialectics without system, stemming from his reading of Hegel, is one which puts the emphasis on the inconsistency or contradiction between the determinate negation and the Absolute Idea as the standstill of history. But Adorno’s formulation runs the risk of lacking precisely that moment of second negation. Differently stated: the issue is not whether Adorno has done justice or not to Hegel. The problem concerns instead the very implications or consequences of that reading as regards the normative basis of a critical theory of society, namely the values upon which it relies in order to criticise the existent. For, even if Adorno’s interpretation of Hegel is legitimate, the problem which confronts such an interpretation is how far critique may go by relying only on the recognition of contradictions, that is, by deriving its force merely from the first negation. If ideology, for Adorno, is identity thinking, which, as mentioned before, is not merely a ruse of thought or an epistemological category but the theoretical synonym of a commodity society whose socially mediating principle is abstract labour and which is governed by the law of value, the problem is the standpoint of ideology critique, of the critique of identity. Should we rest content merely with a denunciation of the ‘wrong’ of identity thinking, and with the disclosure of the dissonance between concept and object? Certainly, this encompasses the hope of the ‘not-yet’, the hope that the world could be what it should be but is not yet. Yet hope or the promise of redemption is not enough. One might ask about the direction towards which the world should change. This requires a reflection on the passage to the ‘new’, or the contours of the utopia that critique seeks to realise. In other words, it requires a second negation, which seems to be missing from the project of *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno’s blurred and vague image of utopia – an odd mixture of enlightened liberalism

\(^{116}\) Dunayevskaya 1983, p. 36.
and secularised theology – bears witness to that. A brief exposition of Adorno’s account of utopia will be the concern of the next section.

IX. Delineating utopia: between liberalism and theology

Adorno follows the early Horkheimer in making a dialectical use of the concepts of liberal ideology in order to provide a basis or foundation for the critique of the conditions that this ideology rests upon. Concepts derived from the ‘camp’ of his opponent, that is, liberalism, serve as universals with an emphatic, normative dimension. Yet, these ‘universals’ should in no way be treated as ‘fixities’ or mere hypostatisations. For this would contradict entirely the conception of *Negative Dialectics* as the elucidation or denunciation of the lack of correspondence between the object and its concept. Such universals are treated, instead, dialectically. The concept of freedom provides an example. The concept of freedom has been instantiated historically in institutions and practices. It is the modern concept *par excellence*. It could be argued that the concept of freedom is born along with the development of the bourgeoisie and it will vanish when the latter disappears. The emancipation of the bourgeois individual has brought about something like an ultimate metaphysical principle, which is that of human autonomy. It is as if humanity’s struggle for emancipation from feudal tutelage reflects itself in philosophy in such way that this sought-after autonomy should be elevated into the highest principle and identified with Reason itself. This, to be sure, is the hallmark of the Kantian system. Yet Adorno shows that the social form taken by the principle of freedom in the modern world leads to its exact opposite. Freedom becomes the self-destruction brought about by the imperatives of the free market. The *principium individuationis* as the highest modern value degenerates into a mere abstraction. Thus, following the young Marx’s devastating critique of the liberal ideals of modernity in *On the Jewish Question*, as well as Horkheimer’s analysis in ‘Materialism and Morality’, Adorno unfolds his dialect of the Enlightenment ideals by arguing that their appeal becomes the *sine qua non* condition of possibility of that social system whose function and reproduction demands, ironically, their very abolition. The rule of reproduction of the system demands the abolition of those norms upon

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118 For an excellent account of the dialectical-historical use of the liberal concept of freedom in Adorno, see Cook 2001, pp. 7–10.
which it established itself. The ideal of freedom as freedom from feudal relations, as well as freedom of selling and buying labour-power, becomes the very basis of the commodity society, which functions on the basis of subjection to an abstract system of domination and power unwilled by the social actors.

The conclusions to be drawn from such an analysis are the following. First, Adorno resorts to the liberal discourse of freedom, which serves as the standpoint of ideology critique. Yet, as mentioned above, Adorno does not treat the concept of freedom as a normative universal, an empty formalism, a mere abstraction. Instead, the concept of freedom is seen as having taken place historically, as instantiated in specific social practices and activities. The question that inevitably arises, however, is whether this kind of ideology critique is trapped in a value-neutral sociology of knowledge or a cold historicism.

The answer to that question, which is the second conclusion that I shall draw, is that it is precisely Adorno’s use of the Hegelian determinate negation (through which is disclosed the gap between the ideals by which modernity understands itself and their very historical realisation) that renders distinct the emphatic content of concepts and their historical genesis. For, on the one hand, historical practices undermine and disarm the concept of freedom. The concept of freedom ‘lags behind itself as soon as we apply it empirically. It is not what it says, then’.119 On the other hand, ‘because it must always be also the concept of what it covers, it is to be confronted with what it covers. Such confrontation forces it to contradict itself’.120 Thus, freedom should not be identified with the false consciousness of the individual in capitalism but also with ‘the “more” of the concept compared with his need’.121 At this point, however, a further problem emerges which concerns the ‘more’ of the concept. Adornian speculative critique is a conceptual exercise of dissonance and resistance to the ‘is’. Yet the standpoint from which this ‘is’ comes to be convicted, the fissure detected in the system, the utopian moment, the world as it should be, is only glimpsed indirectly in a completely unspecified way. Moreover, the very historical and social conditions by means of which that ‘ought’ can become a concrete possibility are never clarified. Identity thinking as the fetishism of the concept (expressing and reflecting the fetishism of

120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
commodity) might point in the direction of a historically specific, self-reflexive social epistemology. But a critical theory is always a critique of the object from the standpoint of its transformation, which is viewed, in turn, as a concrete possibility. In his later works Marx also showed that paradoxically the raison d’être of the liberal ideal of freedom is to be found in modernity or capitalism. He also argued that modern ideals are put in the service of the ideological consolidation of that system of domination whose condition of possibility consists in their very abolition. However, like Adorno, Marx does not see the ideational content of the concept of freedom as nothing more than a function of its historical genesis, that is, as a form of false consciousness. Marx traces that ‘more’ of the concept in the very contradictory social forms of commodity-determined society which initially appeal to freedom in order to circumvent it, but he argues that it is only through them that the emphatic content of freedom can be realised. The conditions of realisation of freedom pass through the very logic of capital. It is in the skills, capacities, knowledge and material wealth brought about by capital that freedom may actualise itself.

Thus, in his later works, Marx presents the contradictory social forms of capitalism in a dialectical way, pointing to their self-overcoming and to the realisation of the normative content of the concept of freedom. But Adorno’s ‘project’ lacks that dimension. Despite repeated allusions to the late Marxian categories of political economy in Negative Dialectics, Adorno does not succeed in illuminating either the ideational content of the normative basis of his theory (derived, as I have noted, from liberal discourse) or the historical conditions of its realisation. While the former, as mentioned before, stems from the absence of the moment of a second negation – a consequence of Adorno’s particular way of reading Hegel – the latter is due to the lack of an adequate dialectical development or presentation of the categories of political economy.

Indeed, the only account Adorno gives of utopia is his concept of ‘rational identity’. According to this, not only is speculative critique a critique of the ‘archaisms’ or arrogance of conceptual thinking which claims to be constitutive of knowledge, but, paradoxically, it is also the reverse: it is a critique of the inadequacy of the object to fulfil the potential of its concept. It is in this context

122 For a brilliant exposition of Adorno’s account of rational identity see Cook 2001 and Rose 1978, p. 44. Rose was the first commentator to see the significance of the concept of rational identity in Adorno’s work.
that the concept of rational identity has been introduced, denoting the potential rationality of thinking, the ideational content of the concept expressing the as-yet unrealised potential of the objects. Rational identity, in Adorno’s words, is ‘the concept’s longing to become identical with the thing’. A synonym of rational identity, one which illustrates the Adornian account of utopia, is the idea of ‘constellations’, as discussed in *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno speaks of the hope of an eventual identity between the word and the thing or the future redemption that resides in the concept of ‘constellations’. Clearly, ‘constellations’ are reminiscent of Benjamin’s notion of the Name or the Idea (testimony to Benjamin’s strong affinity with Platonic transcendence) referring to the original meaning of words. Thus the reference to rational identity in *Negative Dialectics* becomes a secularised version of Benjamin’s anamnesis, conceived as the memory of the original power of the name.

An analytical exposition of the Adornian account of utopia would exceed the scope of the present work. However, our brief discussion suggests that Adorno’s speculative critique remains prisoner to an odd amalgam of liberal discourse, on the one hand, and a dialectical vision of truth embellished with a messianic promise of redemption, on the other. Yet, emphasising these weaknesses should not discourage the attempt to develop critical theory as immanent critique along the lines of the Hegelian dialectic. Such a return to Hegel, viewed as a recovery, reconciliation, rewriting or reinvention still awaits discussion.

**References**


123 Adorno 1973, p. 149.
125 Benjamin 1977, p. 37.


Gary Farnell

Benjamin as Producer in The Arcades Project

Esther Leslie’s ‘erotics of capitalism’

The article on The Arcades Project which Esther Leslie wrote for the first issue of Historical Materialism in 1997 outlines a valuable ‘erotics of capitalism’ where, through an analysis of the dialectical exchange between ‘Weib und Ware’ (woman and ware), the figure of the whore emerges as the representation of the commodity made flesh.1 Here, the exchange that is central to the capitalist economic process is one which is essentially allegorical in nature. Leslie draws on the theory of fashion sketched by Walter Benjamin in The Arcades Project, emphasising the significance of the key suggestion put forward there that fashion itself is but a name for ‘the business of dialectical exchange between woman and ware – between carnal pleasure and the corpse’.2 The phrase that Benjamin uses to sum up what fashion is as a profit-oriented coupling of the living body to the inorganic world is ‘provocation of death through the woman’.3 ‘To the living,’ Benjamin argues, ‘fashion defends the rights of the corpse’; fashion’s ‘vital nerve’, in other

1 Leslie 1997, p. 77.
2 Benjamin 1999b, p. 62 (B1, 4). Hereafter, The Arcades Project will be cited by convolute rather than page number.
3 Ibid.
words, is recognisable as the commodity fetishism ‘that succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic’. This whole way of working sexual desire within the modern organisation of human sexuality is what constitutes, in Benjamin’s words, ‘the erotology of the damned’.

What is of no small significance as regards Leslie’s foregrounding of the above allegory of the commodity-whore is identifiable in terms of her forestalling the attempt, following the turn to consumption within current critique, to claim Benjamin as a theorist of shopping (with *The Arcades Project*, in particular, being appropriated as a must-have fashion accessory – the avant-garde’s guide to sexy shopping). Her work (which, as previously mentioned, appeared in 1997) closely engages the substance of trends in Benjamin scholarship that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. At one point, she comments – in relation to a perceived rise in ‘Benjaminiana’ – on how John Berger’s ‘materialist and pedagogic version of Benjamin [viewable in *Ways of Seeing* from 1972] has been over-written and replaced by a consumerist, postmodernist, superficial Benjamin’.

In retrospect, it becomes clearer how important this intervention against Benjamin-in-the-funhouse actually is. For a rapid expansion in Benjamin’s general textual field has occurred in recent years. In particular, there have been some symbolically significant publications in the field of English-language Benjamin studies. Harvard University Press has published a four-volume set of Benjamin’s *Selected Writings* (1996–2003), together with a long-awaited rendering into English of *Das Passagen-Werk – The Arcades Project* (1999).

To facilitate formal reception by English-speaking audiences of this latter work in translation, two international conferences were organised, from which a selection of papers were published in Benjamin special issues of two high-profile journals. In the United States, *boundary 2*’s *Arcades* special appeared as an essay collection titled ‘Benjamin Now’ (2003). This was followed a year later in Britain when *new formations* came out with an *Arcades* collection of its own, titled ‘Reading Benjamin’s Arcades’.

Such is the symbolic significance of these recent ventures within the field of Anglophone Benjamin-kritik, it seems fair to say that the next generation of critical work in this area has now

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4 Benjamin 1999b, B9, 1.
5 Benjamin 1999b, J66a, 9.
7 Benjamin 1996; Benjamin 1999a; Benjamin 2002; Benjamin 2003; Benjamin 1999b.
8 McLaughlin and Rosen 2003.
9 Burrow, Farnell and Jardine 2004–5.
arrived. So it was indeed timely for Leslie, in rough coincidence with the start of the shift we have just outlined, to have asserted a connection back to a ‘materialist’ and ‘pedagogic’ Benjamin from the early 1970s, in order to counter the pull towards ordinary consciousness characteristic of some contemporary fashionable ideas, which threaten ideologically to neutralise the thinker of, among other things, ‘the damned’ and their ‘erotology’.

All this being said, the purpose of the present discussion of Benjamin and *The Arcades Project* is to take note of Leslie’s presentation of Benjamin’s methodology as it drives the assemblage of materials for his study of the Paris arcades, in order to put what is, in fact, a slightly different inflection on the significance of the key critical procedures manifest in that work. As I suggested above, Leslie’s account of capitalism’s erotics, worked up through a reflection on Benjamin’s remarks about the nature of fashion, usefully co-ordinates the direction of subsequent work – at a whole generational level – on Benjamin’s analysis of commodity culture, capitalist modernity and the rise of fascism as formulated in his Paris study. In this connection, it seems important further to clarify the kind of approach that Benjamin takes to the whole activity of cultural critique, in order to establish more firmly the lessons that might be learned from the work produced for *The Arcades Project*, in particular regarding its engagement of the problem of commodity production within capitalist social relations. In the process, we should also be able to establish the extent of Benjamin’s active politicisation of his own work, taking place in response to the threat posed to critical thought and modern life more generally in the darkening times within which the work itself was produced. Each of these two outcomes to our work is of course to be seen as reinforcing the other in terms of their overall significance.

**Critical methodology**

Leslie’s discussion of the whore-as-allegory in her presentation of *The Arcades Project* as a form of capitalist critique culminates in a graphic account of how ‘Benjamin’s critical methodology is ripped through on the female body’. The essential point she makes, in connection with her emphasis on a vital link between women and commodity fetishism within the rule of capital, is that ‘a methodology that aims to encapsulate the destructive activity of capitalism mimics its actions, repeating its violence in the text and on its

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10 Leslie 1997, p. 83.
images, by turning the whore into allegory, the mannequin into effigy, the worker into material’. 11 Here, it is not that ‘the turning of the whore into allegory . . . reduces her to a sign’. 12 Rather, ‘as Benjamin seems to claim’, Leslie suggests, ‘such a move honestly appraises the brutality to which she is subjected and which objectifies her’. 13 It transpires from this argument that the very process of transformation of the woman at the centre of this system of structural violence is a matter of ‘equipping her, allegorically, as super-critic of the system that lays waste to her’.14

All in all, the above account of what is, in many ways, the most commonplace version of allegory ever invented adds to our understanding of the famous ‘cultural contradictions of capitalism’: the woman emerges as ‘super-critic’ of the capitalist system both despite and because of her objectification within it. At the same time, it would appear that there is something symptomatic about the way Leslie rehearses her case, which has to do with an anxiety about locating an element of destructive violence within Benjamin’s own critical methodology. In terms of the current presentation, the logic of the methodology at issue is essentially that of mimicry. So it is that Leslie finds herself arguing that what Benjamin is doing in The Arcades Project, when formulating his critique of an essentially violent system of commodity production and exchange, is ‘repeating its violence’: as has been suggested, ‘Benjamin’s critical methodology is ripped through on the female body’. There is a lurking suspicion in all this that Benjamin’s approach to his work as cultural critic may not in fact, qualitatively speaking, be distinct from the methods used by capital as it goes about its gruesome and deathly business. Here, it is that phrase ‘as Benjamin seems to claim’, used by Leslie to assure us that Benjaminian allegory is decidedly anticapitalist in its motivation, which registers most strongly the inevitable tension of a methodological mimicking of the procedures associated with commodity fetishism under contemporary capitalism. In a way, Leslie’s Benjamin emerges, in the face of this tension, as a type of mental gymnast who, in the anticapitalist Olympics, never puts a foot wrong. Near the beginning of Leslie’s article, in the lead-in to discussion of Benjamin and fashion, reference is made to ‘Benjamin’s 360° critique’.15 This particular phrase captures nicely the predilection in

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11 Leslie 1997, p. 84.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
Benjamin for systemic critique, and thus it serves Leslie’s purpose well as regards her retrieval of ‘a consumerist, postmodernist, superficial Benjamin’. And yet, of course, the phrase also carries the suggestion of The Arcades Project coming full circle in its revolutionism vis-à-vis the capitalist allegory of the commodity-whore. At issue from early on is an intimation of that problematic methodological mimeticism which, as we have seen, will persistently come to the surface of Leslie’s account of Benjamin’s critique of capital.

This said, a brief glance at two essays by Benjamin, titled ‘The Destructive Character’ and ‘On the Mimetic Faculty’, may indeed serve to suggest the existence of a genuinely radical agenda for The Arcades Project and to account for how it is in this work that a ‘methodology that aims to encapsulate the destructive activity of capitalism mimics its actions’. The above essays clearly indicate the way that the destructive character and the mimetic faculty are seen as antithetical in Benjamin’s thinking: there is little that is creative about the destructive character, and the capacity for mimicry is located at the base of diverse forms of creative activity.\(^\text{16}\) So it could well be that it is actually rather unfair to suggest that an essential circularity is what characterises Benjamin’s critical methods, as fashioned for the purposes of a 360° capitalist critique; in this particular case, what comes through is a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Even so, having acknowledged the possibility of what may be regarded as a sympathetic reading of the uses of mimicry in The Arcades Project, it might prove fruitful – as suggested above – to inflect in a slightly different way the significance of the critical methodology which is generative of Benjamin’s Arcades Project. We should do this inasmuch as the whole strategy of re-inflection proposed herein represents a crucial means by which to allow ourselves fully to do justice to the cutting edge of Benjamin’s criticisms of capitalist modernity.

**Benjamin’s epic theatre of modernity**

Here, our contention is that the method of Benjamin’s critical presentation of capitalism’s structuring allegory of ‘dialectical exchange between women and ware’ – placed under the rubric of ‘considerations of representability’ – needs to be understood in terms not of mimicry but of refraction. It would seem that an underlying assumption in Esther Leslie’s discussion of Benjamin’s critical practice as exemplified within The Arcades Project is that it is enough finally

\(^{16}\) Benjamin 1999a, pp. 541–2, 720–2.
to mimic reality in order to show it. This key idea about an essential isomorphism existing between word and thing constitutes the basis of Leslie’s account of what might be considered the curious phenomenon of Benjamin’s ‘repeating’ the violence of the capitalist system while condemning the workings of the system itself. As we have seen, an argument about Benjamin’s methodology and the female body which takes its cue from this starting-point may find itself, at some point along the line, confronted by the thought that ‘critique’ and ‘capital’ are – irony of ironies – in fact different names for the same thing. In light of this, it seems worth emphasising that one of the important things about replacing mimicry with refraction as the starting-point for our present account of critical method in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* is that we no longer need to run the risk, in the argument, of critique collapsing back into capital in the way we have just suggested. In this sense, the point about refraction as such is that a strategic element of non-mimicry in the way that refraction presents itself as a representation of reality is what saves it from turning into a direct mirror image of its object.

To put it another way, refraction comes through as the guarantee of the cutting edge of any form of criticism – of the capitalist system, or whatever – worthy of the name. In all this, if the logical counterpart to mimicry is the mirror image, then the logical counterpart to refraction is the practice of montage. Amongst the most famous passages from *The Arcades Project* are, of course, the ones where Benjamin himself, formulating key methodological statements for his work as a whole, speaks of montage. First:

> This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage.  

Then:

> Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.

Here, the idea which may be perceived as lying behind the ‘art of citing without quotation marks’ is consonant with the intention in many of Benjamin’s writings to reveal the construction of the modern as such. Fragments of
modernity are repeatedly ‘cited’ out of context (‘without quotation marks’), and this has the effect of blasting them out of what might otherwise prove to be – thanks to the influence of nineteenth-century historicist notions of ‘progress’ and ‘decline’ – a homogenising continuum of history. Benjamin brings montage into his repertoire of techniques as a practising critic. The consequence of this is explained by Benjamin himself: ‘I needn’t say anything. Merely show.’ The implication of this remark is that by purloining no valuables, appropriating no ingenious formulations, but, rather, allowing the ‘rags’ and ‘refuse’ of history to come into their own, Benjamin, through the discursive movement of citation (as opposed to commentary) makes critical use of everything that exchange-value has deemed outmoded. Like a rag-picker out of Baudelaire or Atget, Benjamin realises that those objects which have been used up – produced-exchanged-consumed, ‘worn’, ‘eaten’ – are ipso facto secretly collectable as belonging to history. In this regard, it seems not to go too far to suggest that Benjamin here gleans an apocalypse of use-value from the art of citing without quotation marks. In general, it suggests a type of modernist techno-critical interpretation of the significance of the view formulated in Marx according to which: ‘As the capitalist mode of production extends, so also does the utilization of the refuse left behind by production and consumption.’

In the context of modernism itself, this whole process of montage as the very action of refraction in the realm of representation is theorised by the Russian formalists through their concept of defamiliarisation. In addition, the conceptual space of this notion overlaps with that of ‘estrangement’, in terms of the theoretical armature structuring ‘epic theatre’ as developed by Brecht. And it is a Brecht nexus – where Brecht is regarded as a notably influential practitioner of montage – that is, as others have previously suggested, particularly pertinent where an understanding of Benjamin’s conception of ‘literary montage’ is concerned. (Here, the very phrase ‘the art of citing without quotation marks’ seems a strategic invocation of Brecht’s idea for a type of acting ‘without quotation marks [gestus],’ that works in such a way as to make gestures quotable.) On the strength of this Brecht nexus, it is possible to argue that The Arcades Project, comprising a vast montage of gestic citations, is in fact best described as Benjamin’s epic theatre of modernity. At one point in his correspondence, Benjamin speaks of his Arcades Project (conducted

from 1927 to 1929 and 1934 to 1940) as ‘the theatre of all my conflicts and all my ideas’. The thrust of our emphasis on the significance of a degree of Brechtianism in Benjamin’s literary production is thus that it seems appropriate to comprehend in a literally dramatic way Benjamin’s account of how his work took shape within the space of a theatre.

We shall suggest that, chiefly with his 1934 address ‘The Author as Producer’, Benjamin establishes himself as not just a great interpreter of Brecht but, in a directly political sense, the first Brechtian critic. Here, we are following the lead of Richard Sieburth. Sieburth describes how Benjamin’s predilection for a ‘poetics of parataxis’ is evident throughout his critical career, and it is brought into focus at an important stage by the inspiration supplied to it from ‘the didactic discontinuities of the Brechtian stage’. Sieburth offers a quite marvellous exegesis of this whole phenomenon:

‘Epic history’ in the same sense as Brecht’s ‘epic theatre’, the *Arcades Project* will not only administer the shock therapy of montage to block the transference projected onto the past by historicist ‘empathy’, but more importantly, by deploying its materials into a rhythm of caesura it will break the illusion that anything like continuity or causality connects past to present.

The essential thought in this presentation of a paratactical imagination manifesting itself in the course of Benjamin’s study of the Paris arcades is one of ‘[h]istory as parataxis – time scattered through space like stars, its course no longer taking the form of progress but leaping forth in the momentary flashes of dialectical constellations’. Amongst the varieties of modernist modes of montage one might cite surrealist photography or the criticism of Karl Kraus as exerting a strong influence on the kind of critical work that Benjamin produces when engaging the nineteenth century and its legacies. But it is, arguably, the reconstructed Brechtian stage that instantiates the most decisive form of influence in this regard.

**Benjamin as producer**

It is in ‘The Author as Producer’ that Benjamin cites Brecht’s epic theatre as constituting a model form of production for all producers located in the

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21 Sieburth 1989, p. 23.
23 Ibid.
cultural field; one could summarise Benjamin’s description of Brecht’s dramatic work as amounting to a presentation of the theatre for the times. In his address, Benjamin hails epic theatre as ‘the contemporary form’.24 One of the things that most impresses him about it is just how seriously it takes its responsibility to present itself as a model to producers in general. Specifying what would appear to be his primary criterion of value in this regard, Benjamin argues that ‘What matters . . . is the exemplary character of production, which is able, first, to induce other producers to produce, and, second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal’.25 It is in light of this emphasis on Brechtian usefulness that ‘The Author as Producer’ becomes a valuable co-text with which to read The Arcades Project, as not only an unfinished, but also a challengingly experimental work. Indeed, there seems nothing accidental about the way that the second phase of Benjamin’s work for his Arcades should commence in 1934, thus at the height of his preoccupation with the significance of a Brechtian revolution in European theatre. If it is indeed the case that Brecht offers a more politically efficacious understanding of montage-oriented production than the surrealists, under whose sign The Arcades Project is undertaken in the 1920s, then it is appropriate to the extent that Benjamin is now a writer in exile from post-1933 Hitlerian Germany. Needless to add, perhaps, the burden of Benjamin’s 1929 ‘Surrealism’ essay is that ‘there is no doubt that the heroic phase [of the surrealist movement] . . . is over’.26 (What may be merely a coincidence, though the fact itself seems worth recording, is that 1929 – from May onwards – is also the year in which Benjamin enters into a personal friendship with Brecht; a friendship which is felt on both sides to be a tacit form of political alliance.)

From the point of view of The Arcades Project’s actual functioning as Benjamin’s epic theatre of modernity, it is evident that what is especially useful to Benjamin in this regard is a politics of representation that appears integral to Brecht’s epic theatre. In his theoretical writings on theatre, Brecht is concerned to emphasise the significance of, for example, the following axiomatic statement: ‘If art reflects life it does so with special mirrors.’27 His realism is thus one of a refractory rather than a mimetic nature; on the practicalities involved in artistic representation of ‘things as they are’, he is

24 Benjamin 1999a, p. 778.
25 Benjamin 1999a, p. 777.
26 Benjamin 1999a, p. 208.
27 Brecht 2001, p. 204.
clear that it ‘is of course essential that stylization should not remove the natural element but should heighten it.’ 28 Along these lines, a shift from mimicry to refraction, at the level of a recharged mimesis, is what is apparently implied by the correspondent axiomatic formulation that ‘[r]eality alters; to represent it the means of representation must alter too’.29 (In a way, offering a gloss on what might be regarded as misleading about perceptions of an isomorphic relation between words and things, Brecht has it in a pithy remark that ‘It is only boots that can be made to measure.’30) In his Brecht commentary within ‘The Author as Producer’, Benjamin demonstrates a firm grasp of the implications of Brecht’s programmatic pronouncements about ‘art’ and ‘real life’, which helped to shape what came to be called ‘epic theatre’. For instance, Benjamin explains how epic theatre ‘does not reproduce situations; rather, it discovers them’.31 Here, we focus on the way that this innovative form of theatre, by its representation of reality, is able to show what actually takes place in a given situation. It is this aspect of Brecht’s practice which manifests a strong appeal to Benjamin as a critic of capitalist modernity, at work as a producer within the space of his own theatre, The Arcades Project. The point about this emphasis is that it serves to suggest how the critic-as-mimic must, after the decline of classical realism, seem in fact a rather superficial figure, compared with the critic who allows himself to be schooled from the perspective of the Brechtian stage.

To be sure, it is not that Esther Leslie – to whom reference has just been made again through the above critique of critical mimicry – is not well-versed in the complexities of the realism versus modernism debates in modern literary theory and history. But, as we shall suggest towards the end of this discussion, the moment of a Brechtian Benjamin within the field of Benjamin studies is in fact yet to come, and so it is strategic for us to point up here the force of Benjamin’s Brechtianism as it finds expression in The Arcades Project. The use which Brecht makes of montage as an organising principle within epic theatre is especially important for Benjamin as regards his sense of what ‘theatre’ is capable of as a certain structuring of politico-critical space. Pointedly, he goes into some detail when speaking in ‘The Author as Producer’ of ‘the procedure of montage: the superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is

28 Ibid.
29 Brecht 2001, p. 110.
30 Brecht 2001, p. 270.
31 Benjamin 1999a, p. 778.
Benjamin as Producer in The Arcades Project

inserted’. Benjamin lays out how it is that ‘The interruption of action, on account of which Brecht described his theatre as “epic”, constantly counteracts illusion on the part of the audience’. This whole practice of dispelling illusion is a key manoeuvre, at the level of production, for ‘a theatre that proposes to make use of elements of reality in experimental rearrangements’. In essence, Benjamin here clarifies the workings of the famous Brechtian ‘estrangement-effect [Verfremdungseffekt]’ – without, in this case, actually referring to it by name – in order to sharpen an understanding of the purchase it offers on reality itself. Thus, the whole point of ‘interruption’ is that it has the character not of a stimulant but of an organizing function. It arrests the action in its course, and thereby compels the listener to adopt an attitude vis-à-vis the process, the actor vis-à-vis his role.

By estranging what is given as real, the V-effect, as crystallised within the procedure of montage, proves pivotal in terms of its setting critical thought in motion and thereby permitting the creation of a new reality that, in ironic fashion, emerges out of the representation of reality.

To put it another way, Brechtian epic theatre rehearses a certain paradox of mimesis that comes through as refraction. There is, in all this, a developed sense of the Brechtian stage as a sort of ‘little universe’ where elements of refracted reality are thus made use of, as Benjamin puts it, ‘in experimental rearrangements’. And it is, doubtless, this whole experimentalism characteristic of Brecht’s project for the theatre which encourages Benjamin to rethink what a book about the Paris arcades should look like. In this latter regard, the very apparatus through which an account of the whole nineteenth century might be produced is, to use the appropriate Brechtian term, ‘refunctioned’. So it is that we get The Arcades Project as a rather different kind of capitalist critique to what, in the main, has gone before (the apparent marginality of the arcades in Paris as a site for criticism is, of course, anything but beside the point).

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 ‘Estrangement-effect’: this is preferred as a more literal translation of Verfremdungseffekt than the famous ‘alienation effect’ (it is, in fact, the case that the German word for ‘alienation’, in the Marxian sense of the term, is not Verfremdung but Entfremdung). Also, with estrangement-effect we are able to retain a conceptual link – the existence of which is acknowledged by Brecht himself – that connects epic theatre to Russian formalism and its sui generis conception of form as a ‘making strange [ostranenia]’ of a given reality.
36 Benjamin 1999a, p. 778.
It is once again in ‘The Author as Producer’ that what virtually appears as a rationale for the kind of experimentation that Benjamin himself carries out within his Paris study is articulated through a presentation of Brecht’s contemporaneity within the world of production. The relevant passage from Benjamin’s text is the following:

To signify the transformation of the forms and instruments of production in the way desired by a progressive intelligentsia – that is, one interested in freeing the means of production and serving the class struggle – Brecht coined the term Umfunktionierung [functional transformation].

It goes on:

He was the first to make of intellectuals the far-reaching demand not to supply the apparatus of production without, to the utmost extent possible, changing it in accordance with socialism.

In context, it is hard to avoid the impression that when Benjamin speaks of the above ‘demand’ made of ‘progressive’ or ‘socialist’ intellectuals – to bring about a functional transformation of their means of production – the force of what he is saying carries through into his work on the nineteenth century, regarded as a form of primal history in relation to the historical present. It is precisely in these terms that The Arcades Project is given shape as a book that is refunctiooned as a form of ‘epic theatre of modernity’. Or, to sharpen this particular point, Benjamin’s emphasis on an Umfunktionierung of the form of the work which gets produced as The Arcades Project reflects how the tone of the work itself may be seen as changing into the mid-1930s in response to the ongoing rise of Nazism.

The militant language of ‘class struggle’ which marks the ‘Author as Producer’ address – in contrast, perhaps, to the emphasis which obtains in the ‘surrealist’ first phase of the Paris study, when the arcades were conceived of as ‘A Dialectical Fairyland’ – seems symptomatic of this modulation where Benjamin’s stance as an author-producer is concerned. In this connection, it may be worth noting briefly that ‘The Author as Producer’ is sub-titled ‘Address at the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Paris, April 27, 1934’. (Incidentally, Benjamin’s editors for the Harvard Selected Writings believe the date specified in the sub-title to be the date when the work was completed,

37 Benjamin 1999a, pp. 773–4.
38 Benjamin 1999a, p. 774.
39 See Benjamin 1999b, pp. 873–84.
and that the address as such was never delivered.40) Everywhere in his address, Benjamin is concerned to engage the theme of the politics of intellectual work. In this regard, the theory of class struggle and its assorted virtues, linked to the notion of systemic critique, comes through as central to Benjamin’s way of thinking about the problem – in the realm of literary criticism, for example – of the relationship between political tendency and literary value: we return here to debates within classical Marxism on ‘tendency literature’.41 The main thesis of ‘The Author as Producer’, which as such clearly reflects the at once scientific and engaged nature of Benjamin’s position, is stated in the following terms:

the place of the intellectual in the class struggle can be identified – or, better, chosen – only on the basis of his position in the process of production. 42

All this is brought forward as, in a way, an extension to earlier reflections formulated by Benjamin, where, in the 1930 essay ‘Theories of German Fascism’, war is presented as nothing other than class struggle conducted at the level of nationhood.43

**Baudelaire-Brecht**

Our argument, then, is that, within the context of contemporary historical and political change, Benjamin’s Brechtianism may be viewed as a phenomenon that grows in significance into the second phase of the development of *The Arcades Project*. An ‘epic’ dimension to the Benjamin study of the Paris arcades arises from the form of the work as a structure of gestic citations. (In a way, the work resembles not only the Brechtian stage but also the Eiffel Tower, in that its whole exemplary modernity is made manifest by its actual constructedness being laid bare throughout.)44) But if Brecht, as inventor of epic theatre and pioneering artistic proponent of the V-effect, really is the powerful moving spirit – or secret uncanny ghost – within Benjamin’s *Arcades*...
Project which I am claiming he is, then some account needs to be taken of the fact that, vast as it is, there is relatively little direct reference to Brecht’s works in Benjamin’s text. All told, there are no more than eight such references to Brecht in the whole of The Arcades Project.

Having said that, the above statistic need not throw up too many obstacles in terms of the case I am making for the extent of Brecht’s influence on Benjamin’s Paris study. Indeed, it arguably adds to the interest of the case. For, on one level, we would not expect to encounter the first thinker of the V-aesthetic, so to speak, amongst the predominantly nineteenth-century settings of Benjamin’s research into the Paris arcades. Meanwhile, on another level, we might note how there is an interest which is everywhere present in The Arcades Project to explore how the old and the new interpenetrate during the displacement of a given historical epoch by the succeeding one. From a historiographical point of view, Benjamin’s Paris study may be regarded as, precisely, a study in the writing of the primal history [ Urgeschichte], located within the nineteenth century, of the historical present – which, for Benjamin, is the present, twentieth-century moment. Or, as it is put in the course of his 1935 Exposé for The Arcades Project, ‘the modern, la modernité, is always citing primal history’. Here, it is what appears to be an allusion to the Baudelairean conception of ‘la modernité’ which points towards where we might best focus attention as regards an examination of the new kind of work – coming through modernist montage – which is done on the interpenetration of old and new in Benjamin’s account of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, whereas Brecht might appear, as a matter of empirical record, largely absent from the pages of The Arcades Project, the figure who is, in fact, dominant in this regard is Charles Baudelaire.

This observation regarding an ‘absent’ Brecht and a ‘present’ Baudelaire, within the problematic of what we might think of as Benjaminian historiography, brings us to what is potentially a rather contentious stage in our argument about the existence – focalised by The Arcades Project – of a Brechtian Benjamin. Acknowledging that there might be an element of contentiousness about this next part of the discussion, I shall say it all very quickly, for a start, in order to indicate where the ongoing argument is leading: ‘Brecht’ in The Arcades Project is Baudelaire as Ur-form, at the level of primal history, of the ‘author as producer’. The significance of this claim is that it

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45 Benjamin 1999b, p. 10.
reverses the polarity in the Brecht/Baudelaire relationship briefly sketched above. This reversal comes about through emphasising the importance of an interpenetration of the old and the new, in terms of Benjamin’s historicisation of the present of enunciation as he is engaged in writing his history of the nineteenth century, which eventually transmogrifies into the twentieth century of wholesale inter-imperialist war; the era of capitalist commodity consumption mutates into the age of fascist mass mobilisation. In terms of the playing out of a dynamic relation between the French lyric poet and the German theatre practitioner, it is striking how Baudelaire is presented as the precursor of Brecht in the assemblage of materials for *The Arcades Project*. The terms of Benjamin’s ‘Author as Producer’ thesis, about the bearing of social class position on the political practice of montage, come into play as we see Benjamin himself carrying out the work, within his study of the Paris arcades, of locating Baudelaire within the nineteenth century. The implication would appear to be that the poet of *Les Fleurs du mal* should be seen as a forerunner in relation to Brecht-the-producer, and this form of connection comes through as a means whereby to amplify the achievement of the latter in the general field of modern art.

‘... all the rags, the paint, the pulleys, the chains, the alterations, the scribbled-over proof sheets ...’

Within Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, the location of Baudelaire in nineteenth-century history is, for the most part, the work of Convolute J, under the heading ‘Baudelaire’. An animating question behind many of the notes formulated by Benjamin concerns what it means to be a precursor. In this regard, it is interesting to note how Baudelaire as an artistic producer is aligned with the practice of montage in what we would now think of as high modernism. Utilising terms of reference that square with the remarks on the ‘principle of interruption’ in ‘The Author as Producer’, for example, Benjamin writes about Baudelaire as his critical object in the following way: ‘To interrupt the course of the world – that was Baudelaire’s deepest intention.’46 Indeed, the fact that Baudelaire is conceived of in these notes as an *artistic producer* is significant; it shows, again, that the kind of thematics about the interrelationship between social position and technical innovation that, in the 1934 address, are explicitly elaborated as a way of understanding modern

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46 Benjamin 1999b, J50, 2; Benjamin 1999a, p. 778.
art, were also being drawn upon during the actual compilation of Convolute J. Thus, Benjamin is clearly interested in the issue of Baudelaire’s positioning – a socio-theatrical mise en scène of the subject – within the social production relations of his time, and in the bearing this has on the nature of his subject’s response, as a lyric poet, to the changed conditions of artistic production in the mid-century. This interest is brought sharply into focus in the following passage from Convolute J:

Around the middle of the century, the conditions of artistic production underwent a change. This change consisted in the fact that for the first time the form of the commodity imposed itself decisively on the work of art, and the form of the masses on its public. Particularly vulnerable to these developments, as can be seen now unmistakably in our century, was the lyric. It is the unique distinction of Les Fleurs du mal that Baudelaire responded to precisely these altered conditions with a book of poems. It is the best example of heroic conduct to be found in his life.47

All in all, it seems not to go too far to suggest that the passage quoted above, in fact, offers a condensed ‘Author as Producer’-type reading of Baudelaire, that is, in terms of its emphasis on a structural sense of where Baudelaire himself is speaking from when he comes to consciousness as the poet of Les Fleurs du mal in (heroic) recognition of the contemporary commodification of art and massification of its audiences. The whole point about Baudelaire-the-producer fashioning himself as a lyric poet (the producer of lyric poems) is that it constitutes the most powerful means whereby to carry through with his ‘deepest intention’ to ‘interrupt the course of the world’. If it is the case that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the lyric poem is the cultural form most threatened by an expansion in commodity culture, then engaging in the conscious production of ‘a book of poems’ indeed becomes a way of living out the essentially interruptive principle of montage – with all this implies regarding a strategic estrangement of the present situation.

Les Fleurs du mal offers a refractory cutting edge to the representation it sets forth of the world as it is. (From Baudelaire’s aforementioned ‘deepest intention’ to ‘interrupt the course of the world’ – to quote further from the Benjamin note cited above – ‘sprang his violence, his impatience, and his anger; from it, too, sprang the ever-renewed attempts to cut the world to the

47 Benjamin 1999b, J60, 6.
heart [or sing it to sleep]. It is altogether paradoxical that Baudelaire should have great success as a lyric poet both despite and because of his operating within a climate no longer hospitable to poetry. Benjamin points out in this connection that ‘Les Fleurs du mal is the last book of poems to have had a European-wide reverberation’. But what evidence is there to suggest that an alignment is in order not just between Baudelaire and a whole culture of montage in modernism, but, more specifically, between Baudelaire and Brecht, seen as one of the foremost modernist artists? To an extent, we have begun to answer this question by indicating the general tenor of the Baudelairean estrangement of the modern in contemporary life: ‘his violence, his impatience, and his anger’, and so on. The emotional register – better, the passionale furor – of Baudelaire’s lyric poetry seems to chime, in significant respects, with that of Brecht’s epic theatre (not to mention his own poetry, the substance of which we shall have occasion to consider in a moment). However, it is, above all, the anti-illusionistic sense of the theatrical evident in Les Fleurs du mal which can be said to bring Baudelaire as poet-producer closest to the workings of Brechtian drama: the ethos of ‘functional transformation’ would appear not to be foreign to the artistic production of the poet whose work enjoys a ‘European-wide reverberation’.

Given everything we have had to say about Benjamin’s method within The Arcades Project – concerning ‘literary montage’ as formulated through images of ‘rags’ and ‘refuse’ – it is not hard to fathom the nature of the interest shown by Benjamin in a passage from the later Baudelaire (a kind of ‘outtake’ in relation to the Baudelairean oeuvre as a whole) which outlines a plan for future work. Benjamin takes the trouble to copy out the passage for his Arcades, thus:

In the notes he left for a preface to a projected third edition of Les Fleurs du mal, he [Baudelaire] writes: ‘Do we show the public . . . the mechanism behind our effects? . . . Do we display all the rags, the paint, the pulleys, the chains, the alterations, the scribbled-over proof sheets – in short, all the horrors that make up the sanctuary of art?’ Ch. B., Œuvres, vol. 1, p. 582.

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48 Benjamin 1999b, J50, 2.
49 Benjamin 1999b, J56a, 9.
50 Benjamin 1999b, J56, 4. See also J57, 2: ‘The passage in which Baudelaire speaks of his fascination with painted theatrical backdrops – Where? Q4a,4’. Interestingly, Q4a,4 comprises a further quotation by Benjamin from Baudelaire’s Œuvres, where Baudelaire clarifies why he should value as he does not only the theatre’s ‘scenery’, but also the whole ‘brutal and enormous magic’ of the dioramas: ‘These things, because
Here, it is Baudelaire – not unlike Benjamin, we might recall, with his *Arcades Project* as the ‘theatre of all my conflicts and all my ideas’ – who conceives of his literary production along the lines implied by the metaphor of theatre. The workings of an essentially theatrical imagination come through as the guarantee of a position within the cultural field which, in its implications, is antithetical to the modern world’s entire naturalised ideology of art.

In essence, the element of illusion within artistic production is denounced as the expression of a conservative politics; from the point of view of the artistic producer, real historical change can only come about through a strategic breaking away from that legitimation of illusion itself which is, by and large, the *raison d’être* of any given work of art (most especially in respect of notions of the artwork’s ‘unity’). According to the logic of Baudelaire’s view (shared of course by Brecht as well as Benjamin), a theatrical display of what is false – in the sense of ‘illusion-generating’ through the theatre’s production process (‘the rags, the paint, the pulleys’, and so forth) – is, in fact, what makes for a politically transformative theatre of truth. In Benjamin, the single most striking expression of the dialectical thought that underpins opposition to art-as-illusion (evoked by use of the word ‘horrors’ in the passage from Baudelaire quoted above) is doubtless the now famous remark that ‘There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.’51 Whether, in the case of, for example, the critical work (Benjamin), the lyric poem (Baudelaire) or the stage play (Brecht), the whole idea is to challenge the legitimacy of illusion as itself the constitutive myth, the founding fetishism, indeed the direct reification of ‘culture’.

**A whore-poem from the point of view of the whore**

But if Baudelaire, in his reflections on his work as an artistic producer, offers the shock of the V-effect before V-effects were invented, we must remember that the notes discovered by Benjamin while compiling Convolute J are ones relating to a projected third edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* which was never produced by Baudelaire himself. To put it another way, the thrust of Baudelaire’s

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notes for an unwritten preface to a new edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* is evidently towards demonstrating a sense of release (from ‘the sanctuary of art’) which comes through an *Umfunktionierung* of the artist’s means of representation – a functional transformation of the ‘mode of production’ – and a concomitant participation in the class struggle, but the more advanced third edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* does not materialise. Here, the non-appearance of, as it were, the V-effect version of Baudelaire’s ‘book of poems’ seems positively symptomatic in its significance. For Baudelaire, within Benjamin’s implicit typology of nineteenth-century forms that get expressed as twentieth-century realities, is *not* Brecht, but, precisely, his precursor. In this sense, his role within primal history (the Parisian nineteenth century) is to foreshadow the coming onto the historical stage of the figure who is to be his successor, in the guise of a definitively modern version of the Benjaminian culture-hero which we have seen outlined as the author-as-producer.

In this regard, the differences as regards the interpenetration of the old and the new which are articulated between Baudelaire and Brecht as producers are just as significant as the similarities. Saying this, we are able to bring into focus how it is that *Convolute J* should carry the suggestion that there is always something lacking in terms of the composition of Baudelaire’s class politics. Time and again, Benjamin marks how the rag-picker poet himself, notwithstanding the heroism of his artistic production as a lyric poet, never did go wholly over to the side of the oppressed. For example, this sense of lack is emphasised by Benjamin when he suggests that Baudelaire’s class politics may be no more radical than those of Victor Hugo, an author-producer whose social-reformist stripe is clearly evident throughout, among other things, the humanist and life-affirming *Les Misérables*: ‘the revolutionary proletariat . . . dispels the illusion of the mass through the reality of class. Neither Hugo nor Baudelaire could be directly at its side for that’.52 (Incidentally, that ‘humanist and life-affirming’, above, perhaps helps to bring out how the manifest destiny of *Les Misérables* was always that of becoming a smash hit musical in the twentieth century.) In his work on Baudelaire, Benjamin clarifies the ambiguous nature of the poet’s position within the whole revolutionary process as such. This position appears mediated through the presentation of the *flâneur* in Baudelaire’s mapping of the Paris cityscape. It is in the Baudelaire section of Benjamin’s 1935 *Arcades* Exposé that the location of Baudelaire’s

52 Benjamin 1999b, J81a, 1.
flâneur – and, by extension, of Baudelaire himself – is established most clearly, in terms of a class politics mapped onto historical time and urban space. Benjamin writes: ‘The flâneur still stands on the threshold – of the metropolis as of the middle class.’ With this formulation, Benjamin anticipates the historical formation of the masses in the city itself, and places the Baudelairean flâneur as a figure who appears forever on the border, where he might feel that he belongs neither to the metropolis nor to the middle class: ‘In neither is he at home’, Benjamin adds. It is thus the fact of this existence ‘on the border’ that determines the flâneur (again, by extension, Baudelaire himself) as an allegorist par excellence. Benjamin shows that he is indeed thinking together the identities of the Baudelairean flâneur and the poet of Les Fleurs du mal when he writes: ‘the gaze of the allegorist, as it falls on the city, is the gaze of the alienated man. It is the gaze of the flâneur’. And, at the same time, it is here that the kind of allegory which is modelled on the flâneur’s characteristic in-betweenness as a city-dweller is presented as a form of critique – at once forceful and flawed – of whatever may present itself as a unity at the level of the modern within contemporary life. (It goes without saying that the supreme instance of a ‘unity’ in the foregoing sense is the commodity itself.) In the end, Baudelaire emerges as a lyric poet who appears classically petty-bourgeois in his politics, always given to a certain ambiguity where the representation of reality within a whole world of capitalist production is concerned. Indeed, if we allow a substitution in the argument of ‘spirituality’ for ‘class politics’, it can be seen that Benjamin himself is making essentially the same point about Baudelaire’s ‘alienation’ when he says, in a note which relates to the Baudelaire book he hoped to complete as an offshoot of The Arcades Project, that his ‘view of the Catholic temper of his poetry has been adopted rather uncritically by literary historians’. As it happens, a nice epitome of the problematic class politics in Baudelaire may be found amongst Benjamin’s notes for Convolute J. At this juncture, it seems worth pausing briefly to note that we come upon this particular formulation in the Baudelaire convolute exactly at the point when a direct

53 Benjamin 1999b, p. 10.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Benjamin 2003, p. 95. See also the epistolary exchange where, first, Adorno cautions Benjamin against his ‘characterization of Baudelaire in terms of the petty bourgeoisie’, and, second, Benjamin reasserts his case, ending as follows: ‘The decisive fact is that throughout his life Baudelaire was cut off from all dealings with the world of finance and the high bourgeoisie’ (Benjamin 2003, pp. 205 and 209).
comparison is being made by Benjamin between Baudelaire and Brecht as artistic producers; it appears remarkable indeed that this crystallisation of a key critical view of Baudelaire should take place when Brecht, of all people, is brought into the frame. We have already suggested how, both despite and because of the vastness of The Arcades Project, ‘Bertolt Brecht’ seems to constitute a conspicuous absence in Benjamin’s text. The corollary to this is the further suggestion that although the direct references to Brecht are sparse amongst the various convolutes that make up Benjamin’s Arcades Project, the significance of the actual Brecht references that are there in fact increases in inverse proportion to their sparseness.

This, then, is the context for a brief remark by Benjamin on the gaze – the ‘gaze of the flâneur’, perhaps – the structure of which, strikingly, seems never to be dialectical in Baudelaire. Here, in full, is the remark in question: ‘Baudelaire never wrote a whore-poem from the point of view of the whore. (But compare Brecht, Lesebuch für Städtebewohner, no. 5).’ For our present purposes, there are two main points to be made about the significance of the above ‘whore-poem’ remark in Convolute J. The first has to do with Benjamin’s interest in Baudelaire’s handling of prostitution as a type of concept-metaphor in his allegorical mode of apprehension of the world; the latter constituting a whole way of seeing encapsulated in the word correspondances, used, famously, as the title for the most expository amongst the poems included in Les Fleurs du mal. Thus, Benjamin is evidently thinking along lines previously laid down by Baudelaire in the account he formulates of the growth in commodity culture taking place in the mid-nineteenth century. The germ of the allegory of the commodity-whore, which forms the central component of Benjamin’s critique of a capitalist eroticism, is discoverable in Baudelaire. So it is that the Baudelaire section of the 1935 Arcades Exposé is where the idea of the ‘commodity made flesh’ through the existence of the whore is worked out in explicit terms, specifically the ‘image’ of ‘the prostitute’ as that of ‘seller and sold in one’.

In addition, it is in the spirit of Baudelaire’s allegorisation of what is made to appear as an almost generically Parisian urban space – ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, to quote the title of the Exposé of 1939 – that Benjamin should proceed to fashion the prostitute-as-image as a form of expanded metaphor that figures the condition of life which obtains for all producers

57 Benjamin 1999b, J66a, 7.
58 Benjamin 1999b, p. 10.
who, under capitalism, are effectively obliged to sell themselves in the work that they do. Pertinent here is Benjamin’s account, considered earlier, of precisely that mid-nineteenth-century development where ‘for the first time the form of the commodity imposed itself decisively on the work of art’.

Benjamin develops his analysis of this transformation to the point where such a thing as a whore-poem might, in fact, be held to speak of not only the whore, but also the poet (not to mention the flâneur, the intellectual, or the man of letters). In the Baudelaire convolute of The Arcades Project it is none other than Baudelaire himself, struggling to make ends meet by his poetry, who is presented as the alpha and omega of the idea of the prostituted poet-producer, the whore of the literary marketplace. To quote further from Benjamin’s collection of notes: ‘Baudelaire . . . confirmed in his own person what he had said about the unavoidable necessity of prostitution for the poet’. (Incidentally, it can be argued in light of the foregoing remark that the notion of a newly universalised experience of prostitution is what best presses into relief the meaning of the famous last line of Les Fleur du mal’s opening poem ‘Au Lecteur’: ‘Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!’) Similarly, the existence of a market-economy model of prostitution, bearing upon virtually the whole category of male literary production, is what is emphasised in Benjamin’s 1935 Arcades Exposé: ‘In the flâneur, the intelligentsia sets foot in the marketplace – ostensibly to look around, but in truth to find a buyer.’

And yet, though Benjamin clearly finds it useful in his work on the Paris arcades to explore the implications of the Baudelairean concept-metaphor of prostitution in order to deepen and widen an understanding of the historical conditions of capital which highlight the modern in the nineteenth century, Baudelaire’s gaze on contemporary life, as articulated through his whore-poems, is seen to be symptomatically undialectical in structure. Notwithstanding the fact of a Baudelairean ‘allegorical mode of apprehension of the world’, this one-way dimension to Baudelaire’s way of seeing is symptomatic of his alienation as an essentially petty-bourgeois artistic producer. The poet of Les Fleurs du mal ‘never wrote a whore-poem from the point of view of the whore’. This observation compounds the view that Baudelaire, in terms of the force and complexity of his political sympathies, could never be directly at the proletariat’s ‘side’ in the decisive moment of the revolutionary
struggle. In essence, the problem is that despite Baudelaire’s predilection for the whore-poem as such (which helps to establish him as a literary hero for Benjamin), he is a poet who makes prostitution one of the subjects of his poetry without at the same time becoming subjective about this particular subject. And it is the literary production of Brecht as poet which serves to bring out this limitation in what Baudelaire is about when he is engaged in estranging the noxious capitalist culture of the commodity fetish. Baudelaire’s politics, as the above assessment by Benjamin registers and clarifies, finally do not allow him to side with the revolutionary class. Indeed, Benjamin’s follow-through on this view of Baudelaire as, in many ways, the epitome of ‘the alienated man’, is to argue in the Exposé of 1935 that in fact ‘he sides with the asocial’.62 Benjamin adds (making a comment the implications of which, it would seem, could not be more ironic or entirely droll in light of Baudelaire’s strategic expansion of prostitution-as-metaphor): ‘He realizes his only sexual communion with a whore.’63 The petty-bourgeois stance, traced out across the Parisian nineteenth century by the figure of the flâneur, is one that abstracts from the social existence of human beings. Benjamin, ever conscious that the present is a historical product of the past, manages to get a glimpse of history at work in shaping the configuration of the present, even in the symbolism of how the flâneur lives his life. He concludes the Baudelaire section of the Exposé of 1935 with the remark ‘Baudelaire succumbs to the rage for Wagner’, and in an instant – the lightning flash of ‘dialectics at a standstill’ – we see that the basis for fascist populism of the 1930s is laid in the petty-bourgeois mentality which has been structured by the concept-metaphor of prostitution during the dictatorship of the commodity-as-fetish.64

What Brecht brings to this reading, formulated in The Arcades Project, of the processes and transformations of historical change is precisely that ‘becoming subjective’ moment in one’s grasp of the meaning of ‘prostitution’ which Benjamin shows to be so signal lacking in Baudelaire as poet (allegorist, lyricist) of the commodity-whore. Brecht does, in fact, write a whore-poem from the point of view of the whore – Poem 5 in ‘A Reader for Those who

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid. See also an account of Baudelaire in the early Benjamin emphasising the poet’s preoccupation with the ‘negative of essence’, and clearly anticipating Benjamin’s sense of Baudelaire’s alienation as itself a product of the male literary intellectual’s way of conceiving the very notion of prostitution: ‘For [Baudelaire] as litterateur, the hedonistic and hieratic nature of the prostitute’s existence came to life’ (Benjamin 1996, pp. 361, 362).
64 Benjamin 1999b, pp. 11, 10.
Live in Cities’, from 1926–7. It is a work that begins ‘I’m dirt’, and ends ‘(That’s something I’ve heard a woman say.)’\(^6^5\) In other words, apart from its parenthetical last line, it takes the form of a dramatic monologue; by spreading the speaking voice across two first-person singular positions in this way, Brecht is able to structure a dialectical relationship between not only the two ‘I’s in the text, but also the parenthetical ‘I’ and the reader beyond the poem’s frame, who is addressed directly in that last line. Clearly, it is possible to note Brecht’s sense of the theatre being in evidence as a shaping force in respect of his production of lyric poetry. Poem 5’s dramatisation of voice in this threefold fashion thus plays out along the lines of what we have already come across as the Benjaminian exposition formulated in the abstract within ‘The Author as Producer’. Here, the listener is compelled to ‘adopt an attitude vis-à-vis the process’, precisely from the shock of the parenthetical ‘I’ relating how he has heard ‘a woman’ say ‘I’m dirt’. The upshot is that the poem gives expression to a politics the substance of which articulates a world view where social human beings – the whore, the anonymous speaker, the reader-listener – are grasped as social in their dialectical interrelationship, in the face of the general alienation (the structurally-determined reification) of a commodity economy. In the end, it is ‘a woman’ rather than ‘the whore’ who says ‘I’m dirt’.

Poem 5 brings about a strategic restoration of the whore’s point of view, marking her out in the process as a producer (of ‘sex for sale’) amongst producers, and, indeed, no longer simply an object of consumption for other producers. What is perhaps the most important thing of all about this lyrical-dramatic rehumanisation of the figure of the whore in Brecht is that it clearly brings out precisely what is at stake in the interplay of similarity and difference that structures the trope which we might think of as ‘Baudelaire-Brecht’ in the theatrical space of Benjamin’s Arcades Project. The exemplary character of production where Brecht-as-author is concerned – in effect, a strategic reworking of ‘lyric poetry’ in terms of ‘epic theatre’ – shows that a historic taking sides with the exploited, in the face of the structural logic of a capitalist system of commodity producers and consumers, is a realistic possibility for the radical who wishes to awaken from the slumber of the social reformer. The significance of Benjamin’s comparison of Baudelaire and Brecht at the level of the whore-poem is that it provides a means whereby to signal how it happens that it is

in fact the latter rather than the former of these two figures who, let us say, sides with the social. Within epic theatre, Brecht’s implicit self-identification as a producer (as opposed to a dramatist or a poet, say) comes through as the guarantee of the revolutionary credentials of the kind of dramatic activity – a dialectics of the V-effect – which he is thenceforth able to bring into being.

Proletarianisation

What Baudelaire already was (as the promise of an advanced intellectual on the evidence of a projected epic theatre-type third edition of Les Fleurs du mal), Brecht has now become. Or, emphasising a broad historical sweep, what the nineteenth century of Baudelaire-Napoleon III already was, the twentieth century of Brecht-Hitler has now become. These remarks point up the thrust of Benjamin’s historicisation of one epoch’s mutation into another. They also serve to indicate the personal investment which Benjamin has in working on the Paris arcades in order to be able to grasp the shape and bearing of historical change itself and, ultimately, to formulate an understanding of the subsequent course of modern history. Benjamin is caught up in the matrix, as it were, which is structured by the interpenetration of old and new where the relations between Baudelaire and Brecht are concerned. On Benjamin’s part, what reveals the fact of this situatedness perhaps most clearly is the way that the ‘point of view’ of the figure of the whore is handled in work that Benjamin himself produces; logically enough, prostitution emerges as what would appear to be the touchstone issue. Interestingly, while Benjamin, in terms of his own literary production, is never the author of a bona fide whore-poem, it is possible nevertheless to identify what might be regarded as the prose equivalent of the same, fashioned as a sort of set-piece within one of his larger prose pieces.

I am referring to a well-known passage in ‘A Berlin Chronicle’ (an unfinished work from 1932) where Benjamin, writing as a memoirist, speaks of his encounters with the city’s prostitutes. The ‘sabotage of real social existence’ is the overall theme of Benjamin’s reflections at this stage in the proceedings; a theme focalised by Benjamin through his recounting how he would always keep half a step behind his mother while walking with her in the city, manifesting a ‘stubborn refusal under any circumstances to form a united front’.

66 Benjamin 1999a, p. 600.
There is no doubt, at any rate, that the feeling of crossing for the first time the threshold of one’s class had a part in the almost unequalled fascination of publicly accosting a whore in the street. At the beginning, however, this was a crossing of frontiers not only social but topographic, in the sense that whole networks of streets were opened up under the auspices of prostitution. But was it really a crossing? Is it not, rather, an obstinate and voluptuous hovering on the brink, a hesitation that has its most cogent motive in the fact that beyond this frontier lies nothingness?

This is an account of flânerie in Berlin which, in significant respects, seems pretty much a replay of Benjamin’s presentation of the Parisian flâneur, who ‘stands on the threshold – of the metropolis as of the middle class’ and of the Baudelaire who ‘never wrote a whore-poem from the point of view of the whore’ all rolled into one. Benjamin, as he tells us at the beginning of ‘A Berlin Chronicle’, is ‘a son of wealthy middle-class parents’. The passage quoted above clearly stages the fantasy of betrayal on the part of the privileged bourgeois in class terms; as an enactment of the ‘sabotage’ of ‘real social existence’ through one’s ‘publicly accosting a whore in the street’, it expresses, by the same token, a desire for real social existence such as may be found only outside the bourgeois class.

But, if this small Berlin narrative of ‘a crossing of frontiers not only social but topographic’ is indeed Benjamin’s dream of proletarianisation, it conveys at the same time a strong sense of there being little likelihood of the dream actually coming true, of the fantasy proving a reality. For the ‘crossing’ at issue seems really only to be such at the topographic level: ‘whole networks of streets were opened up under the auspices of prostitution’. At the social level, the fantasy is blocked by the hesitation (‘on the threshold . . . of the middle class’) which is signified by the question: ‘But was it really a crossing?’.

Here, as the thought turns inward (and thus away from contact with other social beings), the reality of the crossing-betrayal comes through as being, in the most material sense, merely a fantasy. So it is that the passage should end with what is, in fact, a swelling of that hesitation which in Benjamin is marked by the process of self-questioning. In this doubtful mode of thought, the crossing becomes ‘an obstinate and voluptuous hovering on the brink’. The ‘hesitation’ as such is then acknowledged directly, its ‘most cogent motive’,

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67 Ibid.
68 Benjamin 1999a, p. 595.
Benjamin suggests, is located in the ‘fact’ that ‘beyond the frontier’, marked by the whore publicly accosted in the street, ‘lies nothingness’.

It goes without saying in Benjamin’s narrative that this social ‘crossing’ is not a real one, because the whore at the centre of this virtual dreamscape is conceived of as representing a ‘frontier’ in relation to ‘nothingness’. In this regard, Benjamin is no different from the Baudelaire who never wrote a whore-poem from the whore’s point of view. (Or, were we to compare Benjamin on prostitution with Brecht, it is striking that Benjamin’s ‘whore-poem’ – in prose – is the one that, despite its public setting, features a whore who says nothing.) We are back with the problem of a flâneur’s gaze which is intrinsically undialectical in structure, determining the fact that this essentially middle-class figure will find himself forever on the outside looking in where proletarian forms of class existence (to say nothing of ‘real social existence’) are concerned. The whore is on the edge of the abyss. When this is how she is regarded by the male accosting her, it cannot be surprising that that no aspect of the street encounter in which she features is related from her point of view, while, similarly, her social existence – through the work performed by the flâneur’s gaze – is abstracted from her as a human being.

At the same time, if the touchstone character of prostitution-as-theme does serve to press into relief the problem of Benjamin’s alienation as a male literary producer, the problem as such is discovered in the actual unfolding of ‘A Berlin Chronicle’ as an ongoing exploration of the workings of memory. As we have noted, the whole problem of ‘alienation’ here goes without saying as a kind of knot tying together a number of political and psychosexual issues which, even though not denoted by Benjamin in the account he gives of his life in Berlin, are brought to light by him while working through the inner dynamic of autobiographical discourse. Benjamin, the author-as-producer where ‘A Berlin Chronicle’ is concerned, is indeed ‘working through’ the problem of his complex relation as a bourgeois subject to the capitalist allegory of the commodity-whore. The aim, it would seem, is to reverse the ‘stubborn refusal . . . to form a united front’, perhaps with the mother-figure seen as an incarnation of the principle of social sympathy, and, in more substantial terms, with the whole class of the exploited, whose exploitation is but the condition of possibility for a mode of existence of material life that appears at once genuinely social and yet to come.

It is in connection with this idea of proletarianisation on the part of the self-consciously bourgeois Benjamin – in ‘A Berlin Chronicle’, the proletarian
Moabit neighbourhood is, like the whore, ‘close to the abyss’ – that we should now turn to the interest of Brecht’s actual response to ‘The Author as Producer’ formulated during what have become famous as Benjamin’s ‘conversations with Brecht’.69 The thoughts to which Brecht gives expression, in his discussion of Benjamin’s text with its author, are interesting precisely for the light they shed on the degree of influence which it might be argued the thinker of *Umfunktionierung* has on Benjamin, at once as a critic of Baudelaire in *The Arcades Project* and as a literary intellectual who dreams of becoming more proletarianised in his work. In his ‘Notes from Svendborg’, Benjamin gives a detailed account of an exchange between Brecht and himself on ‘The Author as Producer’. Brecht appears in these ‘Notes’ as positively disposed, though not without qualifications, to Benjamin’s rehearsal of the key notion of *Umfunktionierung*:

> a decisive criterion of a revolutionary function of literature lies in the extent to which technical advances lead to a transformation of artistic forms and hence of intellectual means of production.70

‘Brecht’, Benjamin reports, ‘was willing to concede the validity of this thesis only for a single type – namely, the upper-middle-class writer, a type he thought included himself’.71 Then, reporting Brecht’s direct speech, Benjamin adds:

> ‘Such a writer’, he said, ‘experiences solidarity with the interests of the proletariat at a single point: the issue of the development of his means of production. But if solidarity exists at this single point, he is, as producer, totally proletarianized. This total proletarianization at a single point leads to a solidarity all along the line.’72

The remainder of the exchange is played out in terms of the abstract principles of criticism enunciated by both Benjamin and Brecht being applied to some poems by Johannes Becher, Brecht himself, and Arthur Rimbaud which are regarded as manifesting a proletarian interest.

From our point of view, what is worth noting above all about this complexification of the ‘Author as Producer’ thesis concerning a revolutionary
refunctioning of ‘literature’ is that it shows the Svendborg Brecht formulating a position which, whilst being narrower than the one to which Benjamin subscribes, is, by the same token, more pointedly far-reaching as regards its political implications. The conclusion in respect of the idea of solidarity in class struggle – which Benjamin had reached in ‘The Author as Producer’ by tracing out the social relations of the production process – had been that ‘even the proletarianization of an intellectual hardly ever makes a proletarian’.73 (Benjamin’s thinking here runs along the lines of the bourgeois subject’s bourgeois education proving a means of production that operates in such a fashion as to suture the subject to its class of origin.) But all that is changed by Brecht when he outlines how it is that the upper-middle-class writer – a type which, if it includes Brecht himself, would seem to include Benjamin as well – might be seen to be in the frame where the prospect of the full proletarianisation of the bourgeois subject is concerned. In effect, Benjamin is here confronted by Brecht with the possibility that his dream of proletarianisation, as we have termed it, might become a reality in his personal life. Bearing in mind the significance of what we have already established as Benjamin’s enthusiasm for the Brechtian notion of Umfunktionierung, it is hard to believe that this latest proposition by Brecht, which touches Benjamin directly as both intellectual and producer, does not carry considerable force. Indeed, it is surprising, in some ways, that Benjamin never wrote an essay titled ‘Brecht and Me’, given the extent to which he became drawn to Brecht’s work in the 1930s. Theodor Adorno emerges at this time as the very type of the anti-Brecht in relation to Benjamin. In what appears as one of the more strongly homosocial of the letters exchanged by these two friends, Adorno writes to Benjamin: ‘I feel that... my own task is to hold your arm steady until the Brechtian sun has finally sunk beneath its exotic waters’.74

What we need to emphasise, therefore, as regards the significance of the Svendborg discussion concerning what it takes to fashion a literary intellectual into a proletarian writer is that Brecht offers a rational basis to what, in Benjamin, is but a dream. The implication of Brecht’s view of proletarian class solidarity in the field of literary production is that the upper-middle-class writer is, in fact, particularly well-placed to intervene on the issue of the functional transformation of the productive apparatus in bourgeois society. The contribution that this type of writer can make, at the key point of

73 Benjamin 1999a, p. 780.
74 Adorno to Benjamin, 18 March 1936, in Adorno and Benjamin 1999, p. 132.
‘the development of his means of production’, is determined – doubtless paradoxically – by the autonomy that he (and, one assumes, she) enjoys as a bourgeois subject. Benjamin had begun ‘The Author as Producer’ with a discussion of ‘the autonomy of the poet’ perceived, by Plato, as the source of the poet’s dangerousness vis-à-vis the ideal state (this part of Benjamin’s address comes across as a small parable, whose relevance to the contemporary situation is considerable, given its allegorisation of a politics of totalitarianism). Taking a dialectical approach to the paradox of a writer’s autonomy, Benjamin indicates that this selfsame autonomy might be turned to account, in the interests of the proletariat, through a rethinking of ‘literary technique’ as itself a means by which to determine the correct relation ‘between tendency and quality’ in the works produced by the writer in question. The Benjaminian writer is at liberty to do this when, for example, no longer tied to a party line, he is in a position to produce a literature of a new type.

It would seem that, in essence, Brecht follows through on the basic implication of the above argument about autonomy in artistic production when he grasps that the equivalent of Plato’s poet is the upper-middle-class writer of the present day. (An emphasis on the paramount importance of literary technique, needless to say, is at the heart of Brechtianism; the comment contra Lukács on the model character of the realism practised by Balzac and Tolstoy – whereby ‘[c]opying the methods of these realists, we should cease to be realists ourselves’ – is entirely typical in this regard.) Brecht takes the broad view of the ‘author as producer’ as the progressivist writer who, in order to advance a politically radical agenda, prioritises technical innovation at the level of, say, Benjamin’s ‘artistic forms and . . . intellectual means of production’, making such a view effective in relation to Benjamin himself as his interlocutor. Indeed, if this particular conversation between Benjamin and Brecht were to be made part of a dramatic performance, we would say that it shows Brechtian paedagogics at work in the theatre. For it operates on the principle of critical understanding arising from estrangement; the principle, that is, of performance as critique. What happens in Brecht’s argument about the upper-middle-class writer as producer – implicitly, either himself or Benjamin as author – is that the bourgeois member of the class of exploiters is presented as a kind of model of self-emancipation where the interests of the class of the exploited

75 Benjamin 1999a, p. 768.
76 Benjamin 1999a, p. 770.
77 Brecht 2001, p. 110.
within the overall productive process of class society are concerned. To be sure, the writer here is the figure who has the greater degree of autonomy in the productive work process. But, strategically, this autonomy is put in the service of proletarian class interest, thus in the way that artistic innovation is exemplified as the new springing from the old, through a demonstration of how old methods have become worn out. This is an allegory of liberating practice to put up against the capitalist allegory of the commodity-whore in the class struggle for a truly modern society. So there is indeed real solidarity between the writer and the labourer as themselves producers in Brecht’s conception of revolutionary literature. Thenceforth, it is from the existence of this solidarity that it is possible to speak of the writer’s ‘total proletarianization’, resulting in ‘a solidarity’ on the part of such a figure with so-called direct producers ‘all along the line’.

Instead of a dream, Brecht provides a serious argument about how to tackle the problems and methods of proletarian class struggle. In this regard, the very fact that Benjamin, in his ‘Notes from Svendborg’, should come to speak in an admiring fashion of ‘Brecht’s involvement with the problems and methods of proletarian class struggle’ suggests that he himself is impressed by the practical nature of his fellow-exile’s application to the tasks of a shared revolutionary politics. Of course, the extent to which Brecht might be said to have ‘left his mark’ on Benjamin – in his ideas in general, and his conceptions about art and politics in particular – is not something that one can be terribly precise about. (By the same token, it is not possible to comment on the status as a dream of the whole idea of proletarianisation in Benjamin’s thinking about the social situation of the writer in class struggle.) But it seems not at all coincidental that, as the political situation worsens in the 1930s, the ‘Brechtian sun’, as Adorno calls it, should emerge as a central reference-point for Benjamin, implying a certain urgency about thinking issues through in the perspective of ‘politics’ and ‘class struggle’. In ‘The Author as Producer’, for instance, Benjamin makes it clear that his reflections on the issue of a poet’s autonomy are explicitly intended ‘to promote the study of fascism’. And this same point about a pervasive, substantial Brechtianism evident in Benjamin’s work at this time applies to the particular case of the work which Benjamin produces for his study of Paris in the nineteenth century.

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78 Benjamin 1999a, p. 789.
79 Benjamin 1999a, p. 769.
Our reading of *The Arcades Project* as Benjamin’s epic theatre of modernity has itself been brought forward as a means whereby to make visible how it is that a whole clutch of Brecht’s own concerns – Umfunktionierung, gestus, Verfremdungseffekte, among others – were imported into the general economy of discourses structuring Benjamin’s work on the Paris arcades. In particular, it is worth emphasising how *The Arcades Project* itself is, at each and every moment, about technical innovation. All this is condensed into the term which, as we have seen, Benjamin himself uses in order to describe the ‘[m]ethod of this project: literary montage’. Richard Sieburth nicely emphasises the significance of Benjamin’s interest in a rethinking of literary technique as, indeed, a sort of driving force of the *Arcades*, through his suggestion regarding this work’s changing generic profile that ‘Benjamin was definitively moving beyond the essay form into the fragmentary tractatus à la Schlegel, Novalis, Nietzsche or Wittgenstein’. But, in light of our remarks about technical innovation in the work of the upper-middle-class writer (the modern autonomous ‘poet’), which comes through as a sort of micro-politics of a ‘revolution of the producers’, a further point needs to be made about the specificity of ‘literary montage’ in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*. It will be recalled that, at the heart of this particular method is the idea of allowing the ‘rags’ and ‘refuse’ of capitalist modernity ‘to come into their own’, through Benjamin-as-critic actively ‘making use of them’. In our view, what must now be said about this way of proceeding is that the whole ‘apocalypse of use-value’ posited in the methodological notion of literary montage, appears to be but a reformulation of the allegory of the new springing from the old, once old methods are perceived as having become worn out. In a sense, Brecht is speaking – here, through the interplay between (in French) l’énoncé and l’énonciation – from Svendborg, while Benjamin, as producer in *The Arcades Project*, moves further in the direction of his own ‘fragmentary tractatus’.

**Reception in distraction**

Howard Eiland, we should note briefly, has formulated a view of Benjamin and his relationship to Brecht which is structured around the argument that the notion of distraction [Zerstreuung] in Benjamin, linked to the method of literary montage, in fact shows Benjamin’s closeness to and distance from Brechtian drama. Picking up on the idea of a positive ‘Reception in distraction’

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80 Hafrey and Sieburth 1989, p. 41.
formulated (and italicised) by Benjamin at the end of his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’, Eiland suggests that ‘the notion of distraction operates in a peculiarly slippery manner, such as very likely makes this one of the more elusive of Benjminian topoi. It is at its slipperiest where it bears on the theory of montage.’81 In a discussion that is as carefully balanced as it is finely expository, Eiland shows how it is possible to isolate both a ‘negative’ and a ‘positive’ distraction in connection with the technique of montage as practised by Benjamin. On the one hand, there is a negative valuation to distraction, where distraction itself is regarded as a form of ‘complacent diversion’, and, correspondingly, the ‘method of montage’, where shocks as such are vitalising, ‘is opposed to that of distraction’.82 On the other, there is the positive ‘reception in distraction’, that bespeaks a sort of ‘practiced vigilance required to follow such things as big-city traffic, trading on the floor of the stock exchange, or collective jazz improvisation. For Benjamin, such high-speed vigilance is as much a defining feature of modern experience as distraction itself is’, where, indeed, montage ‘is no longer opposed to distraction… but is its vehicle’.83 Eiland points out that this duality of distractions is a phenomenon evident within *The Arcades Project*. It comes through as a veritable dialectics of distraction, structured in terms of an opposition between a negative ‘commodity fetishism’ and a positive ‘intoxicated experience’; in fact, all this is captured in one of the notes from Convolute K where ‘the fetish character of the commodity’ is played off against the ‘significance of intoxication for perception’.84 (Benjamin is, here, concerned to emphasise ‘the equivocalness of the phenomena we are dealing with in the nineteenth century’.85) Eiland’s main point in this connection is that a form of montage which is opposed to distraction is what reveals Benjamin’s closeness to Brecht in the artistic sphere, and the former’s distance from the latter (‘Die Rezeption in der Zerstreuung’ constituting a notably innovative theoretical conception) is revealed by a form of montage which is consistent with distraction.

The implication in Eiland’s argument is that such a thing as ‘reception in distraction’ obliges us to reassess the extent of Brecht’s influence on Benjamin

81 Benjamin 2003, p. 269; Eiland 2003, p. 52.
82 Eiland 2003, pp. 52, 55.
83 Eiland 2003, pp. 56, 60.
84 Benjamin 1999b, K3, 5.
85 Ibid.
in the 1930s, in order to allow more scope for due recognition to be given to Benjamin’s originality as a critic and a thinker. In this regard, Eiland goes so far as to say that ‘Benjamin parts company with Brecht’ in his view of montage as distraction’s ‘vehicle’.\(^{86}\) But this may be to overstate one’s case. To be sure, there is a real ambiguity about ‘distraction’ in Benjamin, and a revaluation of this notion as positive – in Eiland’s terms, not ‘mere distraction’ but ‘productive distraction’ – appears symptomatic indeed of Benjamin’s willingness to meet the challenge of the new when reflecting upon what it means to be modern.\(^ {87}\) At the same time, however, it is possible to come to a rather different conclusion about Benjamin supposedly parting company with Brecht if, as we should, we try to make sense of this complex state of affairs (Eiland is right to emphasise the elusiveness of it all) in light of what we ourselves have had to say above about the politics of technical innovation disclosed in *The Arcades Project*.

Let us note, first of all, that there is not necessarily any such thing as a merely negative view of distraction in Brecht. Eiland draws attention to the brief fragment titled ‘Theory of Distraction’, as one of Benjamin’s papers associated with the composition of the ‘Work of Art’ essay, where a convergence is postulated of negative and positive values of distraction; Eiland’s purpose, here, being to identify an anticipation of this particular theoretical turn in Benjamin within the work of the critic Siegfried Kracauer (himself one of Benjamin’s associates). But the relevant part of Benjamin’s text, which speaks of the two sets of values converging – on the one hand, ‘educational value [{\em Lehrwert}]’, on the other hand, ‘consumer value [{\em Konsumwert}]’ – cites Brecht by way of exemplification: ‘The educational value and the consumer value of art may converge in certain optimal cases (as in Brecht), but they don’t generally coincide.’\(^ {88}\) The upshot to this is that Brecht’s epic theatre, which Brecht himself often describes in pointedly dialectical terms as an arena of serious fun, appears, once again, as a type of model providing Benjamin with a source of inspiration when, in this particular case, he is preparing the essay that will bring the freshly synthesised idea of reception-in-distraction to light. This brings us to our next point, which is that Benjamin’s new approach to the notion of distraction, evident in his thinking about the technological reproducibility of art (clearly manifest not only in the ‘Work of Art’ essay but

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86 Eiland 2003, p. 55.
87 Eiland 2003, p. 60.
also in *The Arcades Project*) shows him carrying through on the commitment, shared with Brecht, to seeing technique as the *ne plus ultra* of a revolutionary art’s active functioning. Here, it is ‘reception in distraction’ that is all about (to borrow Eiland’s gloss) technique-as-vigilance: Benjamin is interested, in particular, in the masses managing to master new modes of apperception as their material circumstances change from the outside, so that in the process they become ‘a matrix from which all customary behavior toward works of art is today emerging newborn’.89 Benjamin’s basic idea in this regard is that ‘[r]eception in distraction... finds in film its true training ground’.90 All of which is to say that the specific instance of film – as logical product of art’s age of ‘technological reproducibility’ – revolutionising the way that the rest of art is perceived, is grasped by Benjamin as an object-lesson in practical transformation at the level of the direct producers of art itself. Insofar as the very attitude to art, through the logic of reproducibility, is ‘emerging newborn’, so artists in general need to be responsive to this in terms of their conception of the techniques used in artistic production as such. In the end, it is clear that Benjamin is here following the line of the allegory of the new springing from the old when the outdated character of old methods becomes evident – which, as we have suggested, is the basis of his collaboration with Brecht (itself reaffirmed, in a way, at Svendborg). Interestingly, the case of ‘reception in distraction’ implies the masses dictating the tempo of revolutionary change to the artists, rather than vice versa. Along these lines, the conclusion to be drawn about Benjamin, Brecht and the theory of montage in connection with reception-in-distraction is that this latter phenomenon is not really a symptom of these two figures going their separate ways. On the contrary, it represents a further step along the path marked out by the author-as-producer thesis, formulated by Benjamin under Brecht’s influence.

**Conclusion**

It should now be clear why the effective jumping-off point for this present discussion of *The Arcades Project* should be an account of Benjamin’s Paris study mimicking the structural violence of the capitalist system at the level

89 Benjamin 2003, p. 267.
90 Benjamin 2003, p. 269. See also *The Arcades Project*: ‘Film: unfolding <result?> of all the forms of perception, the tempos and rhythms, which lie preformed in today’s machines, such that all problems of contemporary art find their definitive formulation only in the context of film’ (K3, 3).
of its own methodology, as advanced by Esther Leslie – the whole question of technique which is raised here could not be more serious in its implications for Benjamin himself, and we might want to think again about the rightness of a methodological form of mimicry. Our own emphasis, by way of contrast, on refraction, suggests that this ‘mimicry’ is but an exemplification of weak reproducibility. It suffices merely to recall the way that such a thing as a ‘logic of reproducibility’ is inflected by Benjamin – through the presentation he makes of revolutionary means of reproduction existing as a condition for the rise of the masses in capitalist modernity – to recognise how reproduction itself comes through as a particularly strong form of change from the nineteenth century on. In this context, Benjamin’s foregrounding of technique as an issue in relation to author-producers in general is evidently nothing other than a strategic accentuation of the vitally important idea of proletarianisation; the idea itself, needless to add, subtends the whole realm of artistic production at this stage, where politics have become ‘the order of the day’.

This kind of move on Benjamin’s part, we have suggested, bespeaks the reality of an underlying Brechtianism which exerts a certain pressure in the course of work carried out through the 1930s by the author of The Arcades Project. From this perspective, The Arcades Project itself is seen as a work that is decodable, in significant respects, as an extension of that historic project launched by Brecht (and celebrated by Benjamin) which goes by the name of epic theatre. As Benjamin himself says (in a 1931 letter to Gershom Scholem) with reference to Brecht’s theoretical writings for a modern theatre of a new type, ‘my development in the last few years came about in confrontation with them, and because they, more rigorously than any others, give an insight into the intellectual context in which the work of people like myself is conducted in this country’. Of course, it is nothing new to present Benjamin as a critic who emphasises the value of a variety of ‘lessons from Brecht’. But what we have tried to do here is to sharpen the point of doing so by arguing that it is precisely Benjamin’s conception of himself as a producer in The Arcades Project that presses into relief the full extent of his actual Brechtianism.

This serves to further the emergence of a ‘profoundly Brechtian Benjamin’, as described by Fredric Jameson in a recent critical work on Brecht. Commenting at one point on Benjamin’s ‘posthumous influence’, Jameson suggests that this phenomenon

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now appears to be inflected in two distinct directions all at once: in the postmodern, drawing on the untarnished prestige of his technology essays; and in that of language mysticism, as a result of greater familiarity with the early writings.\(^92\)

Elaborating further his thought about these ‘distinct directions’ regarding a Benjaminian afterlife, Jameson remarks: ‘The first of these, at least, is bound to look rather different when it is replaced in its original Brechtian context; while the lineaments of a later, profoundly Brechtian Benjamin have not yet clearly emerged’.\(^93\) As the reader might gather apropos of these pronouncements from Jameson, we would agree strongly with the view that the true depth of Benjamin’s indebtedness to Brecht has not yet been measured through a critical analysis of works produced by Benjamin himself. Also, Jameson’s hint that in order to carry out this kind of assessment we should consider looking further than the ‘technology essays’ – counting amongst the most obvious places where to discover Benjamin’s Brechtianism – is doubtless right too. Bound up with this endeavour of critical excavation, it would seem, is Brecht’s current status as what on the whole would appear ironically to be a less influential figure than Benjamin within the current conjuncture of ‘criticism’, ‘theory’, and ‘politics’; the Brechtian heyday in this regard, which saw Brecht’s ideas passing, via Roland Barthes, into the discourse of Screen theory, seems to have passed quite a long time ago.\(^94\)

It will be necessary to put this phenomenon of Brechtian decline into reverse if we are to proceed with the discovery of the Benjamin of an expanded epic theatre, constituting, it might well be said, a ‘Benjamin for our times’ – all the while coming after the famous Benjamins of ‘technology’ and ‘language mysticism’. We should point out that the very idea of Benjamin-as-producer implies a form of resistance to the ‘turn to consumption’ within cultural analysis that Leslie attacks with her notion of ‘Benjaminiana’. Carrying through with the implications of this idea will entail an attempt to search out a Brechtian Benjamin in places where we might not necessarily expect to find him. All things considered, uncovering the Brechtianism of The Arcades Project seems, strategically, one of the more important tasks to perform when proceeding in this direction. The above has been our contribution to this particular end.

\(^{93}\) Ibid.
\(^{94}\) See, for example, Barthes 1986, pp. 276–85, and Heath 1974, pp. 103–28.
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Guido Starosta

Commodity Fetishism and Revolutionary Subjectivity: A Symposium on John Holloway’s *Change the World without Taking Power.*

Editorial Introduction

Ever since the publication of works such as Rubin’s *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*¹ or Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness,*² the emphasis on Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism has been a hallmark of critical traditions of Marxism. According to those traditions, commodity fetishism is the cornerstone upon which depends the understanding of Marx’s mature works as a critique of political economy (as opposed to an economics, political economy or sociology, no matter how radical or ‘Marxist’ in their stance).³ The essential element defining these currents of Marxist social theory thus consists in their grasp of Marx’s intellectual enterprise as a critical investigation of the historically-specific alienated forms of social mediation of capitalist society.

Since the late 1970s, this broadly-understood ‘form-analytical’ approach has produced plenty of significant theoretical developments. Thus, there have

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¹ Rubin 1972.
² Lukács 1971.
been important contributions to the investigation of the determinations of the value-form,⁴ the state-form,⁵ the legal-form⁶ and, more recently, a renewed interest in Marx’s dialectical method.⁷ And, yet, it could be argued that not many works have explicitly put the problematic of revolutionary subjectivity at the centre of the critique of political economy.⁸

In his latest book, Change the World without Taking Power (Hereafter, Change the World), John Holloway, who has been a major figure in the aforementioned rich and fruitful area of Marxist research, provides a much needed attempt to fill that gap. According to Holloway, the critical investigation of the fetishised social forms of capitalist society is not an abstract, academic discussion, but must be seen as a necessary moment in our radically transformative practice aiming at the negation of alienated social life.¹⁰ As Holloway puts it in the book:

> Fetishism is the central theoretical problem confronted by any theory of revolution. . . . Any thought or practice which aims at the emancipation of humanity from the dehumanization of capitalism is necessarily directed against fetishism.¹¹

In this sense, Change the World offers a necessary reminder about the eminently political nature of the Marxian critique of political economy, which is thereby determined as a theoretical expression of the practical critique of the inversion inherent in the capital-form of social relations. If only for this reason, Holloway’s recent book should be welcome, deserving a central place in contemporary debates on critical Marxist theory.

But there is another, immediately practical reason adding to the relevance of Change the World, namely, the impact that the book has had on radical

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⁸ Drawing on the general methodological approach found in the work of Íñigo Carrera (1992 and 2003), I have developed my own reconstruction of the Marxian critique of political economy as an investigation into the social determinations of the revolutionary subjectivity of the working class in Starosta 2005.
⁹ Holloway 2002.
intellectuals and activists, particularly in the Latin-American Left. Thus, for instance, Holloway’s book has been a central and direct theoretical reference among some of the more radicalised groups that emerged or became visible during the recent turbulent political and economic crisis in Argentina.

More broadly, and beyond the issue of its direct influence on particular social movements, Change the World could be seen as a clear theoretical articulation of certain central political themes that have developed within contemporary movements of global resistance to neoliberalism. First, and most obviously, there is the explicit rejection of the ‘conquest of political supremacy’ by the working class as a necessary moment in the revolutionary process leading to the abolition of capital (and the state). Secondly, there is also a denial of the need for political action to self-consciously take on class forms. Whether one sees these two points as expressions of the (actual or

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12 Thus, the great bulk of the debate on Holloway’s book has been carried out in pages of the Argentine journal Herramienta. It can be found on-line at www.herramienta.com.ar.

13 See MTD Solano and Colectivo Situaciones 2002, the result of a collaborative work between Colectivo Situaciones (a group of intellectuals influenced by Holloway’s and Negri’s Marxism, see Colectivo Situaciones 2001) and the MTD Solano (a radical organisation of piqueteros).

14 Certainly, the current so-called ‘antiglobalisation’ movement is quite diverse and it is possible to find very varied political perspectives within it. Here, I refer to what I think is the dominant trend within the movement.

15 Of course, the argument for the need to conquer state power as necessary moment of the radical transformation of the world does not necessarily lead to a ‘statist’ view of socialism/communism or to a vanguardist negation of the determination of revolutionary activity as self-emancipation. See, for instance, Chattopadhyay’s 1992 excellent textual discussion of Marx’s view of the proletarian revolution. As he competently shows (1992, pp. 92–3), for Marx, the revolutionary conquest of political power together with the expropriation of the bourgeoisie were the necessary forms in which to start the process of transformation of the capitalist mode of production into the free association of individuals. But, unlike the conception found in Lenin and orthodox Marxism generally, Marx was very clear that the political rule of the working class ‘does not by itself signify the collective appropriation by society, and does not indicate the end of capital’ (p. 93). The ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ was, for Marx, a period within the capitalist mode of production – hence, not a non-capitalist transitional society – in which the latter was to be entirely revolutionised in every nook and cranny up to the point of fully preparing wage-workers for their self-emancipation – hence for their self-abolition as working class (p. 93).

16 Against postmodernist thought, Holloway argues that there definitely is an underlying unity within the multiplicity of different forms of resistance to capital given by the constitutive class determination of social antagonism. However, he seems to reject the idea that revolutionary activity should be organised along class lines. According to his approach, this can only lead to the affirmation of working-class identity, hence to the reproduction of capital or ‘power-over’. Holloway’s abandonment of class politics has been subject to criticism not only by traditional or orthodox Marxists, but also by anti-Leninists otherwise more or less sympathetic to his ‘Open Marxist’ approach. See Aufheben 2003 and Wildcat 2003.
potential) strength of current forms of social struggle or of their weakness, they undeniably constitute real aspects of them which cannot be ignored. Change the World could be seen as providing either an illuminating set of arguments for those who would like further to develop those two aspects of contemporary social movements, or a sophisticated theoretical challenge for those who are critical of them. Either way, it clearly constitutes a thought-provoking starting point for the necessary and urgent task of theoretical reflection upon current forms of antagonistic political action.

In brief, whether one agrees with it or not, Change the World undoubtedly represents an important and suggestive intervention which, one hopes, will contribute to bring the problematic of revolutionary subjectivity back into the theoretical agenda of the critique of political economy. In the context of the publication of a new edition of the book, the editors of Historical Materialism once again offer a space for rigorous debate on the issues raised by recent innovative works within Marxism. As with previous symposia in the pages of journal, we hope that the present discussion of Holloway’s book will contribute to the further development of current research in critical-Marxist theory.

The symposium

As mentioned above, there are two main issues running through Change the World: a) the intrinsic connection between the critique of fetishism and the theory of revolution in Marx; b) the rejection of the classical-Marxist political programme based on the revolutionary conquest of state power by the working class. And it is around those two issues that the different contributions primarily revolve.

Two of the contributions centre their discussion on the concept of negativity, which plays a crucial role in the precise way that Holloway tries to go beyond the ‘tragic dilemma’ of revolutionary thought, namely:

How can maimed, dehumanized, alienated people possibly create a liberated, human society? Alienation signals not only the urgency but also, apparently, the impossibility of revolutionary change.17

In his article, Stoetzler welcomes Holloway’s starting point in negativity for the understanding of subjectivity. However, he subjects Holloway’s actual

17 Holloway 2002, p. 46.
use of the concept throughout the book to critical scrutiny and notes that he actually conflates three different meanings of negativity: human doing in general, ‘screaming’ against domination and effective resistance to domination. According to Stoetzler, this conceptual collapse has serious consequences and actually undermines Holloway’s otherwise commendable attempt at overcoming the view of the revolutionary subject as ‘as wholesome, healthy and sane: the good hero battling against the bad society’. Thus, despite all of Holloway’s efforts to eliminate the externality between human subjectivity and its alienated mode of existence, Stoetzler notes that the notion of an abstract, pure subject keeps being reintroduced through the back door in the argument.

The concept of negativity is also central to De Angelis’s piece. However, unlike Stoetzler, he considers that it is the wrong point of departure for a theory of revolution. In an article which, I think, brings out very clearly the often overlooked difference between ‘autonomist’ and ‘open’ Marxism, De Angelis claims that, rather than negativity, the theoretical starting point for the understanding of revolutionary subjectivity must be the affirmation of the multiplicity of needs, aspirations, affects and relations of human subjects. The ‘scream’, ‘negativity’ or the ‘NO’, De Angelis argues, presupposes that the affirmation of an already existing multitude of diverse ‘YESes’ has been frustrated by power-over. Blind to the (onto)logical priority of the positive over the negative in the theory of revolution, De Angelis continues, Holloway fails to pose the central problematic of any attempt radically to change the world, namely: the alternative organisation of the ‘yeses’ in the here and now.

The question of organisation and political strategy is a fundamental aspect of Bensaïd’s critical engagement with Holloway’s book. Moreover, he argues that those issues are not only crucial but also need to be grasped historically. In fact, Bensaïd thinks that one of the shortcomings of Change the World is the way in which he dismisses the rich and complex history of both the revolutionary workers’ movement and revolutionary thought. This, according to Bensaïd, leads Holloway to an untenable and reductionist explanation of the failure of revolution thus far; it all comes down to one and only original sin, namely, statism. This, in turn, is seen as the necessary consequence of the fixation with power and its political conquest, to the detriment of struggling for its dissolution. However, Bensaïd argues that a close scrutiny of the concrete

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history of the revolutionary movement would show Holloway that ‘history is more complicated than that’ and ‘until today there has never been a case of relations of domination not being torn asunder’ by the emergence of forms of dual power ‘posing the question “who will beat whom”’. Refusal to take state power has only resulted in those aiming at revolutionary change being eventually thrashed by it. Hence, Bensaid concludes, we may not possess certainty about the forms that revolutionary power will take in the future, but a historical perspective suggests that, in some form or another, the politics of organisation will always be relevant for revolutionary change.

For Michael Lebowitz, Holloway’s book represents a profound departure from Marx, both in relation to the centrality of commodity fetishism and in Holloway’s rejection of the need to take power. Unlike the previous contributions discussed, Lebowitz considers that commodity fetishism is not as fundamental to Marx’s *Capital* as Holloway thinks. In his view, by stressing commodity fetishism Holloway ends up displacing from centre stage what actually does play the fundamental role in Marx’s argument: namely, the sale of labour-power and the related concept of exploitation. Regarding the question of the state, Lebowitz resorts to Marx’s writings on the Paris Commune and *The Communist Manifesto* to show that, *pace* Holloway, in the specific form of the self-government of the direct producers, the former can and must be used by the working class in its attempt at revolutionary change. And this not only in order to make ‘despotic inroads’ on capital, but also as a necessary moment of the *self-transforming revolutionary practice* of the working class.

Lebowitz’s scepticism about the critical and explanatory power of the concept of fetishism is partly shared by Leigh Binford. Unlike the former, Binford still considers it a central concept; however, he argues that fetishism leaves us at a very abstract level of analysis and that it should be complemented with a reconsidered Gramscian concept of hegemony. The latter would not be simply about consensus and domination but also about struggle. In this sense, it would resemble Holloway’s view of fetishism-as-process. However, hegemony would go beyond the latter through the specification of the concrete conditions in which struggles unfold, thus also restoring the balance in the dialectic between ‘structure and agency’.

Finally, the symposium includes a reply by Holloway, in which he both offers a concise rendition and re-elaboration of the main arguments of his book and addresses the comments and criticisms put forward in the other papers by his critics.
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Daniel Bensaïd

On a Recent Book by John Holloway

Can we speak of a libertarian current, as if one continuous spool of thread were unrolling throughout contemporary history, as if it were possible to tie a sufficient number of affinities to it to make what holds it together win out over what divides it? Such a current, if in fact it exists, is indeed characterised by a considerable theoretical eclecticism, and crosscut by strategic orientations that not only diverge but also often contradict each other. We can nonetheless maintain the hypothesis that there is a libertarian ‘tone’ or ‘sensibility’ that is broader than anarchism as a specifically defined political position. It is thus possible to speak of a libertarian communism (exemplified notably by Daniel Guérin), a libertarian messianism (Walter Benjamin), a libertarian Marxism (Michael Löwy and Miguel Abensour), and even a ‘libertarian Leninism’ whose notable source is State and Revolution.

This ‘family resemblance’ (often torn apart and stitched back together) is not enough to found a coherent genealogy. We can instead refer to ‘libertarian moments’ registered in very different situations and drawing their inspiration from quite distinct theoretical sources. We can distinguish three key moments in rough outline:
(i) A constituent (or classic) moment exemplified by the trio Stirner/ Proudhon/Bakunin. *The Ego and Its Own* (Stirner) and *The Philosophy of Poverty* (Proudhon) were published in the mid-1840s. During those same years, Bakunin’s thought was shaped over the course of a long and winding journey that took him from Berlin to Brussels by way of Paris. This was the watershed moment in which the period of post-revolutionary reaction drew to a close and the uprisings of 1848 were brewing. The modern state was taking shape. A new consciousness of individuality was discovering the chains of modernity in the pain of romanticism. An unprecedented social movement was stirring up the depths of a people that was being fractured and divided by the eruption of class struggle. In this transition, between ‘already-no-longer’ and ‘not-yet’, different forms of libertarian thought were flirting with blooming utopias and romantic ambivalences. A dual movement was being sketched out, both breaking with and being pulled towards the liberal tradition. Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s identification with a ‘liberal-libertarian’ orientation follows in the footsteps of this formative ambiguity.

(ii) An anti-institutional or anti-bureaucratic moment, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The experience of parliamentarianism and mass trade unionism was revealing at that time ‘the professional dangers of power’ and the bureaucratisation threatening the labour movement. The diagnosis can be found in Rosa Luxemburg’s work as well as in Robert Michels’s classic book on *Political Parties* (1910); in the revolutionary syndicalism of Georges Sorel and Fernand Pelloutier; and equally in the critical thunderbolts of Gustav Landauer. We also find traces of it in Péguy’s *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* or in Labriola’s Italian Marxism.

(iii) A third, post-Stalinist moment responds to the great disillusionment of the tragic century of extremes. A neo-libertarian current, more diffuse but more influential than the direct heirs of classical anarchism, is confusedly emerging. It constitutes a state of mind, a ‘mood’, rather than a well-defined orientation. It is engaging with the aspirations (and weaknesses) of the renascent social movements. The themes of authors like Toni Negri and John Holloway are thus much more inspired by Foucault and Deleuze than by

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1 Michels 1987.  
3 See in particular Hardt and Negri 2000, and Holloway 2002.
historic nineteenth-century sources, of which classical anarchism itself scarcely exercises its right to make a critical inventory.⁴

Amidst these ‘moments’ we can find ferrymen (like Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and Karl Korsch) who initiate the transition and critical transmission of the revolutionary heritage, ‘rubbing against the grain’ of the Stalinist glaciation.

The contemporary resurgence and metamorphoses of libertarian currents are easily explained:

– by the depth of the defeats and disappointments experienced since the 1930s, and by the heightened consciousness of the dangers that threaten a politics of emancipation from within;
– by the deepening of the process of individualisation and the emergence of an ‘individualism without individuality’, anticipated in the controversy between Stirner and Marx; and
– by the steadily fiercer forms of resistance to the disciplinary contrivances and procedures of biopolitical control on the part of those who are being subjected to a subjectivity mutilated by market reification.

In this context, in spite of the profound disagreements that we will expound in this article, we are glad to grant Negri’s and Holloway’s contributions the merit of relaunching a much-needed strategic debate in the movements of resistance to imperial globalisation, after a sinister quarter-century in which this kind of debate had withered away, while those who refused to surrender to the (un)reason of the triumphant market swung back and forth between a rhetoric of resistance without any horizon of expectation and the fetishistic expectation of some miraculous event. We have taken up elsewhere the critique of Negri and his evolution.⁵ Here, we will begin a discussion with John Holloway, whose recent book bears a title that is a programme in itself and has already provoked lively debates in both the English-speaking world and Latin America.

⁴ It is in fact striking in this respect to observe how much more respectful (and even ceremonious) and how much less critical this tendency is of its heritage than heterodox neo-Marxism is when it turns ‘back to Marx’.

⁵ See Bensaïd 1995; Bensaïd 2001; articles in ContreTemps no. 2 and the Italian journal Erre no. 1 (on the notion of the multitude); and finally a contribution that will be published by Pluto in an English-language anthology.
Statism as original sin

In the beginning was the scream. John Holloway’s approach starts from an imperative of unconditional resistance: we scream! It is a cry not only of rage, but also of hope. We let out a scream, a scream against, a negative scream, the Zapatistas’ scream in Chiapas – ‘Ya Basta! Enough of this!’ – a scream of refusal to submit, of dissent. ‘The aim of this book’, Holloway announces from the start, ‘is to strengthen negativity, to take the side of the fly in the web, to make the scream more strident’. What has brought the Zapatistas (whose experience haunts Holloway’s disquisition throughout) together with others ‘is not a positive common class composition but rather the community of their negative struggle against capitalism’. Holloway is thus describing a struggle whose aim is to negate the inhumanity that has been imposed on us, in order to recapture a subjectivity that is immanent in negativity itself.

We have no need of the promise of a happy end to justify our rejection of the world as it is. Like Foucault, Holloway wants stay connected with the million, multiple forms of resistance, which are irreducible to the binary relation between capital and labour.

Yet this way of taking sides by crying out is not enough. It is also necessary to be able to give an account of the great disillusionment of the last century. Why did all those screams, those millions of screams, repeated millions of times over, not only leave capital’s despotic order standing but even leave it more arrogant than ever? Holloway thinks he has the answer. The worm was in the apple; that is, the (theoretical) vice was originally nestled inside the emancipatory virtue: statism was gnawing away at most variants of the workers’ movement from the beginning. Changing the world by means of the state thus constituted in his eyes the dominant paradigm of revolutionary thought, which was subjected from the nineteenth century on to an instrumental, functional vision of the state. The illusion that society could be changed by means of the state flowed (Holloway says) from a certain idea of state sovereignty. But we have ended up learning that ‘we cannot change the world through the state’, which only constitutes ‘a node in a web of power relations’. This state must not be confused in fact with power. All it does is define the division between citizens and non-citizens (the foreigner, the excluded, Gabriel Tarde’s man ‘rejected by the world’ or Arendt’s pariah).

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The state is thus very precisely what the word suggests: ‘a bulwark against change, against the flow of doing’, or, in other words, ‘the embodiment of identity’.9 It is not a thing that can be laid hold of in order to turn it against those who have controlled it until now, but, rather, a social form, or, more accurately, a process of formation of social relations: ‘a process of statification of social conflict’.10 Claiming to struggle by means of the state thus leads inevitably to defeating oneself. Stalin’s ‘statist strategies’ thus do not, for Holloway, constitute in any sense a betrayal of Bolshevism’s revolutionary spirit, but its complete fulfilment: ‘the logical outcome of a state-centred concept of social change’.11 The Zapatista challenge, by contrast, consists of saving the revolution from the collapse of the statist illusion and, at the same time, from the collapse of the illusion of power.

Before we go any further in reading Holloway’s book, it is already apparent:

(i) that he has reduced the luxuriant history of the workers’ movement, its experiences and controversies to a single march of statism through the ages, as though very different theoretical and strategic conceptions had not been constantly battling with one other. He thus presents an imaginary Zapatismo as something absolutely innovative, haughtily ignoring the fact that the actually existing Zapatista discourse bears within it, albeit without knowing it, a number of older themes.

(ii) By his account, the dominant paradigm of revolutionary thought consists of a functionalist statism. We could accept that – only by swallowing the very dubious assumption that the majoritarian ideology of social democracy (symbolised by the various Noskes and Eberts) and the bureaucratic Stalinist orthodoxy can both be subsumed under the elastic heading of ‘revolutionary thought’. This is taking very little account of an abundant critical literature on the question of the state, which ranges from Lenin and Gramsci to contemporary polemics12 by way of contributions that are impossible to ignore (whether one agrees with them or not) like those of Poulantzas and Altvater.

(iii) Finally, reducing the whole history of the revolutionary movement to the genealogy of a ‘theoretical deviation’ makes it possible to hover over real history with a flutter of angelic wings, but at the risk of endorsing the reactionary thesis (from François Furet to Stéphane Courtois) of an unbroken

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9 Holloway 2002, p. 73.
10 Holloway 2002, p. 94.
12 See the debates published in ContreTemps no. 3.
continuity from the October Revolution to the Stalinist counterrevolution – its ‘logical outcome’! – incidentally without subjecting Stalinism to any serious analysis. David Rousset, Pierre Naville, Moshe Lewin, Mikaël Guefter (not to speak of Trotsky or Hannah Arendt, or even of Lefort or Castoriadis), are far more serious on this point.

The vicious circle of fetishism, or, how to get out of it?

In Holloway’s account, the other source of the revolutionary movement’s strategic divagations relates to the abandonment (or forgetting) of the critique of fetishism that Marx introduced in the first volume of *Capital*. On this subject, Holloway provides a useful, though sometimes quite sketchy, reminder. *Capital* is nothing other than past activity (dead labour) congealed in the form of property. Thinking in terms of property comes down, however, to thinking of property as a thing, that is to say in the terms of fetishism itself, which means in fact accepting the parameters of domination. The problem does not derive from the fact that the capitalists own the means of production: ‘Our struggle’, Holloway insists, ‘is not the struggle to make ours the property of the means of production, but to dissolve both property and means of production: to recover or, better, create the conscious and confident sociality of the flow of doing’.13

But how can the vicious circle of fetishism be broken? The concept, says Holloway, refers to the unbearable horror constituted by the self-negation of the act. He thinks that *Capital* is devoted above all to developing the critique of this self-negation. The concept of fetishism contains in concentrated form the critique of bourgeois society (its ‘enchanted... world’14) and of bourgeois theory (political economy), and at the same time lays bare the reasons for their relative stability: the infernal whirligig that turns objects (money, machines, commodities) into subjects and subjects into objects. This fetishism worms its way into all the pores of society to the point that the more urgent and necessary revolutionary change appears, the more impossible it seems to become. Holloway sums this up in a deliberately disquieting turn of phrase: ‘the urgent impossibility of revolution’.15

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This presentation of fetishism draws on several different sources: Lukács’s account of reification, Horkheimer’s account of instrumental rationality, Adorno’s account of the circle of identity, and Marcuse’s account of one-dimensional man. The concept of fetishism expresses, for Holloway, the power of capital exploding in our deepest selves like a missile shooting out a thousand coloured rockets. This is why the problem of revolution is not the problem of ‘them’ – the enemy, the adversary with a thousand faces – but above all our problem, the problem that ‘we’, this ‘we’ fragmented by fetishism, constitute for ourselves.

The fetish, this ‘real illusion’, in fact enmeshes us in its toils and subjugates us. It makes the status of critique itself problematic: if social relationships are fetishised, how can we criticise them? And who – what superior and privileged beings – are the critics? In short, is critique itself still possible?

These are the questions, according to Holloway, that the notion of a vanguard, of an ‘imputed’ class consciousness (imputed by whom?), or the expectation of a redemptive event (the revolutionary crisis), claimed to answer. These solutions lead ineluctably to the problematic of a healthy subject or a champion of justice fighting against a sick society: a virtuous knight who could be incarnated in a ‘working-class hero’ or vanguard party.

This is a ‘hard’ conception of fetishism, which therefore leads to an insoluble double dilemma:

- Is revolution conceivable? Is criticism still possible? How can we escape from this ‘fetishisation of fetishism’? Who are we then to wield the corrosive power of critique? ‘We are not God. We are not... transcendent’! And how can we avoid the dead end of a subaltern critique that remains under the ascendancy of the very fetish it is claiming to overthrow, inasmuch as negation implies subordination to what it negates?

Holloway puts forward several possible solutions:

(i) The reformist response, which concludes that the world cannot be radically transformed; we must content ourselves with rearranging it and fixing it around the edges. Today postmodernist rhetoric accompanies this form of resignation with its modest chamber music.

(ii) The traditional revolutionary response, which ignores the subtleties and marvels of fetishism and clings to the good old binary antagonism between capital and labour, so as to content itself with a change of ownership at the summit of the state: the bourgeois state simply becomes proletarian.

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(iii) A third way, which would consist by contrast of looking for hope in the very nature of capitalism and in its ‘ubiquitous [or pluriform] power’, to which a ‘ubiquitous [or pluriform] resistance’ is an appropriate response.17

Holloway believes that he can escape in this way from the system’s circularity and deadly trap, by adopting a soft version of fetishism, understood not as a state of affairs but as a dynamic and contradictory process of fetishisation. He thinks this process is, in fact, pregnant with its contrary: the ‘anti-fetishisation’ of forms of resistance immanent to fetishism itself. We are not mere objectified victims of capital, but actual or potential antagonistic subjects: ‘Our existence-against-capital’ is thus ‘the inevitable constant negation of our existence-in-capital’.

Capitalism should be understood above all as separation from the subject and from the object, and modernity as the unhappy consciousness of this divorce. Within the problematic of fetishism, the subject of capitalism is not the capitalist herself but the value that is valorised and becomes autonomous. Capitalists are nothing more than loyal agents of capital and of its impersonal despotism. But, then, for a functionalist Marxism, capitalism appears as a closed, internally consistent system without any possible exit, at least until the arrival of the deus ex machina, the great miraculous moment of revolutionary upheaval. For Holloway, on the contrary, the weakness of capitalism consists in the fact that capital ‘is dependent on labour in a way in which labour is not dependent upon capital’: the ‘insubordination of labour is thus the axis on which the constitution of capital as capital turns’. In the relationship of reciprocal but asymmetrical dependency between capital and labour, labour is thus capable of freeing itself from its opposite, while capital is not.19

Holloway thus draws his inspiration from the autonomist theses previously put forward by Mario Tronti, who reversed the terms of the dilemma by presenting capital’s role as purely reactive to the creative initiative of labour. In this perspective, labour, as the active element of capital, always determines capitalist development by means of class struggle. Tronti presented his approach as ‘a Copernican revolution within Marxism’.20 While beguiled by this idea, Holloway still has reservations about a theory of autonomy that tends to renounce the work of negation (and, in Negri’s case, to renounce any dialectic

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17 Holloway 2002, p. 76.
20 Holloway hardly ventures at all to examine this Copernican revolution critically. Yet, a quarter of a century later, an evaluation is possible, if only to avoid repeating
the same theoretical illusions and the same practical errors while dressing up the same discourse in new terminological clothes. See on this subject Maria Turchetto’s contribution on ‘the disconcerting trajectory of Italian autonomism’ in the *Dictionnaire Marx Contemporain*, Turchetto 2001; and Wright 2002.

bring it to a full stop). In short, ‘Who are we, we who criticize?’: privileged, marginal people, decentred intellectuals, deserters from the system? Implicitly an intellectual élite, a kind of vanguard, Holloway admits. For, once the choice has been made to dispense with or relativise class struggle, the role of the free-floating intellectual paradoxically emerges reinforced. We then quickly fall back once more into the (Kautskyan rather than Leninist) idea of science being brought by the intelligentsia ‘into the proletarian class struggle from without’ (by intellectuals in possession of scientific knowledge), rather than Lenin’s idea of ‘class political consciousness’ (not science!) brought ‘from outside the economic struggle’ (not from outside the class struggle) by a party (not by a scientific intelligentsia).

Decidedly, taking fetishism seriously does not make it easier to dispose of the old question of the vanguard, whatever word you use for it. After all, is not Zapatismo still a kind of vanguard (and Holloway its prophet)?

‘The urgent impossibility of revolution’

Holloway proposes to return to the concept of revolution ‘as a question, not as an answer’. What is at stake in revolutionary change is no longer ‘taking power’, for Holloway, but the very existence of power: ‘The problem of the traditional concept of revolution is perhaps not that it aimed too high, but that it aimed too low’. In fact, ‘The only way in which revolution can now be imagined is not as the conquest of power but as the dissolution of power’. This and nothing else is what the Zapatistas, frequently cited as a reference point, mean when they declare that they want to create a world of humanity and dignity, ‘but without taking power’. Holloway admits that this approach may not seem very realistic. While the experiences that inspire him have not aimed at taking power, neither have they – so far – succeeded in changing the world. Holloway simply (dogmatically?) asserts that there is no other way.

This certainty, however peremptory it may be, hardly brings us much further. How are we to change the world without taking power? The book’s author confides in us:

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25 Lenin 1961, pp. 384, 422; and see Bensaid 2002a.
26 Holloway 2002, p. 139.
At the end of the book, as at the beginning, we do not know. The Leninists know, or used to know. We do not. Revolutionary change is more desperately urgent than ever, but we do not know any more what revolution means... [O]ur not-knowing is... the not-knowing of those who understand that not-knowing is part of the revolutionary process. We have lost all certainty, but the openness of uncertainty is central to revolution. ‘Asking we walk’, say the Zapatistas. We ask not only because we do not know the way... but also because asking the way is part of the revolutionary process itself.28

So here we are at the heart of the debate. On the threshold of the new millennium, we no longer know what future revolutions will be like. But we know that capitalism will not be eternal, and that we urgently need to cast it off before it crushes us. This is the first meaning of the idea of revolution: it expresses the recurrent aspiration of the oppressed to their liberation. We also know – after the political revolutions that gave birth to the modern nation-state, and after the trials of 1848, the Commune and the defeated revolutions of the twentieth century – that the revolution will be social or it will not be. This is the second meaning that the word revolution has taken on, since the Communist Manifesto. But, on the other hand, after a cycle of mostly painful experiments, we have difficulty imagining the strategic form of revolutions to come. It is this third meaning of the word that escapes our grasp. This is not terribly new: nobody had planned the Paris Commune, soviet power or the Catalan Council of Militias. These forms of revolutionary power, ‘found at last’, were born of the struggle itself and from the subterranean memory of previous experiences.

Have so many beliefs and certainties vanished in mid-career since the Russian Revolution? Let us concede this (although I am not so sure of the reality of these certainties now so generously attributed to the credulous revolutionaries of yesteryear). This is no reason to forget the (often dearly paid) lessons of past defeats and the negative evidence of past setbacks. Those who thought they could ignore state power and its conquest have often been its victims: they did not want to take power, so power took them. And those who thought they could dodge it, avoid it, get around it, invest it or circumvent it without taking it have too often been thrashed by it. The process-like force of ‘defetishisation’ has not been enough to save them.

Even ‘Leninists’ (which ones?), Holloway says, no longer know (how to change the world). But did they ever, beginning with Lenin himself, claim to possess this doctrinaire knowledge that Holloway attributes to them? History is more complicated than that. In politics there can only be one kind of strategic knowledge: a conditional, hypothetical kind of knowledge, ‘a strategic hypothesis’ drawn from past experiences and serving as a plumb line, in the absence of which action dissipates without attaining any results. The necessity of a hypothesis in no way prevents us from knowing that future experiences will always have their share of unprecedented, unexpected aspects, obliging us to correct it constantly. Renouncing any claim to dogmatic knowledge is thus not a sufficient reason to start from scratch and ignore the past, as long as we guard against the conformism that always threatens tradition (even revolutionary tradition). While waiting for new founding experiences, it would in fact be imprudent to frivolously forget what two centuries of struggles – from June 1848 to the Chilean and Indonesian counter-revolutions, by way of the Russian Revolution, the German tragedy and the Spanish Civil War – have so painfully taught us.

Until today there has never been a case of relations of domination not being torn asunder under the shock of revolutionary crises: strategic time is not the smooth time of the minute hand of a clock, but a jagged time whose pace is set by sudden accelerations and abrupt decelerations. At these critical moments, forms of dual power have always emerged, posing the question ‘who will beat whom’. In the end, no crisis has ever turned out well from the point of view of the oppressed without resolute intervention by a political force (whether you call it a party or a movement) carrying a project forward and capable of taking decisions and decisive initiatives.

We have lost our certainties, Holloway repeats like the hero played by Yves Montand in a bad movie (*Les Routes du Sud*, with a script by Jorge Semprun). No doubt we must learn to do without them. But wherever there is a struggle (whose outcome is uncertain by definition) there is a clash of opposing wills and convictions, which are not certainties but guides to action, subject to the always-possible falsifications of practice. We must say yes to the ‘openness to uncertainty’ that Holloway demands, but no to a leap into a strategic void!

In the depths of this void, the only possible outcome of the crisis is the event itself, but an event without actors, a purely mythical event, cut off from its historical conditions, which pulls loose from the realm of political struggle only to tumble into the domain of theology. This is what Holloway calls to
mind when he invites his readers to think ‘of an anti-politics of events rather than a politics of organization’. The transition from a politics of organisation to an anti-politics of the event can find its way, he says, by means of the experiences of May ‘68, the Zapatista rebellion or the wave of demonstrations against capitalist globalisation. These ‘events are flashes against fetishism, festivals of the non-subordinate, carnivals of the oppressed’. Is carnival the form, found at long last, of the postmodern revolution?

Remembrance of subjects past

Will it be a revolution – a carnival – without actors? Holloway reproaches ‘identity politics’ with the ‘fixation of identities’: in his eyes, the appeal to what one is supposed to ‘be’ always implies a crystallisation of identity, whereas there are no grounds for distinguishing between good and bad identities. Identities only take on meaning in a specific situation and in a transitory way: claiming a Jewish identity did not have the same significance in Nazi Germany as it does today in Israel. Referring to a lovely text in which Subcomandante Marcos champions the multiplicity of overlapping and superimposed identities under the anonymity of the famous ski-mask, Holloway goes so far as to present Zapatismo as an ‘explicitly anti-identitarian’ movement. The crystallisation of identity by contrast is, for him, the antithesis of reciprocal recognition, community, friendship and love, and a form of selfish solipsism. While identification and classificatory definition are weapons in the disciplinary arsenal of power, the dialectic expresses the deeper meaning of non-identity: ‘We, the non-identical, fight against this identification. The struggle against capital is the struggle against identification. It is not the struggle for an alternative identity.’ Identifying comes down to thinking based on being, while thinking based on doing and acting is identifying and denying identification in one and the same movement. Holloway’s critique thus presents itself as an ‘an assault on identity’, a refusal to let oneself be defined, classified and identified. We are not what they think, and the world is not what they claim.

31 Holloway 2002, p. 64.
32 Holloway 2002, p. 100.
What point is there then in continuing to say ‘we’? What can this royal ‘we’ in fact refer to? It cannot designate any great transcendental subject (Humanity, Woman, or the Proletariat). Defining the working class would mean reducing it to the status of an object of capital and stripping it of its subjectivity. The quest for a positive subject must thus be renounced: ‘Class, like the state, like money, like capital, must be understood as process. Capitalism is the ever renewed generation of class, the ever renewed classification of people’.\(^\text{35}\) The approach is hardly new for those of us who have never looked for a substance in the concept of class struggle, but only for a relation. It is this process of ‘formation’, always begun anew and always incomplete, that E.P. Thompson brilliantly studied in his book on the English working class.

But Holloway goes further. While the working class can constitute a sociological notion, for him, there does not exist any such thing as a revolutionary class. Our ‘struggle is not to establish a new identity or composition, but to intensify anti-identity. The crisis of identity is a liberation’: it will free a plurality of forms of resistance and a multiplicity of screams.\(^\text{36}\) This multiplicity cannot be subordinated to the a priori unity of a mythical Proletariat; for, from the standpoint of doing and acting, we are this, that and many other things as well, depending on the situation and the shifting conjuncture. Do all identifications, however fluid and variable, play an equivalent role in determining the terms and stakes of the struggle? Holloway fails to ask (himself) the question. Taking his distance from Negri’s fetishism of the multitude, he expresses fear only when the unresolved strategic enigma breaks through: he worries that emphasising multiplicity while forgetting the underlying unity of the relationships of power can lead to a loss of political perspective, to the point that emancipation then becomes inconceivable. Point taken, then.

**The spectre of anti-power**

In order to get out of this impasse and solve the strategic enigma posed by the sphinx of capital, Holloway’s last word is ‘anti-power’: ‘This book is an exploration of the absurd and shadowy world of anti-power’.\(^\text{37}\) He uses the distinction developed by Negri between power-to [potentia] and

\(^{35}\) Holloway 2002, p. 142.

\(^{36}\) Holloway 2002, p. 212.

power-over \([potestas]\) for his own purposes. The goal he advocates is to free power-to from power-over, doing from work, and subjectivity from objectification. If power-over sometimes comes ‘out of the barrel of a gun’, this, he thinks, is not the case with power-to. The very notion of anti-power still depends on power-over. Yet the

struggle to liberate power-to is not the struggle to construct a counter-power, but rather an anti-power, something that is radically different from power-over. Concepts of revolution that focus on the taking of power are typically centred on the notion of counter-power.

Thus the revolutionary movement has, too often, been constructed ‘as a mirror image of power, army against army, party against party’. Holloway defines anti-power by contrast as ‘the dissolution of power-over’ in the interest of ‘the emancipation of power-to’. 38

What is Holloway’s strategic conclusion (or anti-strategic conclusion, if strategy, as well, is too closely linked to power-over)? ‘It should now be clear that power cannot be taken, for the simple reason that power is not possessed by any particular person or institution’ but rather lies ‘in the fragmentation of social relations’. 39 Having reached this sublime height, Holloway contentedly contemplates the volume of dirty water being bailed out of the bathtub, but he worries about how many babies are being thrown out with it. The perspective of power to the oppressed has, indeed, given way to an indefinable, ungraspable anti-power, about which we are told only that it is everywhere and nowhere, like the centre of Pascal’s circumference. Does the spectre of anti-power thus haunt the bewitched world of capitalist globalisation? It is, on the contrary, very much to be feared that the multiplication of ‘antis’ (the anti-power of an anti-revolution made with an anti-strategy) might, in the end, be no more than a paltry rhetorical stratagem, whose ultimate result is to disarm the oppressed (theoretically and practically) without for all that breaking the iron grasp of capital and its domination.

**An imaginary Zapatismo**

Philosophically, Holloway finds in Deleuze’s and Foucault’s works a representation of power as a ‘multiplicity of relationships of forces’, rather
than as a binary relationship. This ramified power can be distinguished from the regalian State and its apparatuses of domination. The approach is hardly a new one. As early as the 1970s, Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality, Volume One* influenced certain critical reinterpretations of Marx.40 Holloway’s problematic, which is often close to Negri’s, nonetheless diverges from it when he reproaches Negri with limiting himself to a radical-democratic theory founded on the counterposition of constituent power to institutionalised power: the still binary logic of a clash of titans between the monolithic might of capital (Empire with a capital letter) and the monolithic might of the Multitude (also with a capital letter).

Holloway’s main reference point is the Zapatista experience, whose theoretical spokesperson he appoints himself as. His Zapatismo seems however to be imaginary, or even mythical, inasmuch as it takes hardly any account of the real contradictions of the political situation, the real difficulties and obstacles that the Zapatistas have encountered since the uprising of 1 January 1994. Limiting himself to the level of discourse, Holloway does not even try to identify the reasons for the Zapatistas’ failure to develop an urban base.

The innovative character of Zapatista communications and thought are undeniable. In his lovely book *L’Étincelle zapatiste*, Jérôme Baschet analyses the Zapatistas’ contributions with sensitivity and subtlety, without trying to deny their uncertainties and contradictions.41 Holloway, by contrast, tends to take their rhetoric literally.

Limiting ourselves to the issues of power and counter-power, civil society and the vanguard, there can scarcely be any doubt that the Chiapas uprising of 1 January 1994 (‘the moment when the critical forces were once more set in motion’, Baschet remarks) should be seen as part of the renewal of resistance to neoliberal globalisation that has since become undeniable, from Seattle to...
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Genoa by way of Porto Alegre. This moment is also a strategic ‘ground zero’, a moment of critical reflection, stocktaking and questioning, in the aftermath of the ‘short twentieth century’ and the Cold War (presented by Marcos as a sort of Third World War). In this particular transitional situation, the Zapatista spokespeople insist that ‘Zapatismo does not exist’ (Marcos) and that it has ‘neither a line nor recipes’. They say they do not want to capture the state or even take power, but that they aspire to ‘to something only a bit more difficult: a new world’. What we need to take is ourselves, Holloway translates. Yet the Zapatistas do re-affirm the necessity of a ‘new revolution’: there can be no change without a break.

This would, then, be the hypothesis that Holloway has developed, that of a revolution without taking power. Looking at the Zapatistas’ formulations more closely, however, they are more complex and ambiguous than they at first seem. One can see in them, first of all, a form of self-criticism of the armed movements of the 1960s and 1970s, of military verticalism, of the readiness to give orders to social movements, and of caudilloist deformations. At this level, Marcos’s texts and the EZLN communiqués mark a salutary turning point, renewing the hidden tradition of ‘socialism from below’ and popular self-emancipation. The goal is not to take power for oneself (the party, army or vanguard) but, rather, to contribute to turning power over to the people, while emphasising the difference between the state apparatuses strictly speaking and relationships of power that are more deeply embedded in social relations (beginning with the social division of labour among individuals, between the sexes, between intellectual and manual workers, and so forth).

At a second, tactical level, the Zapatista discourse on power points to a discursive strategy. Conscious as they are that the conditions for overthrowing the central government and ruling class are far from being met on the scale of a country with a 3,000 kilometre-long border with the American imperial giant, the Zapatistas choose not to want what they cannot achieve in any event. This is making a virtue of necessity so as to position themselves for a war of attrition and a lasting duality of power, at least on a regional scale.

At a third, strategic level, the Zapatista discourse comes down to denying the importance of the question of power in order simply to demand the organisation of civil society. This theoretical position reproduces for them the dichotomy between civil society (social movements) and political (particularly electoral) institutions. Civil society is, in their eyes, dedicated to acting as
pressure (lobbying) groups on institutions that it is resigned to being unable to change.

Situated in not very favourable national, regional and international relationships of forces, the Zapatista discourse plays on all these different registers, while the Zapatistas’ practice navigates skilfully between all the rocks. This is absolutely legitimate – as long as we do not take pronouncements that are founded on strategic calculations, while claiming to rise above them, too literally. The Zapatistas themselves know full well that they are playing for time; they can relativise the question of power in their communiqués, but they do know that the actually existing power of the Mexican bourgeoisie and army, and even the ‘Northern colossus’, will not fail to crush the indigenous rebellion in Chiapas if they get the chance, just as the US and Colombian state are now trying to crush the Colombian guerrillas. By painting a quasi-angelic picture of Zapatismo, at the cost of taking his distance from any concrete history or politics, Holloway is sustaining dangerous illusions. Not only does the Stalinist counter-revolution play no role in his balance sheet of the twentieth century, but also, in his work, as in François Furet’s, all history results from correct or incorrect ideas. He thus allows himself a balance sheet in which all the books are already closed, since, in his eyes, both experiments have failed, the reformist experiment as well as the revolutionary. The verdict is, to say the least, hasty, wholesale (and crude), as if there existed only two symmetrical experiences, two competing and equally failed approaches; and as if the Stalinist régime (and its other avatars) resulted from the ‘revolutionary experiment’ rather than the Thermidorian counter-revolution. This strange historic logic would make it just as possible to proclaim that the French Revolution has failed, the American Revolution has failed, and so on.42

We will have to dare to go far beyond ideology and plunge into the depths of historical experience in order to pick up once more the thread of a strategic debate that has been buried under the sheer weight of accumulated defeats. On the threshold of a world that is in some ways wholly new to us, in which the new straddles the old, it is better to acknowledge what we do not know and stay open to new experiences to come than to theorise our powerlessness by minimising the obstacles that lie ahead.

42 See Boron 2001 and Bernal 2002. While expressing their sympathy and solidarity with the Zapatista resistance, they warn against the temptation to base a new model on it while masking its theoretical and strategic impasses.
Appendix

Screams and Spit
(Twelve Comments Plus One More, to Continue the Debate with John Holloway)

(i) ‘Spit on history’, John Holloway retorts. Why not? But on which history? For him, apparently, there is only one history, a one-way history, the history of oppression that even contaminates the struggle of the oppressed. As if history and memory were not themselves battlefields. As if a history of the oppressed – often an oral history (history of the exploited, women’s history, gay history, the history of colonised peoples) – did not also exist, just as we can conceive of a theatre of the oppressed or a politics of the oppressed.

(ii) For Holloway, history is ‘the great excuse for not thinking’. Does he mean that it is impossible to think historically? And, then, what do we mean by ‘thinking’? – An old question, that, always getting in the way.

(iii) Spit ‘also on the concept of Stalinism’, which absolves us of the ‘need to blame ourselves’ and constitutes a convenient ‘fig-leaf, protecting our innocence’. No one today imagines that the revolution of the 1920s, luminous and immaculate, can be counterposed to the dark 1930s on which we can dump every sin. No one has emerged unscathed from the ‘century of extremes’. Everyone needs methodically to examine their conscience, including us. But is this sufficient reason to erase the discontinuities that Michel Foucault was so fond of? To establish a strict genealogical continuity between the revolutionary event and the bureaucratic counter-revolution? To pronounce an evenly balanced verdict of ‘guilty’ on both the victors and vanquished, the executioners and their victims? This is not a moral question but a political one. It determines whether it is possible to ‘continue’ or ‘begin anew’. The darkness of non-history, in which all cats are grey (without, for all that, catching the tiniest mouse) is the preferred landscape for neoliberals and repentant Stalinists to hold their reunions, hurriedly wiping out the traces of their past without thinking about this past that makes it so hard for them to pass.

43 John Holloway responded to the above piece in *ContreTemps* no. 6 with an article entitled ‘Drive Your Cart and Your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead’, Holloway 2004. The following is Bensaïd’s riposte.

44 Quotes from Holloway 2004.
(iv) ‘Spit on history because there is nothing so reactionary as the cult of the past’. So be it. But who is talking about a cult? Does tradition weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living? Definitely. But what tradition? Where does this tradition in the singular come from, in which so many contrary traditions vanish away? By contrast, Walter Benjamin, whom Holloway cites so eagerly (appositely or not), demands that we rescue tradition from the conformism that always threatens it. This distinction is essential.

(v) ‘Break history. Du passé faisons table rase’.45 The song rings out proudly. But the politics of the blank page (which Chairman Mao was so fond of) and the blank slate evokes some rather disquieting precedents. Its most consistent advocate was none other than a certain Pol Pot. Gilles Deleuze speaks more wisely when he says, ‘We always begin again from the middle.’

(vi) ‘Spit on history’? Nietzsche himself, certainly the most virulent critic of historical reason and the myth of progress, was subtler.46 He did, admittedly, recommend learning to forget in order to be able to act. He took exception to any history that would be ‘a kind of conclusion to living and a final reckoning for humanity’. But, while he implacably denounced ‘monumental history’, ‘antiqurian history’, ‘excess of historical culture’ and the ‘supersaturation of an age in history’, and history as such as ‘a disguised theology’, he maintained, nonetheless, that ‘living requires the services of history’: ‘To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it . . . for life and action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and action . . .’. Nietzsche thus defended the necessity of a ‘critical history’. At least he claimed to counter ‘the effects of history’, not with a politics of emancipation, but, rather, with an aesthetic: the ‘powers of art, or the “super-historical” . . . powers which divert the gaze from what is developing back . . . to art and religion’. Myth against history?

(vii) ‘We live in a world of Monsters of our own creation’. While commodities, money, capital and the state are fetishes, they are not ‘mere illusions, they are real illusions’. Exactly. What follows from this, in practical terms? That abolishing these illusions requires abolishing the social relations that make them necessary and fabricate them? Or, as Holloway suggests, that we must be content with a fetish strike: ‘Capital exists because we create it . . . If we do not create it tomorrow, it will cease to exist’? In the aftermath of 1968,

45 In French in Holloway’s text: ‘Make a clean sweep of the past’ [translator’s note].
46 Quotes from Nietzsche 2004.
there were Maoists who claimed that ‘driving out the cop’ in our heads would be enough to get rid of the real cops too. Yet the real cops are still with us (more than ever), and the tyranny of the ego is still secure even in the best regulated minds. So would refusing to create capital suffice to lift its spells? Magical behaviour (conjuring away in our imaginations an imaginary despot) would only bring about a liberation which is just as imaginary. Abolishing the conditions of fetishism in reality means overthrowing the despotism of the market and the power of private property and breaking the state that ensures the conditions of social reproduction.

(viii) No doubt, this is all an old story. But where are the new stories? The new must always be made (at least in part) with the bricks of the old. Holloway defines the revolution as ‘the breaking of tradition, the discarding of history… the smashing of the clock and the concentration of time into a moment of unbearable intensity’. Here, he is recycling the imagery that Benjamin used in describing the rebels in 1830 who fired on the faces of public clocks. The symbolic destruction of the image of time still confuses the fetish of temporality with the social relationship on which it rests: the ‘wretched’ measurement of abstract labour time.

(ix) Holloway blots out with his spit the criticisms that Atilio Boron, Alex Callinicos, Guillermo Almeyra and I have made of his work. He reproaches us with envisaging history as ‘something unproblematic’, instead of opening it up to theoretical questions. This is a gratuitous accusation, backed up neither with arguments nor with serious evidence. All of us have, on the contrary, devoted much of our work to interrogating, revising, deconstructing and reconstructing our historical worldview. History is like power; you cannot ignore it. You can refuse to take power, but then it will take you. You can throw history out the door, but it will kick over the traces and come back in through the window.

(x) There is ‘something fundamentally wrong with the power-centred concept of revolution’. But what? Foucault passed this way a long time ago. As I have already mentioned, more than twenty-five years ago I wrote a book entitled *La Révolution et le pouvoir* (‘The Revolution and Power’), around the idea that the state can be broken but the ‘relations of power’ must still be undone (or deconstructed). This is not a new issue. It reached us by way of libertarian traditions and May ’68, among others. Why, if not out of ignorance,

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47 See, for example, Bensaïd 2002b, and Callinicos 1995 and 2004.
does Holloway make a show of radically innovating (still making a clean sweep) instead of situating himself in discussions that have . . . a (long) history!

(xi) ‘The accumulation of struggle is an incremental view of revolution’, says Holloway. It is a positive movement, whereas the anticapitalist movement ‘must be a negative movement’. Criticising illusions of progress, the stockbroker spirit, Penelopes weaving their electoral skeins (stitch by stitch, link by link), interest piled on interest, and the ineluctable march of history as it triumphs over regrettable skids, detours and delays – all this criticism itself belongs to an old tradition (represented in France by Georges Sorel and Charles Péguy, who had so much influence on Benjamin). But, just the same, is the absolute interruption of a scream without a past or a sequel enough to outweigh the continuities of historical time? Benjamin takes exception to the homogenous, empty time of the mechanics of progress, and with it to the notion of an evanescent present, a simple, evanescent hyphen, absolutely determined by the past and irresistibly aspiring to a predestined future. In Benjamin’s work, by contrast, the present becomes the central category of a strategic temporality: each present is thus invested with a feeble messianic power of reshuffling the cards of past and future, giving the vanquished of yesterday and forever their chance, and rescuing tradition from conformism. Yet, for all that, this present is not detached from historical time. As in Blanqui’s work, it maintains relations with past events, not relations of causality, but, rather, relations of astral attraction and constellation. It is in this sense that, to use Benjamin’s definitive formulation, from now on, politics trumps history.

(xii) ‘Using History as a pretext’, Holloway says, we want to ‘pour new struggles into old methods’: ‘Let the new forms of struggle flourish.’ Just because we are constantly welcoming a portion of newness, history (!) exists rather than some divine or mercantile eternity. But the historical dialectic of old and new is subtler than any binary or Manichean opposition between old and new, including in the methodological sense. Yes, let the new flourish; do not give in to routine and habit; stay open to surprise and astonishment. This is all useful advice. But how, by what standard, can we evaluate the new if we lose all memory of the old? Novelty, like antiquity, is always a relative notion.

48 On Benjamin, see Bensaïd 1990.
Screaming and spitting do not amount to thinking. Still less to doing politics.

Translated by Peter Drucker

References


John Holloway’s book is an essentially orthodox intervention – that is, a revision of the tradition by loyalty to its founding texts – concerned with transmitting an unredeemed theoretical achievement of the past into a contemporary ‘political scene’. Readers who bought the book because of the ‘today’ in its subtitle, The Meaning of Revolution Today (and perhaps were also misled by the abseiling activist on the cover) must have been disappointed not to find a restatement of revolutionary theory that takes an analysis of contemporary movements as its empirical starting point. Holloway refers to contemporary movements only for illustration; what he provides is theory in a strict (others may say, narrow) sense, the working through of concepts whose historical background is implied rather than developed.

Holloway’s book showcases the relevant essentials of Marx’s critical theory by way of emphasising why and in what respect they are superior to alternative (non-Marxian) and currently more fashionable ways of thinking. He recovers Marx’s revolutionary insight that an exploration of the possibility of revolution
needs to be a critique not of politics (let alone other ‘superstructural’ partialities such as ‘consciousness’ or ‘culture’) but of society in its totality, including the simultaneous critique of state, individual and community.

This basic intention is reflected in the structure of the book: the first three chapters form an exposition of the problem, with Chapter 1 grounding methodological-epistemological considerations in an argument for the urgency of revolutionary theory, Chapter 2 making the point that state-centred concepts of revolution (let alone reform) have had their historical chance and failed, and Chapter 3 exploring the meaning of the phrase ‘change the world without taking power’. The latter is clearly the most extravagant and risqué chapter. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 discuss the concept of fetishism from different angles, forming the theoretical backbone of the argument. Chapter 7 provides a historical perspective on the extent to which the centrality of the concept of fetishism has been acknowledged in Marxist theory (a chapter that feels almost like a digression as it is the only one that is written in the mould of intellectual history). Chapters 8 and 9 aim to locate Holloway’s anti-fetishistic concept of subjectivity in Marx’s understanding of class and revolutionary agency. Chapter 10 relates the former to the concept of crisis as inherent in the capitalist mode of production and negotiates a space for revolutionary hope. Holloway emphasises that it is one of the specific characteristics of Marx’s thought (as opposed to other socialist traditions) that this hope is neither ‘utopian’ (in a bad, ‘romantic’ sense) nor ‘scientific’ (in a bad, positivist sense). Chapter 11 draws all this together under the title ‘Revolution?’.

Holloway’s conception pivots on his view of class struggle as the central societal conflict between ‘classification’ and ‘non-subordination’. The former implies the ‘fracturing’ of the ‘social flow of doing’ and the ‘defining’ of ‘identities’ (for which the duality of modern state and global market provides crucial tools). The many ways of ‘non-subordination’ – sometimes mere ‘screaming’, sometimes leading to open ‘insubordination’ – contain implicit elements of utopian hope. They are the movement of communism and the basis for a future communist society. Crisis, in which the intrinsic impossibility of capitalist society becomes manifest, is understood as merely an intensified form of class struggle (whereby capital’s ‘flight from labour’ can temporarily serve as a powerful but precarious weapon). Holloway’s characterisation of communism (and the practices that are its manifestations) vacillates between the notion of a ‘reconstitution’ of the ‘social flow of doing’ and that of ‘blowing open’ the limitless and unprecedented possibilities of a humane future.
Classification, class struggle and non-subordination

The logical starting point of Holloway’s book is his understanding of the concept of class. Holloway rejects a positive definition of the working class in the sense of its ‘identification’ as ‘a particular group of people’, which he depicts as the basis of ‘endless discussions about class and non-class movements, class and “other forms” of struggle, “alliances” between the working class and other groups, and so on’. Getting beyond the stale rhetoric of ‘identity’ and coalition politics is clearly one of the motivations behind Holloway’s approach. He argues that classes ‘exist’ only in the sense that they are permanently ‘in the process of being constituted’ by capitalist production, ‘the daily snatching of the object-creation-product from the subject-creator-producer’.

Class struggle, then, is the struggle to classify and against being classified at the same time as it is, indistinguishably, the struggle between constituted classes. . . . All social practice is an unceasing antagonism between the subjection of practice to the fetishized, perverted, defining forms of capitalism and the attempt to live against-and-beyond those forms. There can thus be no question of the existence of non-class forms of struggle. Class struggle, then, is the unceasing daily antagonism (whether it be perceived or not) between . . . fetishization and de-fetishization. . . . Working class identity should be seen as a non-identity: the communion of struggle to be not working class.

Working-class identity, in this sense, is the struggle not to be classified, not to be reduced to ‘being’ a ‘worker’.

‘Humanity, as it exists, is schizoid’ as ‘everybody is torn apart by the class antagonism’, that is by being and not being (subsumed to) some ‘identity’. Those who do not benefit from capitalist appropriation, however, can be expected to be more strongly against it – although nobody can be purely ‘against-and-beyond’ it. Only insofar as we are not the working class, ‘the question of emancipation can even be posed’, but only insofar as we are the working class we have the need to pose it.

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1 Holloway 2002, p. 141.
Although capital imposes identity, ‘the identity (is-ness) of capitalism is a real illusion . . . capitalism never “is”, it is always a struggle to constitute itself’;6 ‘capital presents itself as stable: class struggle, they say, and we accept, comes from us’.7 We might find it flattery to be told that we are the ones who wage the class struggle but, Holloway writes, it is they who start the struggle by subjecting us to classification.8 Class struggle’s principal form is insubordination.9 Holloway names as examples ‘the disobedience of children’, ‘the cursing of the alarm clock’ in the morning, ‘absenteeism, sabotage and malingering at work’, all the way to ‘open rebellion’: all seem part of, or based in, a ‘hidden culture of resistance’. More often than not, ‘the scream of insubordination’ is heard as ‘a low mumble of discontent’;10 it might simply be the assertion that we are more than the definition that we are said to come under.

Holloway’s rejection of a narrowly political (in the sense of state-centred) concept of revolution follows from his definition of class in terms of classification. ‘The movement of the state . . . is a movement to impose patterns on a refractory reality’.11 ‘The imposition of state definitions of nationality’ or ‘citizenization’ is ‘a process of redefinition of the movement of power-to’. Our ‘claim to exert control over our own lives is redefined as democracy, democracy being understood as a state-defined process of electorally influenced decision making’. This ‘redefining’ is a form of containment.

Holloway gives two main reasons why we should not rely on state-centred strategies: firstly, there is a danger of overestimating what can be gained from ‘conquering’ state-power because ‘what the state does is limited and shaped by the fact that it exists as just one node in a web of social relations. Crucially, this web of social relations centres on the way in which work is organized’.12 Secondly, the state-political perspective is too short as the idea ‘that the state can be the centre point of social transformation . . . presupposes . . . a conceptual snipping of social relations at the frontiers of the state’.13 Holloway recalls that the ‘non-territoriality’ of the ‘capitalist constitution of social relations’ is
‘not just the product of the current phase of “globalisation”’.\textsuperscript{14} The critique
of the state leads to that of the party as the latter ‘presupposes an orientation
wards the state and makes little sense without it’.\textsuperscript{15} The party ‘is in fact a
form of disciplining . . . the myriad forms of class struggle’. In the context of
party politics and the conquering of state power, ‘the negative of refusal is
converted into the positive of power-building’;\textsuperscript{16} party building, army building,
institution building, nation building, state building all mean the streamlining,
instrumentalising, hierarchisation and impoverishment of class struggle.

\textbf{Subjectivity, negativity and the ‘social flow of doing’}

Three difficult aspects of Holloway’s argument need to be addressed first of
all:

(i) Holloway bases the concept of ‘subjectivity’ on that of ‘negativity’, but
negativity is defined in three different ways, as human doing in general, as
‘screaming’ against domination and as effective resistance to domination.
Domination by ‘power-over’, however, is said to destroy subjectivity, while
‘dignity’ is defined as the reassertion of ‘doing’.

(ii) He discusses present society on the one hand as one in which ‘community’
has been broken up and has given place to ‘identity’, while, on the other
hand, it is implied that there is nevertheless a ‘community of doing’ or a
‘social flow of doing’ that is being ‘invaded’ or ‘fragmented’ by capitalist
relations of production.

(iii) He explicitly rejects the notion that there might have been a precapitalist
communal form of society that we could simply revert to, but it implicitly
reappears at several points in the argument.

In a characteristic statement, Holloway formulates his position as follows:

For bourgeois theory, subjectivity is identity, whereas in our argument,
subjectivity is the negation of identity. . . . To identify the bourgeois subject
with subjectivity as a whole, however, is a most murderous throwing of the
baby out with the bathwater . . . since subjectivity, as movement, as negation
of is-ness, is the only possible basis for going beyond identity, and therefore
beyond the bourgeois subject.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{14} Holloway 2002, p. 95.
\bibitem{15} Holloway 2002, p. 17.
\bibitem{16} Ibid.
\bibitem{17} Holloway 2002, p. 70ff.
\end{thebibliography}
Holloway rightly identifies ‘identity’ as a core characteristic of bourgeois subjectivity, forgetting, though, that it is not its only characteristic. His reverse argument – that non-bourgeois subjectivity means ‘negation of is-ness’ – is, therefore, shaky to the extent that such a negation is not totally alien to the bourgeois subject either. This becomes a problem in Holloway’s discussion of ‘negativity’. He quotes Marx’s remark (from Capital, Volume I, ‘The Labour Process’) that ‘the architect’ is different from a bee in that he (Holloway adds: or she) ‘raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality’, and presents this observation as a quasi-anthropological statement. Holloway writes that ‘the doing of the architect is negative’ as ‘it begins and ends with the negation of what exists’. On this level of the argument, the ‘negativity’ consists simply in the fact that human beings transform nature by projecting what they find into what they imagine it could be. However, this ‘negativity’ is not at all in itself negative in the much more specific sense that ‘the scream’ is negative. Holloway glosses over this crucial difference by continuing: ‘Bees, to the best of our knowledge, do not scream. They do not say “No! Enough of queens . . .” . . . their doing is not a doing that negates: it simply reproduces’. In this second step of the argument, the criteria for what constitutes ‘negativity’ are much stricter and include a normative judgement (‘enough of queens’), different from the generic concept used in the first half of this paragraph. Most creative acts that are ‘negative’ in the first sense (a negativity of transforming and creating that is actually pivotal to the bourgeois concept of subjectivity) are not at all ‘negative’ in the Marxian, critical sense. Holloway raises the stakes even higher when he continues that a proper scream ‘must involve a projected doing’. Here, in the third concept of negativity, the argument culminates: to be human includes a capacity for imaginative purposeful projection in a general sense (difference from the bee); secondly, to be human in the form of society we have to deal with demands being negative in the sense of screaming ‘No, stop it!’ (difference from bees and bees).
also from all those among our fellow human beings who, for various reasons, tend to emulate bees); third, the screaming must come with some ‘projected doing’ attached (different from all those posers who do not get out of their armchairs to change the world).

In these paragraphs, Holloway is wavering between a stronger and a weaker notion of ‘human nature’. One moment, he writes that humans differ from animals ‘not because going beyond is part of our human nature, but simply because we scream’; because humanity is not yet, ‘doing-as-going-beyond’ is a necessity. The next, he falls back into a pre-critical notion of negativity, when he writes that ‘subjectivity refers to the conscious projection beyond that which exists . . .’, equating subjectivity with doing and with the transcendence of ‘is-ness’. This way of putting things collapses the three forms of subjectivity that Holloway otherwise is at pains to distinguish: the architect, the faux screamer and the revolutionary screamer/doer. Then again, Holloway turns against defining subjectivity at all and argues that ‘any definition of the subject is . . . the attempt to pin down that which is a movement against being pinned down’,.

In what I find is the most ideological statement in the whole book, Holloway extends the notion of a ‘liberation’ of ‘power-to’ to the concept of ‘dignity’: ‘Dignity is the self-assertion of those who are repressed . . . the affirmation of power-to in all its multiplicity’. The ‘huge diversity’ of dignity’s struggles ‘is a single struggle to emancipate power-to, to liberate human doing from capital’. A rich selection of keywords from the context of bourgeois revolution is assembled here – self-assertion, affirmation, emancipation, liberation. If ‘dignity’ means the indiscriminate ‘affirmation of power-to in all its multiplicity’ I cannot see any place for it within critical theory.

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23 Holloway 2002, p. 26. However, Holloway’s argument that ‘definition’ is a form of reification that goes together with the fragmentation of the ‘flow of doing’ and the appearance of society as a mass of discrete phenomena, must be complemented with Adorno’s point (in Negative Dialectics; actually referred to by Holloway in another context [Holloway 2002, p. 102]) that all thinking is dependent upon concepts and some degree of identification and definition: if this should be called ‘reification’, then it must be admitted that some amount of it is unavoidable. There is a fine line between the necessary and the specifically capitalist (i.e. historically contingent) forms of objectifications and abstractions. The table is a table’ and ‘Mexico is Mexico’ (Holloway 2002, p. 62) are statements that only superficially look the same: the fragmentation of the world into nation-states is not of the same order as the fragmentation of the world into tables, chairs and sofas. Furthermore, Holloway’s important point that the ‘we-who-want-to-change-the-world cannot be defined’ (ibid.) means that ‘the working class’ or ‘women’ cannot be defined in the same way that tables indeed can.
The unresolved contradiction between the concepts of the doer/creator/projector and the screamer/subverter/insurgent also structure Holloway’s discussion of the concept of ‘power’. ‘Power, in the first place, is . . . capacity-to-do’.25 It is ‘transformed into . . . power-over’ when ‘the social flow of doing is fractured’. Holloway points to two forms the fracturing takes: division of labour and exploitation.

Holloway’s notion of the ‘social flow of doing’ that capital is fracturing is central to his rejection of the methodological individualism of liberal sociology. He writes that all those who designed, built, packed and transported the computer he was using at the very moment of his writing, as well as those who produced and provided the electricity, John’s breakfast, and so on, partake in the writing of this book: ‘there is a community of doing, a collective of doers, a flow of doing through time and space’.26 Holloway’s point – ‘doing is inherently social’27 – needs, however, qualification. He describes the ‘social flow of doing’ as if it were an original condition into which capitalist production intervenes, although the ‘community’ or ‘collective’ Holloway describes is actually the ‘flow’ of the capitalist process itself. The important points, what kind of flow of what kind of doings and within what kind of sociality, are obfuscated by reference to ‘the’ social flow of doing.

Holloway uses what he presents here as the positive facticity of the ‘social flow of doing’ as a (quasi-ontological) point of reference for a possible transformation of the formless multiplicity of ‘the scream’ into the movement of communism. He describes this as a process of gaining consciousness: we need to understand that the ‘we’ is constituted by ‘the conscious and unconscious, the planned and unplanned braiding of our lives through time’. This involves, ‘if the collective flow of doing is recognized, a mutual recognition of one another as doers, as active subjects. Our individual doing receives its social validation from its recognition as part of the social flow’. Holloway seems to conflate here the ‘we’ that is simply society – more specifically: capitalist society – with the ‘we’ that does the screaming: society, especially capitalist society, does ground subjectivity in the recognition of productivity and creativity; mutual recognition as ‘doers’ (producers) is, in itself, not a basis for insubordination.

27 Ibid.
Holloway tends to identify ‘screaming’ with ‘doing’ (with ‘negativity’ as their common essence).²⁸ He combines here two very different arguments: the one is the traditional one that the (productive, creative) workers need to understand that it is they who build the world in order to claim its ownership. The other is the more specifically Marxian point that the ‘we’ that collectively creates all the goods is at the same time the ‘we’ that screams because it does not want to be the former. The difference is the affirmation (sometimes: pride) of being a (bourgeois) producer-creator-subject,²⁹ or its rejection. The most powerful side of Holloway’s argument is his insistence that ‘we-ness’ gains force by understanding its groundedness not in being-so (producers, doers) but in the contingent acts of ‘screaming-doing’, that is in trying to getting beyond being-so and doing-so;³⁰ this means that the real question is not that of recognition (as the liberal-Hegelian, for example, Habermasian or Taylorian discourse goes) but what kind of recognition of what kind of ‘collectivity’. Our theory ought to make it clear why we are not after the forms of recognition provided by capitalist society; after all, the pre-eminent medium in which bourgeois producer-subjects recognise each other’s subjectivity is the gentle flow of money.

**Objectivity and the paradox of revolution**

One of the difficult preconditions of revolutionary theory is the question, ‘how can maimed, dehumanized, alienated people possibly create a liberated human society?’.³¹ The ‘specific contribution of Marx’ that ‘takes Marxism beyond other forms of radical thought’ is the discovery ‘that capital depends absolutely upon labour for its existence, that is, upon the transformation of human doing into value-producing labour’.³² Holloway writes that ‘it is clear that the rich oppress us, that we hate them and fight against them’ but the us-against-them approach ‘tells us nothing of our power or their vulnerability’ and ‘the fragility of that oppression’. The fact that Marxism is formulated

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²⁸ Holloway 2002, p. 27.
²⁹ In contexts where women are not – or are to a lesser extent, or under significantly worse conditions – included into the productive workforce (that is, into the community of ‘subjects’) this ‘pride’ is likely to take the form of a re-articulation of traditional patriarchal attitudes.
³⁰ This aspect of Holloway’s argument resembles parallel discussions in feminist theory, such as Judith Butler’s 1990 re-formulation of the feminist ‘we’ in *Gender Trouble*.
³¹ Holloway 2002, p. 46.
from the standpoint of negation manifests itself exactly in this aspect: it is less interested in stating the obvious fact that there is oppression but much more in the less obvious fact that the basis of this oppression is vulnerable: ‘we are not victims but subjects, the only subjects’.33 ‘The essential claim of Marxism’ is that ‘they’ are ‘continually created by us. We, the powerless, are all-powerful’. Nevertheless, the ‘increasing closure of existence under capitalism’34 means that ‘the more urgent revolutionary change is shown to be, the more impossible it seems’. The ‘revolutionary dilemma’ or paradox is, however, an objective fact, not a problem of false versus proper thinking. The increasingly total character of capitalist ‘power-over’ means that ‘every breath of our lives’ becomes ‘a moment of class struggle’.35 Inversely, the ubiquity of capitalism is also its weakness, as it opens so many points for attack.

Amongst the theorists that Holloway acknowledges as the greatest influences on his argument are Lukács, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse. Holloway claims that what distinguishes his own arguments from theirs is that – their differences notwithstanding – they fetishised the concept of fetishism: for them, ‘the only possible source of anti-fetishism lies outside the ordinary’,36 incorporated in ‘the Party’ for Lukács, in ‘privileged’ intellectuals and artists for Horkheimer and Adorno and in outcasts and social outsiders for Marcuse: ‘fetishism rules normal, everyday life, while anti-fetishism resides elsewhere, on the margins’. As Bolshevik faith in ‘the Party’ is now ‘historically irrelevant at best’, any theory based on fetishising fetishism ‘tends to lead to a deep pessimism’. Avoiding the latter without reviving some version of a deus ex machina such as ‘the Party’ is what Holloway defines as the main concern of his book. ‘To break with this pessimism, we need a concept in which fetishism and anti-fetishism are not separated’. His antidote is to stress the processual and unfinished character of fetishisation, that is, to re-emphasise the dialectical nature and origin of this concept.37 Holloway’s insistence on ‘fetishisation-as-process’ implies likewise that ‘there is nothing special about our criticism of capitalism, that our scream and our criticism are perfectly ordinary’.

34 Holloway 2002, p. 54.
35 Holloway 2002, p. 56.
37 Although this cannot be discussed here, I feel that Holloway’s emphasis on the dialectical nature of analysis based on the concept of fetishism is much more in continuity than discontinuity with Horkheimer and especially Adorno (from Horkheimer’s essay on ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ to Adorno’s Negative Dialectics).
Holloway’s category of ‘the scream’ is so generic, of course, that it is true but also somewhat banal to say that screaming is ordinary. The more difficult question is that of the differences between different people’s screams, and the fact that most screamers ‘don’t allow themselves’ (to use Adorno’s words) to hear all the other screams. Are not John himself and his most referred-to insurgent, Marcos, just the type of intellectuals Adorno had in mind when he wrote that ‘criticizing privilege’ (not: screaming) ‘becomes a privilege’?38 Furthermore, are not the indígenos from Chiapas a perfectly Marcusean marginalised group? Would not rejecting the bad news – that of the increasing closure in capitalist society – be the denial of a reality?

The intention behind Holloway’s rejection of the idea of the extraordinariness of (whatever leads to) revolution is, of course, correct:

[The movement of communism is anti-heroic. . . . The aim of revolution is the transformation of ordinary, everyday life and it is surely from ordinary, everyday life that revolution must arise. . . . The weaving of friendship, of love, of comradeship, of communality in the face of the reduction of social relations to commodity exchange: that is the material movement of communism. . . . Our struggle is. . . to intensify anti-identity. The crisis of identity is a liberation from certainties. . . the crisis of the revolutionary subject is the liberation of the subject from knowing.39]

More precisely, we need to look at the liberation from being governed by positive knowledge alone. In order to achieve such liberation, we clearly must know a lot, but it is a different kind of knowledge.

There is ‘no innocence, and that is true with an increasing intensity’.40 This evidently implies that what Holloway calls ‘power-to’ can exist only in what is its now predominant form, ‘power-over’. Holloway formulates this with hesitation but still rather optimistically:

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Intellectuals, artists and marginalised groups are considered by Horkheimer, Adorno or Marcuse not as outside the social reality of capitalist society. For Adorno certainly, the artist is particularly able merely to give powerful expression to societal contradictions, which does not mean being particularly able to resolve them. Immanence and self-reflexivity have defined critical theory since the term was coined by Horkheimer in 1937 (Horkheimer 1972); Holloway’s criticism holds against Lukács (and against Habermas; see Postone 1996, Chapter 6) but not against Horkheimer and Adorno. Holloway is actually paraphrasing Horkheimer (1972) when he writes that bourgeois theory discards the fact that the ‘what ought’ is grounded in the ‘what is’, and separates the study of ‘empirical’ reality from ‘normative’ theory (Holloway 2002, p. 7).

38 Quoted by Holloway, ibid.
The exercise of power-to in a way that does not focus on value creation can exist only in antagonism to power-over, as struggle. Power-to . . . can exist . . . only . . . as anti-power.\footnote{\citenum{41}}

This formulation, however, is misleading: power-to actually exists mostly as power-over, or as the complement and object of power-over. Anti-power is always infested with power-over. ‘Under capitalism, subjectivity can only exist antagonistically, in opposition to its own objectification’. However, the ‘revolutionary dilemma’ that Holloway describes means that even opposition can mean affirmation: not every activity that ‘does not focus on value-creation’ or that appears to oppose ‘its own objectification’ is \textit{ipso facto} ‘anti-power’. The concept of ‘anti-power’ is dangerous as long as it remains under-determined. Not every force that opposes the currently predominant form of ‘power’ works in the service of communism, and the concept of ‘anti-power’ needs to be subjected to the test of reversal: do, for example, fascist anti-statism and anti-Semitic anticapitalism also fit under the category of ‘anti-power’? If they do, then the concept is too broad and thus uncritical. We have to take more seriously Adorno’s suspicion that what looks like opposition might really be a form of affirmation.

\section*{Crisis as intensified class struggle}

In his comments on crisis theory, Holloway holds that the ‘falling apart of the social relations of capitalism’ is intensified class struggle (while revolution is nothing other than intensified crisis, that is, doubly intensified class struggle).\footnote{\citenum{42}}

As ‘the tendency to crisis’ is ‘embedded in the form of the class antagonism’,\footnote{\citenum{43}} ‘our struggle is clearly a constant struggle to get away from capital . . . a struggle to lengthen the leash’ (such as in arriving late for work or struggles over wages).\footnote{\citenum{44}} Capital struggles by trying to contain our flight from capital, and, paradoxically, it uses – amongst others – means that could be described

\footnote{\citenum{41}}\citenum{Ibid.}

\footnote{\citenum{Holloway 2002, p. 204. Revolution is ‘the development of the anti-power which already exists as the substance of crisis’. The objectivity of capitalist crisis has its roots in the \textit{fragility} of the objectivity of fetishism and its dependence on our subjectivity (or rather, the \textit{anti-identitarian}, insurgent subjectivity that is our rejection of our \textit{identitarian}, being-so and doing-so subjectivity), and it is in this sense that revolution comes (if it comes) out of the same source as capitalism and its crises: our doing, its (incomplete and ongoing) alienation (as labour) and our discontent with the latter.}

\footnote{\citenum{Holloway 2002, p. 188.}}

\footnote{\citenum{Holloway 2002, p. 189.}}
as forms of ‘actual or threatened flight from labour’; withdrawal of capital, especially after the conversion of capital into its money-form. However, capital can never go beyond the fact that it is ‘nothing but objectivized labour’. To the extent that the ‘flight from labour’ means introduction of more (or more sophisticated) machinery, it paradoxically intensifies capital’s dependence on labour: relatively fewer workers need to be exploited at relatively higher intensity in the effort to counterbalance the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. Capital must retain its ability to keep this relatively smaller number of workers relatively happier. This permanent struggle does not in itself constitute a crisis. Hippies can opt out, workers can turn up late for work, students can fritter away their time in the study of Marx, capital can turn to financial speculation or handling drugs: all that does not matter too much as long as the production of capital (that is the objectivization of doing) itself is not threatened . . . [i.e.] the production of surplus value . . .

Crisis is no more than the expression of the unsustainability of fetishism. Holloway asserts that this crucial piece of Marx’s theory is an explanation of crisis ‘in terms of the force of the scream’, the force of the flight of doing from its fetishisation, from being reduced to labour. He correctly rejects the traditional explanation of crisis in terms of a conflict between ‘forces and relations of production’ as a piece of positivism/idealism: the ‘forces of production’ – dubbed by Holloway ‘human power-to’ to avoid mechanistic overtones – exist ‘in-and-against’ their capitalist form, ‘power-over’ (like use-value exists ‘in-and-against’ value), and do not simply grow, grow, grow, while *en passant* exploding one social form and creating another. The increase of ‘human power-to’ (forces of production) may be a necessary, but is not a sufficient condition of revolution; the decisive conflict is internal to the mode of production, and it is entirely negative: the capital relation destroying itself.

However, Holloway does point to a positivity in the negation that does, for him, provide positive elements for the construction of a self-determining, communist society: ‘The worker who phones in to say she is sick because she wants to spend the day with her children is struggling to give priority to one

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form of doing over another’,\textsuperscript{50} and ‘even’ people who ‘simply try to do their jobs well, as in teachers trying to teach their students’ are fighting ‘for the emancipation of the sociality of doing’.\textsuperscript{51} Holloway has a point here but wastes it on hyperbole when he concludes: ‘From the point of view of capital, the focus on use value rather than value is just as much a form of insubordination as absenteeism or sabotage’. The notion that use-value could or should be emancipated is a red herring, as use-value is the \textit{embodiment} of value, that is, the opposite and complement, but not the negation of exchange-value. Holloway tries to wring the identification of something positive out of the totality but the totality is stronger.

A crisis can be said to exist when the insubordination or non-subordination of doing hinders the intensification of exploitation required for capitalist reproduction to such an extent that the profitability of capital is seriously affected.\textsuperscript{52}

In this situation, ‘capital seeks to reorganize its relation with labour in such a way as to restore profitability’ by means that affect all the conditions of exploitation, in other words, ‘the whole of society’,\textsuperscript{53} in the long list of all these means, Holloway also includes changes in the relations ‘between women and men, children and parents’ and also ‘between different aspects of ourselves’. Capital is forced to seek confrontations, which it would otherwise rather avoid as too risky. To postpone confrontation, companies as well as states may chose to ‘make believe that there is a greater production of surplus value than is actually the case’ (by borrowing money), ‘a greater subordination of life to capital than is really so’.\textsuperscript{54} In order to alleviate risky confrontations with non-subordination, credit was expanded in the twentieth century, which meant a loosening of social discipline as imposed by the law of value. Its historical side-effect, the domination of politics by debt, means a tightening of social discipline and the general loss – from the point of view of capital – of the option to postpone and avoid conflict. The historical compromise negated itself. The logical implication is that, in the immediate future, there will be a lot of conflict of the kind that capital found in the last century – whenever possible – important to avoid.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Holloway 2002, p. 193.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Holloway 2002, p. 194.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Holloway 2002, p. 195.
\end{itemize}
Scream, anti-power and communism

In the currently existing form of society, doing ‘exists antagonistically, as a doing turned against itself’.

However, the status of the ‘un-alienated social flow of doing’ is neither that of an actual reality nor that of ‘mere ideas, romantic echoes of an imagined Golden Age’. Holloway asserts that whether there was ever a golden age of free doing (primitive communism) does not really matter to us now. They [these concepts] point not towards the past but towards a possible future: a future whose possibility depends on its real existence in the present.

Although the un-alienated doing does not exist, and has never existed, it does exist as ‘a presently existing not-yet’, as the ‘revolt against its denial’. Its ‘materiality’ consists in that there cannot be a denial or domination without something which is being denied or dominated:

No matter how much the done dominates the doing, it depends absolutely on that doing for its existence. . . . Capital depends absolutely upon the labour which creates it (and therefore on the prior transformation of doing into labour). . . . That is the basis for hope.

To say ‘we are not yet’ is not the promise of a ‘secure homecoming’ in the near future, but that of ‘a becoming with no guarantees’, of attaining ‘not a lost humanity’ but ‘a humanity to be created’. It is basically good news that ‘our not-yet-ness already exists as project, as overflowing, as pushing beyond’, but this also implies that the becoming promised by the scream resonates with what the scream screams against. Being negation of the negation, the ‘not-yet-ness’ carries within itself traces of ‘is-ness’. ‘Humanity’, in the sense of ‘the negation of inhumanity’, is not, however, already there waiting like Sleeping Beauty (a.k.a. ‘human nature’) as ‘humanism’ (including ‘humanist Marxism’) postulates in its positivist naïveté.

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55 Holloway 2002, p. 34.
56 Holloway 2002, p. 35.
60 An important statement on communism is hidden away in a brief remark: the acknowledgement that the struggle for communism is endless implies that ‘even if the conditions for a power-free society are created’ with the abolition of the capitalist mode of production, the state and all the rest of it, ‘it will always be necessary to struggle against the recrudescence of power-over’ (Holloway 2002, p. 152). There will never be a ‘final synthesis’. Under capital, ‘human potential’ is ‘clogged up’, the human
One might argue that the hope that ‘unalienated doing’ could be, and one day will be, an actuality, is in fact the presupposition of the analysis of capitalism as ‘alienation’ and ‘denial’, not its conclusion: after all, it is us who understand and accept as true the claim that the bases of capital are ‘alienation’, ‘denial’ and ‘organised armed robbery’ although we do not have positive, hard, factual evidence of what ‘non-alienation’ would be. We only ‘conclude’ from our own claim that capital is denial that there must be the presently absent presence of non-alienation that will, one day, become a present presence; if this is what the philosophers call metaphysical, we will have to live with it. It might mean that ‘in the beginning’ is not the scream but the hope, a vague intimation of a future of non-alienated doing, without which we would not even as much as have a notion of alienation, without which, in turn, we would hardly be able to scream (in the determined, revolutionary way that distinguishes our screaming from that of the pigs on slaughterhouse day). In other words, Holloway’s discovery of the ‘materiality’ of our hope for a non-alienated future is too good to be true, but it does no damage. We can rely on the hard fact that capital consists of the exploitation and appropriation of labour, which is, by definition, alienated doing, constituted as such in the process of alienation itself, not prior to it. How, if at all, the not-yet of non-alienation is ‘materially’ present in the capitalist process of its denial is not clear.

Holloway’s claim to have discovered the ‘material’ presence of the absent seems, however, to allow some bourgeois-liberal ideology to sneak in through the back door: the subsequent formulation that we ought to ‘liberate power-to from power-over’ falsely implies (against himself) one could ‘liberate’ something that does not yet exist. It would be more to the point to say that we ought to create that which does not yet exist. Furthermore: the ‘re-’ in ‘the struggle for the reassertion of the social flow of doing’ likewise suggests – against Holloway’s confessed intentions – that an unalienated ‘social flow’ already is waiting somewhere in the wings and merely needs to

potential to be humane as well as the human potential to be cruel and mean: the more ‘human potential’ will be liberated, the more ‘processual’, open-ended and uncertain human living-together will be. The type of security and predictability (‘Community, Identity, Stability’, the motto of the world-state in Brave New World [Huxley 1932]) which the iron cage of capital guaranteed (at least in its social-democratic variant) will be dissolved by communism. It will know acts of cruelty, but they will be dealt with differently, as easy bourgeois solutions such as prisons, asylums and so forth will not be at hand.

61 Holloway 2002, p. 36.
62 Ibid.
be kissed to life. When Holloway describes ‘the dissolution of power-over’ as ‘the emancipation of power-to’ he takes on board in the same vein a concept that never even really worked for liberalism – a period piece of a nineteenth-century heritage that we would better do without: if someone (or something) is supposed to be emancipated, this someone must already exist.

‘We’, the ‘anti-working anti-class’, ‘we are the wreckers’. Capital ‘constantly seeks to compose, to create identities, to create stability (always illusory, but essential to its existence)’, while we are the ones ‘who de-compose’.

What unites the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas or the Movement of the Landless (MST) in Brazil with the struggle of internet workers in Seattle, say, is not a positive common class composition but, rather, the community of their negative struggle against capitalism.

The question that needs to follow from here is whether this community of negativity needs also to be translated into a community of experience and of vision in order to become more than the potential of revolution.

Holloway’s insistence on the power of negativity is shot through with assertions of positivity, such as when he declares – seemingly against the main line of his argument – that

actions that are purely negative . . . do nothing to overcome the separation on which capitalist rule is based. . . . [A]ctions must . . . assert alternative ways of doing . . . transform the experience of social life. . . . This means seeing struggle as a process of ever renewed experiment . . . as constantly moving a step beyond the absorbing identification that capitalism imposes.

Here, Holloway is moving from the negativity of everyday ‘screams’ to the positivity of ‘oppositional self-organization’. The latter should lead to ‘a cumulative breaking of linearity’. Although organising (as a communicative process) is crucial in order to get things done, it must be instrumental to a ‘politics of events’; the events must not become instrumental to building up an organisation (as a thing-like structure) and to ‘expand[ing] the caste of militants’. But Holloway does not explain how the multiplicity of ‘screamings’ and non-subordination is mediated and related to a ‘politics of events’ as

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63 Ibid., my emphasis.
64 Furthermore, the concept of ‘emancipation’ presupposes a subject who does the emancipating – usually the state, until ‘self-emancipation’ was invented late in the nineteenth century as a euphemism for nation-building.
‘events’ are, by definition, not part of everyday life. The examples Holloway gives are the Zapatista rebellion and ‘the wave of demonstrations against global neoliberalism’ (Seattle and so forth).68 While I can imagine how the Zapatista uprising must have been rooted in the everyday class struggle of ‘classification’ and ‘insubordination’ in Chiapas, I find this less self-evident in the case of Seattle: Holloway merely praises the rather formal aspect that Seattle et al. were ‘event-centred’, and writes that ‘at their best’, such events are ‘carnivals of the oppressed’. The latter are, however, not necessarily ‘flashes against fetishism’ as Holloway seems to suggest (after all, the ‘carnival’ metaphor is a variation on a formulation by Lenin),69 but could indeed contain intensely fetishistic and spectacular elements. Furthermore, in what way Seattle et al. supposedly served ‘the dissolution of identity’ (part of how Holloway defines revolution) is unclear.

‘Social discontent today tends to be expressed’ rather ‘diffusely’, and the ‘vast area of activity directed towards changing the world in a way that does not have the state as its focus, and that does not aim at gaining positions of power’ (state power he seems to mean here) ‘is rarely revolutionary in the sense of having revolution as an explicit aim, yet the projection of radical otherness is often an important component of the activity involved’.70 The latter is, Holloway suggests, the revolutionary moment of these activities.

Holloway accepts the objection whereby non-subordination that remains fragmented, ‘private’ and unconscious will easily be recuperated by ‘power-over’, but, nevertheless, all forms of non-subordination leave ‘a residue’

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69 It is worthwhile looking at how exactly Lenin used the image. The place is in Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution: ‘Revolutions are festivals of the oppressed and the exploited. . . . At such times people are capable of performing miracles, if judged by the limited, philistine yardstick of gradualist progress. But it is essential that leaders of the revolutionary parties, too, should advance their aims more comprehensively and boldly at such a time, so that their slogans shall always be in advance of the revolutionary initiative of the masses, serve as a beacon, reveal to them our democratic and socialist ideal in all its magnitude and splendour, and show them the shortest and most direct route to complete, absolute, and decisive victory’ (Lenin 1975, p. 140ff.). The ‘festival/but’ structure of Lenin’s argument should immunise us against mistakenly believing that the affirmation of the festival/carnival metaphor implies in itself a critique of vanguard politics. It would be extremely useful were someone to analyse to what extent the de-centralised cadres of current ‘anticapitalism’ actually act differently from how Lenin recommended party cadres to act. My feeling is that the difference between revolutionary ‘festivals of the oppressed’ and Seattle et al. would lie precisely in the fact that, in the case of the latter, there still is somebody who hands out prefabricated slogans and placards.
adding up to a ‘substratum of negativity which, though generally invisible, can flare up in moments of acute social tension’. The materiality of anti-power.

In the same way as the enclosures of the eighteenth century meant that conduct that was previously just minding one’s own business now became conduct-against-capital . . . so the enclosures of today mean that conduct previously considered as normal begins to appear as a threat to capital. Holloway quotes as examples the desire of the ‘indigenous people’ of Chiapas to ‘maintain their traditional patterns of life’, and that of university students and professors to maintain their equally traditional pattern of working ‘on themes like Plato and Aristotle’, a good addition to the list of phenomena that fall under the concept of ‘non-subordination’. A more specific statement is the following:

The Paris Commune discussed by Marx, the workers’ councils theorized by Pannekoek, the village councils of the Zapatistas, and so on and so on: all are experiments in the movement of anti-fetishism, the struggle for the collective flow of doing, for self-determination.

The most problematic passage in this context is for me this one:

Often the No is expressed so personally (dying one’s hair green, committing suicide, going mad) that it appears to be incapable of having any political resonance. Often the No is violent or barbaric (vandalism, hooliganism, terrorism) . . . a No so bare that it merely reproduces that which is screamed against . . . And yet that is the starting point: not the considered rejection of capitalism as a mode of organisation, not the militant construction of alternatives to capitalism. They come later (or may do). The starting-point is the scream, the dangerous, often barbaric No.

Holloway lumps together here two very different ways of saying ‘No’: those that appear ‘unpolitical’ but, arguably, are political in a not so obvious way; and those that are ‘violent and barbaric’ and reproduce what they scream against. ‘Barbaric’ and ‘terrorist’ reproductions of the existent violence, however,
are clearly not ‘starting points’ for communism (although green hair may be, a little bit). The ‘considered rejection of capitalism’ better not lag very much behind the starting-point/screaming, or it might never come; first, the screaming, then the considered rejection, sounds rather un-dialectical. Is not traditional ‘socialist’ anti-Semitism a classic case of the barbaric scream? The expectation that smashing the shop-windows of ‘Jewish capital’ will sooner or later be followed by ‘considered rejection’ of the capitalist mode of production was held by some German Social Democrats in the 1890s only briefly, as they found out quickly that it was devastatingly wrong. More recently, in the context of the current ‘antiglobalisation’ movement, the predominance of screaming over ‘considered rejection’ encouraged, in some cases, fascists to jump onto the ‘anticapitalist’ bandwagon (an old tune) exploiting the ‘anticapitalist’ screaming about the alleged dominance of finance capital over industrial capital, and so forth. Clearly, Holloway’s point that ‘screaming’ is ‘the starting point’ is right, but it is the starting point of a lot of different things, not all of which feed into communism.

Holloway’s formulations are also somewhat ambiguous on another issue, that of ‘tactical identity’. ‘By giving discontent an identity, “We are women”, “We are indigenous”, we are already imposing a new limitation upon it, we are already defining it’. Holloway rejects here the ‘fight for recognition’ of identity and refers to the Zapatista habit of wearing a balaclava in public as implying that theirs is ‘the struggle of non-identity’.

Holloway takes up Adorno’s argument that, although ‘all conceptualization involves identification’, dialectical thinking works against its own identifications as it conceptualises on the basis not of being but of doing and becoming. What Adorno wrote about the process of thinking, Holloway argues is similarly true about struggle: struggle ought to identify only to the extent that it negates identification ‘in the very moment of identification: we are

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76 Apparently, this was most visible in the Netherlands a few years ago. See texts in De Fabel van de Illegal, 52/53, 2002.

77 Holloway 2002, p. 156.

78 My understanding would have been that the respective statements by the Zapatistas were not a rejection of collective identity but an intelligent re-interpretation of the fact that the balaclava is a disguise of one’s individual identity for fear of assassination by gunmen. Holloway’s point could also have been bolstered here by reference to the recognition made by important strands of 1970s and 1980s feminism that the category, or ‘class’ (developed by Guillaumin especially very much in Holloway’s sense of ‘classification’) ‘woman’ needs to be abolished (Wittig 1992; Guillaumin 1995; also Foucault 1990 and, in his wake, Butler 1990).

indigenous-but-more-than-that, we are women-but-more-than-that’. In other words, although anti-fetishistic struggles inevitably have to operate with identifications, they must take them up (givens of an actually fetishistic social reality) in order to negate them. The subsequent application of this theoretical statement to the paradigm of the Zapatista uprising however is rather ambiguous:

> [T]he strength and resonance of the Zapatista movement, for example, comes not from the fact that it is an indigenous movement, but from the fact that it goes beyond that to present itself as a movement fighting for humanity, for a world of many worlds.\(^80\)

Which movement in the modern period has not tried to ‘present itself’ as ‘fighting for humanity’, and which nationalist-anticolonialist movement has not worked towards ‘a world of many worlds’? If the Zapatista movement really ‘goes beyond’ the ‘fact that it is an indigenous movement’,\(^81\) it must be doing this other than merely through the way it ‘presents itself’. Holloway does not discuss how movements can deal with the danger that preliminary identification, often defined by movements as ‘merely strategic’ or ‘tactical’ identity politics, relapse into affirmative identifications; defenders of nationalist identity politics have regularly, and not wrongly, pointed to the fact that the respective movements are actually ‘more-than-that’, but this should not have excused that they were also, and perhaps primarily, nationalist.

Earlier in the book, Holloway takes a soft position on identity politics, too: ‘an apparently affirmative, identitarian statement’, he writes, can carry ‘a negative, anti-identitarian charge’.\(^82\) To say ‘I am black’ in ‘a society characterised by discrimination against blacks’ is ‘despite its affirmative, identitarian form . . . a negative, anti-identitarian statement’. And:

> to say ‘we are indigenous’ in a society that systematically denies the dignity of the indigenous is a way of . . . negating the negation of dignity, of saying ‘we are indigenous and more than that’.

Whether or not such claims to collective identity carry a ‘negative charge’ depends on ‘the particular situation’ – in what way exactly, Holloway does not explain.

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\(^{80}\) Holloway 2002, p. 103.

\(^{81}\) It is not clear what kind of ‘fact’ that might be, as ‘indigenous movement’ is a rather unspecific category.

\(^{82}\) Holloway 2002, p. 64.
There is a tension in such positive-negative statements . . . in which the positive constantly threatens to engulf the negative. Thus, for example, the nationalism of the oppressed (anti-imperialist nationalism), although it may aim at radical social transformation, is easily diverted from its broader aims into simply replacing ‘their’ capitalists with ‘ours’, as the history of anti-colonial movements makes clear. Alternatively, of course, the positive-negative tension may also explode in the opposite direction, into an explicitly anti-identitarian movement, as is currently the case of the Zapatista movement in Mexico.

The first part of this statement is supported by overwhelming historical evidence, while the second part – beginning with ‘alternatively’ – is very thinly supported by reference to the Zapatista uprising only. Although I cannot claim the right of an opinion on the latter, the claim this is ‘an explicitly anti-identitarian movement’ seems exaggerated to me. I feel that, rather than trying to identify such a thing as an ‘anti-identitarian movement’ in the present reality, one would do better to try and point out anti-identitarian moments within existing social movements. Such a more modest approach would be more in keeping with Holloway’s own account of the ‘paradox of revolution’.

A peculiar characteristic of Holloway’s book is that any criticism of its weak sides can almost entirely be based on its strong sides; or, in other words, selective reading and quoting can construct either a crowd-pleasing, romantic ‘anti-global-capitalism’ Holloway, or an austere ‘back-to-Marx-via-Adorno-and-Italian/German-autonomism’, anti-identitarian Holloway. Although my sympathies are with the second, the book’s ambiguous positioning is what makes it unique. It is perhaps part of its appeal that it gives expression to real contradictions by being itself contradictory.

In terms of conclusion, I would like to point to the following as the most important of Holloway’s points:

– The innocence of anti-power is a dangerous illusion, while the revolutionary dilemma is a reality: the more urgent revolution is, the more difficult it becomes.

– A critical, or revolutionary theory must, nevertheless, emphasise not domination but the vulnerability of domination and its dependence on the dominated (as far as I can see, a unique property of Marxism). Despite the increasing closure of the capitalist totality (a totality based on an antagonism), the totality is never complete.
– Capital imposes classification and identity; we are the wreckers and de-composers.
– Humanity is not yet; there will neither be a going home to *Paradise Lost* nor a final synthesis: the hope is that human history will begin.

Holloway’s book is bold and asks all the right questions, and I cannot think of another book that would provide as much of what is necessary to answer them. If ever a text was a battlefield, this is one, but one that is worth battling through.

**References**

Michael A. Lebowitz

Holloway's Scream: Full of Sound and Fury

In the beginning is the dream, the promise of a society which permits the full development of human potential, a society in which we relate to each other as human beings and where the mere recognition of the need of another is sufficient to induce our deed. In the beginning is the vision of a society where the products of our past activity serve our own need for development and where, in working together, we develop our capacities, our needs, our human wealth.

That dream moves us – even as we catch only fleeting glimpses. It underlies our struggles – our struggles for wages (to satisfy the needs of socially developed human beings), our struggles over the length and intensity of the working day (in order to have time and energy for ourselves), our struggles to make the state (controlled and used by others to enforce our exploitation) into our own agency, our struggles to end our oppression (for instance, as women, blacks, indigenous people), our struggles for our share of civilisation. And, in those struggles, we ourselves develop. Not only does the dream itself become clearer through our collective activity, but we transform ourselves, we grow; through our revolutionary practice, where we simultaneously
change circumstances and ourselves, we make ourselves fit to create a new world, the world that corresponds to the dream.

John Holloway does not begin his *Change the World without Taking Power* with the dream, the potential, that positive and fertile utopia. He begins with a *scream*: ‘In the beginning is the scream. We scream’. It is a scream of sadness, horror, pain, anger but most of all, ‘a scream of refusal: NO’.1 We scream because we refuse to accept. His, in short, is the scream of negativity, and the ‘aim of this book is to strengthen negativity, to take the side of the fly in the web, to make the scream more strident’.2

Although it might be argued that Holloway’s real premise is the dream (the truly human society, the communist society), it is not a point that occupies him, because his purpose is to accentuate the negative. Even Marx’s architect who builds his new structure in his mind before producing it in actuality is depicted as engaged, not in something positive, but in negation: ‘The doing of the architect is negative, not only in its result, but in its whole process: it begins and ends with the negation of what exists’.3 Rather than focus upon that alternative and attempt to build it, Holloway himself begins and ends with the negation of what exists.

Most of all, that which exists and must be negated is power over us – the power of our products over us, the power of social relations over us. But also to be negated are the false paths taken in the past, paths that history and theory reveal to be just other forms of power over us, indeed paths that are counter-revolutionary. So, we must say NO to the state – because ‘the very notion that society can be changed through the winning of state power’ is the source of all our sense of betrayal, and we need to understand that ‘to struggle through the state is to become involved in the active process of defeating yourself’;4 NO to seeking power in order to achieve our goals – because ‘once the logic of power is adopted, the struggle against power is already lost’;5 NO to the party – because the party (whether revolutionary or parliamentary) is the instrument by which our struggles are impoverished, placing control of the state at the top of the hierarchy and ‘sensuality, playing, laughing, loving’ at the bottom;6 NO to armed struggle – because ‘even in

the unlikely event of military victory, it is capitalist social relations that have triumphed;\(^7\) NO to national liberation – because the assertion of national identity in national liberation movements [has] done little more than reproduce the oppression against which the scream was directed;\(^8\)

NO to struggles over identity – because the appeal to identity always involves the consolidation of identity, the strengthening, therefore, of the fracturing of doing, in short, the reinforcement of capital;\(^9\)

NO to identifying and classifying the working class – because we do not struggle as working class, we struggle against being working class, against being classified [and because of] the cumulative evidence of a separation between ‘the working class’ as an empirically identifiable group and the most striking forms of rebellion.\(^10\)

And, finally, NO to the idea that we as thinkers have any privileged understanding of history and the world – because that would imply there are ‘Knowers’, ‘a vanguard of some sort’, and because such a positive-scientific displacement of Marx’s concept of negative science ensures that power-over penetrates into revolutionary theory and undermines it far more effectively than any government undercover agents infiltrating a revolutionary organisation.\(^11\)

As can be seen, there are many NO’s here, far more than would be anticipated – given Holloway’s rejection of an all-Knower. Yet, as we will see, there is one basic, fundamental NO – NO to Marx.

**Holloway’s YES**

 Appropriately, Holloway cheers those who are part of the scream, those who attempt to negate their negation. In the ‘absurd and shadowy world of anti-power’, he places the Zapatistas, participants in autonomous-community projects and NGOs, those who project ‘a radical otherness’, the Zapatistas,

\(^7\) Holloway 2002, p. 213.  
\(^8\) Holloway 2002, p. 73.  
\(^10\) Holloway 2002, pp. 56, 144.  
\(^11\) Holloway 2002, pp. 80, 84, 118, 122.
Liverpool dockers, the protestors against global neoliberalism, the Zapatistas, Internet workers in Seattle, ‘those whose lives are overturned by accumulation: the indigenous of Chiapas, university teachers, coal miners, nearly everybody’.12 This anti-power is ‘ubiquitous’: we find it in the dignity of everyday existence. Anti-power is the relations that we form all the time, relations of love, friendship, comradeship, community, cooperation.13

What makes anti-power revolutionary, though, is that it says NO to power: ‘The Zapatistas have said that they want to make the world anew, to create a world of dignity, a world of humanity, but without taking power’.14 And their call resonates not only among those in open rebellion but also in a hidden world of insubordination – one which encompasses absenteeism from work, the producer who tries to produce a good product (thus, fighting for the development of use-value against value), the ‘wise peasant’ who, when the great lord passes, ‘bows deeply and silently farts’.15 Changing the world without taking power – this is the challenge posed by the Zapatistas . . . the challenge of salvaging revolution from the collapse of the state illusion and the collapse of the power illusion.16

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we can see that the mass organisations of the proletariat are no more – ‘proletarian power has been replaced by an undefined anti-power’, which takes the former’s place as ‘the hope of humanity’.17 How much hope, though, can we draw from this diverse world of anti-power? Holloway admits that much of this activity is ‘rarely revolutionary’, is not always in open hostility to capitalism and does not appear to have the force to change the world.

The Ethiopian peasant’s fart certainly does not blow the passing lord off his horse, and yet: it is part of the substratum of negativity which, though generally invisible can flare up in moments of acute social tension. This substratum of negativity is the stuff that social volcanoes are made of.18

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12 Holloway 2002, pp. 21, 38, 145, 156, 164.
13 Holloway 2002, pp. 155, 158.
15 Holloway 2002, pp. 20–1, 150, 157, 193.
18 Holloway 2002, p. 21. Holloway is silent on whether this substratum of negativity includes the suicide bomber.
In anti-power, we have the ‘stifled volcano’, the dry brush for a prairie fire.\(^{19}\) Because there is always that rage, because the starting point and constant point of return is the scream – negation, rejection, insubordination. But what is it that ‘transforms the scream from a scream of anger to a scream of hope, a confident scream of anti-power’?\(^{20}\)

The recognition that capitalism is fragile. The understanding that rulers ‘always depend on those whom they rule’ and that any system of rule depends upon acquiescence – that is its weakness and ‘the basis for hope’.\(^{21}\) This, Holloway proposes, is ‘the concern of Marxism: understanding the fragility of oppression,’ understanding that ‘in any class society, there is an instability deriving from the ruler’s dependence on the ruled’, that ‘the exploiting class depends on the work of the exploited class for its very existence’.\(^{22}\) With respect to capitalism, we need to grasp not only that capital depends upon the labour which produces it but, fundamentally, that capital must struggle ferociously to reproduce the subordination of workers, its condition of existence. This is the insight that Holloway draws from his focus upon fetishism and the process of fetishisation – that all the categories and conditions of capital are contested, are in flux, are ‘revealed to be raging, bloody battlefields’.\(^{23}\)

We are, in short, in a constant struggle against subordination, against the way capital defines, classifies, oppresses, exploits us. And, because we constantly scream, the reproduction of capital is inherently fragile. What makes capitalism peculiarly unstable is that it must subordinate insubordinate workers who are free, workers who can escape. Inherent in this freedom (which can be temporarily subdued only to rise again) is the dis-articulation of social relations, ‘the possibility of social dis-integration, the possibility of crisis’.\(^{24}\)

Of course, ‘hippies can opt out, workers can turn up late for work’, and so forth – capital can live with that. In itself, insubordination is not sufficient to produce crisis ‘as long as the production of capital (that is the objectivization of doing) itself is not threatened’; insubordination produces crisis, however, when it ‘hinders the intensification of exploitation required for capitalist reproduction to such an extent that the profitability of capital is seriously

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20 Holloway 2002, pp. 40, 150.
21 Holloway 2002, pp. 35–6, 40.
affected'. Happily, we seem to be at that very point. Therein rests Holloway’s hope for anti-power.

Given its difficulties in subordinating insubordination, capital has turned to the expansion of credit. Yet, this tactic ('trick'), which puts off confrontation, has produced its own problems: ‘crisis (and hence the materiality of anti-power) cannot be understood without discussing the role of the expansion of credit’. Simply stated, the expansion of credit in the face of crisis has meant the growth of fictitious capital, fictitious expectations, fictitious living standards, and it cannot go on:

as a result of the avoidance of confrontation with insubordination, the relative decline in the surplus value produced makes it impossible to maintain the fiction.

The ever-growing separation between real and monetary accumulation produces ‘the instability, volatility, fragility and unpredictability of capitalism today’; however, it also increases

the gap between the real subordination of life achieved and the subordination demanded by the voracity of capital. Capital, in order to survive, becomes more and more demanding.

Here, then, is the source of Holloway’s ‘confident scream of anti-power’, why that ‘undefined anti-power’ can be the ‘hope of humanity’. That very fragility of capitalism today means that we cannot pre-judge which NO will trigger the social volcano:

the impact of the Zapatista uprising on capital (through the devaluation of the Mexican peso and the world financial upheaval of 1994–5, for example) makes it clear that the capacity to disrupt capital accumulation does not depend necessarily on one’s immediate location in the process of production.

All our NO’s are important. Further, capital’s growing demands on us in order to survive, its ‘drive to subordinate every aspect of life more and more intensely to capital [which] is the essence of neoliberalism’, make our NO’s so much more important at this juncture. ‘We who are without face and

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26 Holloway 2002, p. 194.
29 Holloway 2002, p. 149.
without voice: we are the crisis of capitalism’.\textsuperscript{30} Now, when capital needs our ‘YES, YES’ so much more, we can say NO.

**NO to Capital**

Holloway’s confident scream may sound like music to some dwelling in the substratum of negativity, but those familiar with the melodies of Marx are likely to consider it as noise. *Change the World without Taking Power* represents a profound rejection of Marx. While Holloway’s NO to Marx is most obvious in their respective views on the place of the state in the struggle to go beyond capitalism, that particular opposition is clearly consistent with quite differing perspectives on what capitalism is and what *Capital* is about.

The concern of Marx was not to understand the fragility of capitalism. Rather, it was to understand its strength. His was an attempt to explain precisely how capitalism reproduces itself and why, therefore, capital’s walls do not crumble with a loud scream. Consider his conclusion that capitalism tends to produce the workers it needs, workers who treat capitalism as common sense:

> The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of this mode of production as self-evident natural laws. The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance.\textsuperscript{31}

Why did capital tend to ‘break down all resistance’? Because of the worker’s ‘dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them’. The immediate dependence of workers upon the sale of their labour-power to satisfy their needs, the mystification of the nature of capital, whereby the social productivity of labour necessarily appears as the attributes of capital, the divisions among workers and capitals, the effects of the substitution of machinery – these are just some of the reasons for that dependence.\textsuperscript{32} All of them come back to the sale of labour-power, that essential characteristic of capitalism, that transaction whose form of expression, however, extinguishes every trace of exploitation, making it appear that the worker gets what she deserves – as does the capitalist.

\textsuperscript{31} Marx 1977, p. 899.
\textsuperscript{32} Lebowitz 2003, pp. 156–60.
‘All the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism’s illusions about freedom’, Marx commented, are grounded in the form of this apparent free exchange.

But you will not find this in Holloway. His theme is the fragility of rule: that ‘in any class society, there is an instability deriving from the ruler’s dependence on the ruled’. The worker’s dependence on capital and the particular mystification which flows from the sale of labour-power are not Holloway’s story. And there is a reason: in his book, the centrality of the sale of labour-power is displaced by the sale of commodities; the exploitation of the worker, by the fetishism of commodities.

Fetishism (and, following from it, the process of fetishisation) is the central theoretical concept that Holloway advances to make his case for the efficacy of the scream. The concept means more to him, though, than the act of attributing life and meaning to the inanimate object, of believing that social value is inherent in the material characteristics of commodities; for Holloway, fetishism is the ‘rupture of doing’, the ‘rupture of doing and done’, the ‘rupture of doer from done’ – the alienation, in short, of the producer from her product.

At the core of his discussion is not capitalism as such but the sale of the commodity:

the fact that it is produced for exchange on the market breaks the flow of doing, makes the thing stand apart from the doing of which it is both product and precondition.

Production for the purpose of exchange ruptures doing and done:

doing is turned against itself, alienated from itself; we lose control over our creative activity. This negation of human creativity takes place through the subjection of human activity to the market.

And the sale of that peculiar commodity, labour-power? The subjection to the market which negates human creativity

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33 Marx 1977, p. 680.
34 Although Holloway finds a basis for the stability of capitalism in the concept of commodity fetishism, fragility remains his focus (Holloway 2002, p. 51).
36 Holloway 2002, p. 46.
takes place fully when the capacity to work creatively (labour power) becomes a commodity to be sold on the market to those with the capital to buy it.\textsuperscript{38}

Rather than focusing (as Marx did) upon commodity production as a condition for the exploitation of the wage-labourer, Holloway reverses the relation and stresses the significance of the sale of labour-power for bringing about ‘the generalisation of commodity production’: the separation of the done from the doing ‘receives its fully developed form in capital, the appropriation of the done by the owners of the past done’.\textsuperscript{39} Thus, exploitation as such is not central: production for the market means that ‘the rupture of doing and done is by no means limited to the immediate process of exploitation, but extends to the whole society’.\textsuperscript{40} The real question is the ‘more general distancing of people from the possibility of determining their own activity’.\textsuperscript{41} With this substitution of fetishism (alienation) for Marx’s concept of exploitation, we have theoretical support for ‘the broad concept of class struggle proposed here’, Holloway’s turn from Marx to the ‘shadowy world of anti-power’.

Holloway’s displacement of capitalist exploitation from the part that \textit{Capital} assigns it is also manifest in his stress upon fetishisation – the process whereby capitalist forms (commodity, money, capital, and so on) are constituted. Holloway moves from a discussion of the contested nature of capitalist forms – that the problematic nature of the constitution of capitalist forms is always present, and that these forms are ‘constantly being established and re-established (or not) through struggle’ – to the conclusion that primitive accumulation is ‘central to the existence of capitalism’.\textsuperscript{42} His logic is that, since capitalism is the daily repeated violent separation of the object from the subject . . . the violence of this separation is not characteristic just of the earliest period of capitalism: it is the core of capitalism.\textsuperscript{43}

In short, ‘primitive accumulation is thus a permanent and central feature of capitalism, not a historical phase’.\textsuperscript{44}

Insistence upon the class struggle inherent in the constitution of all capitalist forms and on the implicit or explicit violence which is present in that process,
however, should not be permitted to obscure the critical distinction that Marx made between primitive accumulation and accumulation within capitalist relations. Marx gave two different answers to the question, ‘where does capital come from?’ Within capitalist relations, he stressed, capital comes from the exploitation of the wage-labourer within the sphere of production. By contrast, in primitive accumulation, capital comes from many diverse sources – but not from the exploitation of the wage-labourer, not from the compulsion to perform surplus-labour as the result of the sale of labour-power. By dissolving the difference and treating the two processes as one, ‘the indigenous of Chiapas, university teachers, coal miners, nearly everybody’ may be considered equal. So, we need not focus on the transaction which, for Marx, is the source of ‘all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production’; in this ‘broad concept of class struggle’, there is no reason to attach particular significance to the producers of surplus-value. So much for *Capital*!

It seems, though, that there is a certain irony in Holloway’s privileging of primitive accumulation. Insofar as he argues that the reproduction of capitalist relations constantly occurs (or does not) through struggle, it suggests that ‘the silent compulsion of economic relations’ is not sufficient to ensure the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Not only ‘the rising bourgeoisie’, then, ‘needs the power of the state’. What Marx called ‘an essential aspect of so-called primitive accumulation’, the use of the state by capital, would from this perspective be ‘a permanent and central feature of capitalism, not a historical phase’. But, would not that make the struggle to take the state away from capital all that more critical?

**NO to the Manifesto and the Commune**

Although Holloway is strangely silent about criticising Marx himself (as opposed to problems in Marxism and the Marxist tradition), his argument completely rejects Marx’s view of the place of state in the process of going beyond capitalism. Marx was very explicit in *The Communist Manifesto* that

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47 In the idea that *Capital* provides an understanding of regularities (‘a law of motion’) in capitalism and in Marx’s ‘state paradigm’, Holloway discovers Lenin and Stalin respectively: the theory of the vanguard party ‘developed to their logical conclusion the organizational consequences’ of the former, and the strategy of socialism in one country ‘was in reality the logical outcome’ of the latter (Holloway 2002, pp. 130, 96).
the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the dominant class, to win the battle of democracy. This state under the control of workers would then begin a process of making ‘despotic inroads’ on capital, restricting the possibility for reproduction of capitalist property relations while, at the same time, fostering the emergence of state-owned property; it would, thus, ‘wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie’. The state, in short, would be the means by which the working class enforced ‘its interests in a general form, in a form possessing general, socially coercive force’.

Holloway disputes this scenario. To retain the idea that you can change the world through the state (whether by winning elections or by revolution) is a grave error – one which has failed to learn from history and theory that the state paradigm, rather than being ‘the vehicle of hope’, is the ‘assassin of hope’. For one, the state does not have the power to challenge capital: ‘what the state does and can do is limited by the need to maintain the system of capitalist organization of which it is a part’. It is ‘just one node in a web of social relations’. He dismisses the idea, then, that control of the state (the armed node!) can be used to tear apart that web, that the workers’ state can be used as a lever to disturb the reproduction of capital, can be part of a process that leads beyond capital (even though he can talk about the significance of the Zapatista uprising in disrupting capital accumulation). By definition, the ‘state in a capitalist society’ cannot ‘be made to function in the interests of the working class’ because as a capitalist state ‘its own continued existence is tied to the reproduction of capitalist social relations as a whole’. Why can the state not act against capital? Holloway answers:

any government that takes significant action directed against the interests of capital will find that an economic crisis will result and that capital will flee from the state territory.

Of course, it should be obvious that Holloway’s point is not limited to the state, this particular ‘node in a web in social relations’ – it would apply to workers, environmentalists, political activists (and, indeed, anyone in the world of ‘anti-power’) who took ‘significant action against the interests of
capital’. Further, it should be obvious (as it was to Marx and Engels) that the workers’ state is in a unique position to respond to a capital strike by using its ‘political supremacy . . . to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible’; in short, ‘significant action directed against the interests of capital’ does not mean that ‘an economic crisis will result’, as long as the workers’ state pursues a policy of ‘revolutionary courage’.53

The powerlessness of the state, though, is not Holloway’s real point; rather, it is that a workers’ state (any state!) is power over us, is part of the social relations that are constantly defining, classifying, fragmenting, fetishising us. Accordingly, ‘it is absurd’, he argues, ‘to think that the struggle against the separating of doing can lie through the state’. Since ‘what is at issue in the revolutionary transformation of the world is not whose power but the very existence of power’, Holloway for that reason proposes that to struggle through the state is to actively defeat yourself.54 Marx’s argument that the struggle against capital should ‘be fought out to a conclusion’ through a state of the Commune-type – one which replaces ‘the ready-made state machinery’, a ‘public force organized for social enslavement’, with ‘the self-government of the producers’ – is rejected without mention.55 And it is obvious why: to create such a state would be to ‘construct a counter-power, a power that can stand against the ruling power’ when what is needed is ‘anti-power’ – ‘something much more radical: the dissolution of power-over’.56

The problem, Holloway argues, is that we have aimed ‘too low’ – ‘what has failed is the notion that revolution means capturing power to abolish power’.57 So, we have to aim higher, raise the stakes, pursue the communist dream: to create a society free of power relations through the dissolution of power-over. This project is far more radical than any notion of revolution based on the conquest of power and at the same time far more realistic.58

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53 Lebowitz 2003, p. 192. If Holloway were right – that actions against the interests of capital will stimulate capital flight and create an economic crisis, would the political implication be to work for simultaneous actions by states around the world because this would deny capital a place to run? Given that his real argument is against any state, Holloway does not go there.


56 Holloway 2002, p. 36.


From this lofty perspective, obviously the idea of using the state – even a state of a new type which is ‘organized into self-working and self-governing communes’ and which serves as the workers’ own power (‘forming their own force instead of the organized force of their suppression’) – is besides the point.\textsuperscript{59} Or, rather, it is beneath acknowledgement. But the power of the capitalist state does not disappear simply because we raise our sights. What does Holloway propose to do about the police, the courts, the armies of that capitalist state which is not dependent on ‘the reproduction of capitalist social relations as a whole’ but, rather, supports that reproduction? Nothing. Insofar as the state depends on the reproduction of capitalist social relations and is ‘just one node’ within that web of relations, the answer is to put an end to those relations. Just say NO. Armed with Hegelian logic, the scream becomes more confident: ‘ubiquitous power implies ubiquitous resistance. Ubiquitous yes implies ubiquitous no’. We find hope in the fact that there is power because power implies anti-power. We take comfort in the fact that we can identify and criticise fetishism because it gives evidence of the present existence of anti-fetishism.\ldots The concept of alienation, or fetishism, in other words, implies its opposite\ldots as resistance, refusal, rejection of alienation in our daily practice.\textsuperscript{60}

The fragility of capitalism, the fragility of capitalism – if we say it enough\ldots

And the power of the capitalist state? Dissolved by logic: ‘power is not possessed by any particular person or institution.\ldots The state, then, is not the locus of power that it appears to be’.\textsuperscript{61} How silly of us to worry about the real capitalist state! But how, in real life, do we get from that state to the society we want to create? How do we change the world without taking power?

**Idealism and revolutionary practice**

This book demonstrates that negating a negation does not necessarily produce enriched concepts. Holloway’s negation of Marx brings us back, unfortunately, to Hegel.\textsuperscript{62} The simplest thing becomes the most complicated and the most

\textsuperscript{59} Lebowitz 2003, pp. 194–6.
\textsuperscript{60} Holloway 2002, pp. 76, 88–9.
\textsuperscript{61} Holloway 2002, pp. 72–3. Holloway’s perspective may be influenced by the fact that the Zapatistas have faced a weak state.
\textsuperscript{62} Holloway’s Hegelianism can be found as well in his identification of the centrality
complicated the simplest. Here, predicates, mystical substances, become the actual subject and ‘the real subject appears as something else, as an element of the mystical substance’.63 Power becomes the subject. Power is reflected in the capitalist state – rather than ‘the capitalist state has power’; the state is dependent upon capitalist relations – rather than ‘the maintenance of those relations depends upon the capitalist state’. In the focus on fetishisation, the constitution of forms is key – once constituted, the forms appear to walk the earth as ghostly spectres; they dance, they interact and they imply their opposites. Power passes into anti-power, fetish into anti-fetish.

The contrast to Marx could not be greater. In his negation of Hegel’s self-development of the Idea, Marx stressed the way human beings produce themselves through their own activity. They develop, he repeated over and again, through their struggles; they transform circumstances and themselves. Struggle, in short, is a process of production, a process of positing, a positive act. This emphasis upon of revolutionary practice, though, is effectively absent from Holloway. That is why he can disdain struggles over identity, why he sees in these the strengthening of fragmentation, the reinforcement of capital – rather than a process of producing human beings with new capacities, people able to initiate a larger movement.64 (Presumably, the same would be true of struggles over wages, which after all accept that the worker is a wage-labourer – the ultimate acquiescence.) Holloway, who screams his rejection of the ‘Knower’ as vanguardist, does not hesitate to instruct real people on the correct struggles and to explain why some struggles contribute to dividing the working class.

Insofar as he can already speak of ‘we’ and can presume, further, that we connect our individual screams, Holloway’s ‘anti-working anti-class’ negative subjects are united in essence in the struggle against capital’s identification, classification, fragmentation of them; what unites them is ‘the community of their negative struggle against capitalism’.65 Their development as a class for itself is unnecessary. Already One as embodiments of the Idea, as embodiments of the idea of anti-power, they have no need for a political instrument where partial knowledge and struggles can be integrated; they do not need to grow

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63 Marx 1975, pp. 23, 25, 40.
64 Lebowitz 2003, pp. 178–89.
through the process of developing common strategies and struggles. Resistance is already ubiquitous:

it is necessary to go beyond the force of overt militancy to ask about the force of all who refuse to subordinate themselves, the force of all who refuse to become capitalist machines.66

‘That is the stuff of dialectical thought’, Holloway reveals; dialectics is ‘the sense of the explosive force of that which is denied’.67 Predicates of the Idea of Anti-power, Holloway’s people are the stifled volcano. Sooner or later they erupt. And after the eruption? It is hard not to envision these bearers of the scream looking around in surprise at what they have wrought, the destruction brought by that volcano, and sheepishly returning to an inert state until the next time.

This is the stuff not of dialectical thought but, rather, of a period of defeat. ‘How can we change the world without taking power? The answer’, Holloway proposes early in the book, ‘is obvious: we do not know’. And, so, he stresses the importance of working practically and theoretically at this answer.68 Almost two hundred pages later, on his concluding page, he asks again ‘How then do we change the world without taking power? At the end of the book, as at the beginning, we do not know’.69

In the beginning is the scream; in the end, the silent fart.

References


67 Holloway 2002, p. 76.
Massimo De Angelis

How?!!
An Essay on John Holloway’s Change the World without Taking Power

0. Method

To define John Holloway’s book would be to run contrary to his methodology, it would be to reify it, setting it against all others; indeed, it would contribute to constituting the ‘other’. ‘Definition constitutes otherness’, it ‘excludes us as active subjects’. ¹ So I will not define his book, I will not say ‘it talks about this or that’, it ‘belongs to this or that school/tradition/etc.’, I will not try to measure it with the yardstick of academic classification. This has been done already by his friends and foes, with obviously divergent classification outcomes. ²

Instead, I will try to engage with it. Yet this means I face a difficulty from the outset. To relate to this book, to the thoughts it expresses, to the range of problematics it raises, to the ‘screams’ it wants to

² See, for example, the review by Werner Bonefeld (‘friend’) and Alex Callinicos (‘foe’) among the many others in the Argentinian journal Herramienta, <http://www.herramienta.com.ar>. So, Bonefeld regards Holloway’s book as a contribution distinct from autonomist Marxism. On the other hand, Callinicos regards it as an example of autonomist Marxism.
give voice to, I must attempt to locate a common, that which constitutes an ‘us’ between this work and mine, between its preoccupations and those of my writings. In other words, to relate to this book, I cannot entirely forget where I come from, my own theoretical and political preoccupations, and the theoretical and political preoccupation of like-minded people I co-operate with at a daily level in both theoretical and political work. If I pose myself as an active subject in this relation to Holloway’s book, I am immediately in trouble. To even attempt to locate a common ground, an affinity from which to start this reflective relation, is to identify, to define, to do things that Holloway’s book repeatedly tells me I must not do. But I cannot avoid doing it, because, implicitly or explicitly, any constructive critical engagement must attempt to define this common ground, so that it may open the way for articulating the differences that lie around it. So, with apologies for having contradicted my earlier promise to follow Holloway’s method from the start, the outcome of applying this method urges me to start from a location, a definition of this common ground.

I. Commons

The common ground I share with this book is the problematic it poses, its premise and longing, its raison d’être. This is not ‘socialism’, it is not ‘anarchism’, it is not ‘communism’; it is not an ideology with ready answers to fix an obviously rotten world; it is not a closed system of thought we identify with, we rally around and ‘build the movement’ by recruiting the newly converted to our own answers. The common ground with Holloway’s book forks out into two complementary routes. In the first place, there is the centrality of a political and theoretical methodology of asking questions. And, second, the acknowledgment that the politics of asking questions – a politics inspired by the Zapatistas’ adagio ‘by asking we walk’ which has obviously had much influence on Holloway’s work, as has on many others including myself – is a politics that puts human subjects at its centre. Thus, John Holloway starts his book with a fundamental question, one that very few contemporary books inspired by a Marxist framework address:

[H]ow, in spite of everything, can we understand our own force, our own capacity to create a different world? . . . [H]ow do we overcome the feeling of helplessness that seems now to pervade everything? How do we
understand that, in relation to the crisis as in relation to the war, we are not victims but subjects, the only subjects? 3

Ultimately, the political preoccupation of this common ground is not ‘who is in power’, but how to articulate our relations in this planet so that we may exercise our powers to, our doing, in such a way as to recognise each other as human beings endowed with dignity.

2. Scream

This is the common ground, fundamental indeed, because it presupposes de-fetishising from the very beginning. Subjects and their (our) questions, subjects and their (our) doing, subjects and their (our) powers-to, hence their (our) power-to make another world, subjects and their (our) mode of relating to each other. But this common ground is not the theoretical starting point of Holloway’s investigation. Rather, it is its underlying energy, its underlying rationale. The theoretical starting point is, instead, a detour from this problematic, it is this problematic hijacked by power-over. Hence a realignment of the relational problematic: instead of starting from the mode of articulation among the many subjects, the critique of existing modes of this articulation and the strategic problematisation of alternatives to these modes, as well as of what we are up against, Holloway begins his argument from the relation between the subjects – the ultimate creators of another world – and a ‘feeling of helplessness that seems now to pervade everything’. The subject posited by Holloway is never spelled out in details. He strives to make sure we do not think of an ‘I’, but of a ‘we’ when we think of the subject, although this ‘we’ ‘is very much a question rather than an answer’. 5 In other words, Holloway never poses the question of how the many ‘I’s become a ‘we’ – under what conditions, what are the challenges, the alternatives, the contradictions, the horizons. And, indeed, this absence, as we shall see below, is the absence of the problematic of organisation.

But I cannot find other ways to imagine the general character of these subjects (however their ‘collectivity’ may be articulated), except as human

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6 This is also noted in Wright and Hawkins 2004.
beings with needs and desires, with aspirations, affects and relations. Hence
the ‘feeling of helplessness’ that seems to constitute these subjects – whose
raison d’être we intuitively imagine finding in the many horrors of the world
discussed by various other critical accounts of the world we live in – is a
feeling that emerges out of needs unmet, desires crushed, aspirations, affects
and relations disappointed, fragmented and made invisible. This clash between
subjects and their ‘feeling of helplessness’ vis-à-vis the horrors of the world
is the unspoken big bang that gives rise to Holloway’s theoretical starting
point: ‘the scream’.

When we write or when we read, it is easy to forget that the beginning is
not the word, but the scream. Faced with the mutilation of human lives by
capitalism, a scream of sadness, a scream of horror, a scream of anger, a
scream of refusal: NO.7

In other words,

the starting point of theoretical reflection is opposition, negativity, struggle.
It is from rage that thought is born, not from the pose of reason, not from
the reasoned-sitting-back-and-reflecting-on-the-mysteries-of-existence that
is the conventional image of ‘the thinker’.8

The scream, says Holloway, is like the scream of the ‘flies caught in a spider’s
web’.9 Of course, these are human flies: ‘We scream not because we face certain
death in the spider’s web, but because we dream of freeing ourselves . . .’. In
other words, ‘our scream is a refusal to accept’, or ‘the scream implies a
tension between that which exists and that which might conceivably exist’.10

In other words, for Holloway, the scream is the moment of the subjects’
acknowledgment of their alienation, their separation from the flow of doing:
it is a scream that wishes that the future had a present different from ours,
because our present makes us scream. This is the negativity that the book
wants to strengthen, a negativity presented insistently through the book, the
pure negativity of the scream of the alienated subject.11 Far from being ‘just
a question of seeing things from below, or from the bottom up, for that too
implies the adoption of pre-existing categories, a mere reversal of negative
and positive signs’.12

8 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
But this ‘mere reversal of negative and positive sign’ is exactly what Holloway seems to be doing here. Ultimately, this ‘feeling of helplessness’ out of which he can conceptualise his starting point, the scream, is nothing but the acknowledgment of a clash: between the subjects’ positing of needs, desires, aspirations, affects and relations through their doing – in brief, value practices – and the negation of all this by a world, a mode of doing with its corresponding value practices, in which the doing is ruled by the done, in which needs, desires, aspirations, affects and relations are not themselves the ‘measure’ of doing, but the doing (which is always a positing of needs, desires, aspirations, affects and relations) is measured by the done. The scream might well be an expression of negativity, but this scream of refusal, this ‘NO’ underlines the frustration of a multitude of ‘yeses’. Understood positively, this clashing point is a clash among value practices. Holloway could have started with these yeses and said that, at the beginning, there are needs, desires, relations, affects, and their denial by capital lead us to scream, to say NO! With a difference, however, in that starting from the multitude of yeses, he could not have avoided posing the question of their alternative articulation as the central problematic of revolution.

3. De-fetishising St. John

Clearly, if the scream ‘implies an anguished enthusiasm for changing the world’, the problem is ‘how can we do it?’ Holloway does not attempt to answer the question. Instead, guided by his negativity, he tells us how not to do it. In the following chapters he argues his reasons why we cannot do it through the state, we cannot do it through seizing power, we cannot do it through fetishised categories, we cannot do it through traditional Marxist modes of thought that classify, we cannot do it through an autonomist Marxist thought that seems to move from the subject as positive force. Many of these pages are filled with powerful insights that aim at dissolving each of the pre-existing categories of thought that traditional political discourses are made of. State, power and class seem to vanish under the hammer of Holloway’s negativity with which he hopes to contaminate traditional Marxism.

13 Holloway 2002, p. 11.
14 Holloway 2002, pp. 11–18.
In a nutshell, Holloway’s argument is this. Capitalist relations are everywhere, they are even embedded in the state. Thus the old debate regarding whether state power should be seized through reformist or revolutionary means represents a false dichotomy. In either case, the problematic of ‘seizing power’ leads to the reproduction of the hierarchies of capitalism. The seizing of power is the seizing of power-over, of the structure of hierarchies and powers over the social body. But revolution is certainly not this, rather, it is the abolishment of power-over people, the living of relations of anti-power. Capitalism, in fact, is not something out there, it is rather everywhere because it is essentially based on a separation between the done and the doing, between object and subject. Holloway makes this argument by going back to Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism, which he sees as central to the problematic of understanding, criticising and transcending capitalism. This critique tells us that human relations take the form of relations among things, which, ultimately, means that the object dominates the subject, the done the doing: this is the all-pervading power that dominates us according to Holloway, not a power outside us existing as a capitalist class, a state, an army. It is this power-over that dominates the power-to, that must be dealt with by revolution today, a revolution that therefore must take the form of a struggle of anti-power, to liberate power-to from power-over. ‘The struggle to liberate power-to is not the struggle to construct a counter-power, but rather an anti-power, something that is radically different from power-over’.

To pose the question of commodity fetishism is thus an attempt to re-ground revolution on the subject rather than on fetishised categories (class, state and so on). And, since commodity fetishism is no illusion, but relations between people do really take the form of relations between things, how do we break with it?

When we raise this question, it is clear what the scream is for Holloway. It plays the same role played by the party in the Lukács of History and Class Consciousness. For Lukács, the party served as the knowing of the class, the bearer of class consciousness in a situation in which the proletariat was believed, in true Leninist spirit, to be capable only of an economic or trade-unionist consciousness. Holloway’s critique of Lukács is minimalist but effective: how can the party know? How can it become the bearer of class consciousness? According to Holloway, this is simply asserted.

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20 Marx 1976, p. 166.
Holloway, correctly, does not want to look outside the lived activity of the subject for an answer to how we can break with fetishism. His answer is the scream arising out of that tension between everyday oppression and a sense that we are more than objects. Resistance, struggle, the scream, this is where commodity fetishism – which ‘is concerned with the explosion of power inside us’21 – is transcended, according to Holloway.

But Holloway’s solution is also problematic. Commodity fetishism defines the thing-like nature of social relations in capitalism. You can scream as a result of the rule of the object, of the deed, yet this is not to overcome fetishism. The scream perhaps opens the way, points in a direction, and opens a horizon. Ultimately, the scream, the NO, the refusal sets a limit, draws a line in the sand, vis-à-vis fetishising forces. It is not yet the creation of social relations beyond capital. As we argued above, the scream is placed between a positing of the subject and the frustration of this positing, it is a tension between the NO and many frustrated yeses, it is the clash point of opposite value practices. To break the spell of commodity fetishism, relations between things need not only to be recognised as relations between people, but acted upon. To de-fetishise is to recognise that the only constituent social force of those many yeses is your articulation with the other, a relational dance that produces life.

So, how do we get out of fetishism? Following a long tradition, Peter Hudis points out that, in Capital, Marx presented commodity fetishisms as all pervasive, or, we could say, as the sea in which we are all immersed in our daily action.22 A fish certainly cannot see the sea,23 since to our knowledge, fish cannot imagine, cannot construct a reality in thought which is different from any existing one, cannot act upon it. Thus the problem of ‘how can we get out of it?’ is addressed by Marx through a discursive trick: ‘let us imagine, for a change, an association of free men’ he suddenly argues in Chapter One.24 De-fetishisation, for Peter Hudis, is, therefore, about imagining human relations in the future, about a projection into a different society, an answer to the question ‘what happens after the revolution?’. And imagination is a positive, affirmative standpoint, not a negative one. According to Hudis, in other words, Marx

21 Holloway 2002, p. 56.
24 Marx 1976, p. 171.
presupposes a positive transcendence of capitalism and from this standpoint penetrates the mystery of commodity fetishism. He writes, ‘the veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life process... until it becomes production by freely associated men.’

The power of imagination. The power of affirmation. And it is obvious to me that, since affirmation is an integral part of our doing, so are words, discourses, communication among doers. So why is it that Holloway dismisses Saint John, or, better, the postmodern fascination with discourse?

Saint John is doubly wrong when he says that ‘in the beginning was the Word!’ Doubly wrong because, to put it in traditional terms, his statement is both positive and idealist. The word does not negate, as the scream does. And the word does not imply doing, as the scream does.

How Holloway can make this split between doing and discourse is, to me, beyond comprehension. And what I understand even less is how he can quote Marx in support of this split when Marx seems to argue just the opposite:

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.

Here is how Holloway comments on the quote:

the imagination of the labourer is ecstatic: at the commencement of the labour process it projects beyond what is to an otherness that might be. This otherness exists not only when it is created: it exists already, really, subjunctively, in the projection of the worker, in that which makes her human. The doing of the architect is negative, not only in its result, but in its whole process: it begins and ends with the negation of what exists. Even if she is the worst of the architects, the doing is a creative doing.

But the projection of the architect is not a projection that is independent from discourse, from representation, from some types of discursive constructs, from a grid of signification, from ‘the word’ and from ‘Saint John’. Indeed, human doing embodies discourse as one of its moments, the architect imagining the
house, the human subject turned into a political animal imagining new social relations at whatever scale of social action. The positing of new relations, the praxis of their affirmation is only possible through a creative form of projection of the imagination.\textsuperscript{29} But, in turn, imagination that turns into a social force by ‘gripping the masses’, as Marx would put it, is an imagination that has found words and modes of thinking that are rooted in a multiplicity of needs, desires and aspirations and are opening to forms of praxis that articulate through respect rather than lead through exclusion. Once again, it is not a matter of word versus doing, but the ‘how’ of the word and discourse are a moment of doing. It is not that in the ‘world of the word, doing is separated from talking and doing, practice is separated form theory’\textsuperscript{30}. Again, it is a question of the how. The word that is aware of itself as a moment of the doing, the word that is aware of its being part of a discourse, is a word that is doing. To dismiss the word in this way is to dismiss affirmation, and our own positing of the telos of our powers-to,\textsuperscript{31} our own constituent powers that can only go through the relational dance we are involved in the practice of communication.

So, yes, imagination plays a central role in our de-fetishising. But it is wrong to conceive, as in the case of Hudis’s interpretation of Marx, our being in the world in terms of an all-pervasive presence of capital and its fetishism. As if communities around the world were not striving to organise around imagination and a diversity of dreams. As if we were not already constructing realms of social action and communication in which we strive to recognise each other in dignity; as if we were not continuously ‘negating the negation’ every time we posit the new and act upon it in our organising, hence co-producing; as if we were not learning from our mistakes, learning to listen to the voices we became accustomed to excluding through our stale modes of thought and discourses; as if Seattle 1999, Chiapas 1995, Argentina 2001, London 2003 and other millions of occasions of ‘revolt’, were not also

\textsuperscript{29} See, for example, Smith 2002.
\textsuperscript{30} Holloway 2002, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{31} Obviously, the word might end up in academic chitchat – as the doing might end up in drifting – the ‘stable world, a sitting-back-in-an-armchair-and-having-a-chat world, a sitting-at-a-desk-and-writing world, a contented world, far from the scream which would change everything, far from the doing which negates’, Holloway 2002, p. 23. But this is nothing else than the drifting specific to the discursive form of doing. Academic chitchat, that form of discourse that not only is self-referential (all discourses, to a variety of degrees, are), but also that is not conscious of being self-referential, is not a good reason to prioritise ‘doing’ over ‘words’, that is, a specific doing that produces words, constructs, grids we use to act upon the world.
breakthroughs of constitution, moments of a long and complex social process of making of relations, of worldviews, of things, of questions, of answers, of de-fetishising visions, affects and moments that are certainly ridded with contradictions, limitations and paradoxes, yet are revolutionary moments nevertheless because they break with the old and posit the new. As if the times were not ripe for posing the question of the how do we relate to each other on this planet?

At this junction between the centrality of the affirmative standpoint in the struggle against fetishism, and the refusal to see fetishism as all pervasive, but rather as a process of fetishisation (as correctly pointed by Holloway), we have opened up a space for the positing of a strategic and organisational question that is missing in Holloway (and in many of his critics): how do we articulate the many ‘screaming’ ‘I’s so as we may not only say ‘no’ to fetishism and the rule of capital, but also be able to articulate the many yeses constituting another world? It goes without saying that this question rules out Hudis’s question of ‘what happens after the revolution’, and, instead, poses the question of what happens here and now, that is to say during the revolution, ‘what kind of human relations and forms of social production are we creating so as to overcome capital. Ultimately, the problematic of the transcendence of commodity fetishism points to the problematic of organisation, of building bridges, of establishing links, accessing social wealth, learning from mistakes, de-fetishising our relations to the others, outreaching and being reached, articulating flows from movement to society and viceversa. What else is de-fetishising other than a relational practice, hence a ‘how’? And this is why the question of organising becomes so important, because it is in the organising that we bring together the drawing of lines in the sand, the screaming ‘NO’, with the constitution of a social force that learns to articulate many yeses, that takes responsibility for the production of new social relations.

4. Clashing powers-to

When one sees the doing from the perspective of the scream, power-to is negated, turned into power-over.

It is when the social flow of doing is fractured that power-to is transformed into its opposite, power-over... the social flow is fractured when doing itself is broken. Doing-as-projection-beyond is broken when some people arrogate to themselves the projection-beyond (conception) of the doing and
command others to execute what they have conceived. Doing is broken as the ‘powerful’ conceive but do not execute, while the others execute but do not conceive. Doing is broken as the ‘powerful’ separate the done from the doers and appropriate it to themselves. The social flow is broken as the ‘powerful’ present themselves as the individual doers, while the rest simply disappear from sight.  

Revolutionary politics (or better anti-politics), stands against all this, as ‘the explicit affirmation in all its infinite richness of that which is denied’. What is being denied is power-to, hence the aim of anti-politics ‘is the transformation of ordinary, every day life, and it is surely from ordinary, everyday life that revolution must arise’.

From this perspective, therefore, it is not only possible to change the world without taking power. It is also obvious that the exercise of the multiplicity of powers-to is the real bottom line, the ordinary life stuff of revolution. But power-to is always exercised within a given context and scale, and it is always exercised for something. There are some critical scales of action in which, if you exercise power, they send the police and the army. So, certainly power is to be exercised and not seized, but we are in self-denial if we do not recognise and therefore problematise the fact that there are modes of exercising power-to that are clashing, say the power of the landless to reclaim the land, build schools, homes and hospitals and community, and the power of the army to shoot, murder, clear the land and return it to the ‘lawful’ multinational owner.

And, here, it seems to me, is the problem in Holloway’s discussion of the relation between power-over and power-to. There might be no doubt that ‘power-over may come out of the barrel of gun, but not power-to’, but let us not forget that pulling the trigger (as well as producing the gun, distributing it through the army, establishing logistical supply lines that work and are effective, brainwashing the mind of the soldiers to accept orders, brainwashing the mind of the population into patriotism, and so on) is also power-to . . . shoot. It is the end result between different powers-to whose teloi set them in opposition to one other which, it seems to me, is what defines power-over. Power-over is a type of relation among powers-to, it is constituted by this
relation. And, certainly, it is true that, in our relation to capital, we exercise power-to in ‘the mode of being denied’, but denied by what? By power-over? No, by other powers-to, the characteristic of which is to run in opposite directions with respect to the many yeses that are being denied, powers-to that aim at constituting another reality, that have an organisational force able to overcome the organisational force of needs and desires that go beyond capital. In other words, power-over is an emergent property, it specifies the extent to which we are alienated from the social body, the extent to which we must comply with the mechanisms of a world that set each against the other. To put it in this way is to redirect our eye towards the effectiveness of the organisational reach of a social force that wants to move beyond capital (in terms of the multiplicity of our powers-to through discourse, practices, networks, culture, affects, and so on) vis-à-vis the organising of capital. It is also to defeat the self-fulfilling prophecies of cynicism. Because, if power-over is not something opposed to power-to, but the end result of clashing between powers-to running in opposite directions, then strategic self-reflection on ‘our powers to’, is a moment of our own empowerment.

5. Articulation and revolution

As we have mentioned, Holloway’s starting point is the relation between the subjects – the ultimate creators of another world – and a ‘feeling of helplessness that seems now to pervade everything’. Holloway sees this subject not as an ‘I’ but as a ‘we’, although this ‘we’ ‘is very much a question rather than an answer’. A question, however, that is raised with no reference whatsoever to a context, to the multiplicity of powers within the social body, within the many ‘I’s that should constitute the ‘we’ Holloway is talking about. How do these many ‘I’s’ become a ‘we’? How do we build community in difference? How is it possible for the multiplicity of the ‘I’s to co-operate and recognise each other as diverse and at the same time recognise they share commons that set them vis-à-vis capital? And this absence of the problematic of how the ‘I’s can be articulated into a ‘we’, is the absence of the problematic of organisation. Indeed, one wonders, is the problematic of organisation conceptualisable within in Holloway’s framework? The problem is not so much that no fixed model can be rigidified in a conceptual grid under Holloway

37 This is also noted in Wright and Hawkins 2004.
de-fetishising hammer. The problem is that, once we begin to think and conceive the organising as a form of social doing, we must abandon the scream and negativity as its starting point. And necessarily so, because, in the very moment we root our organising in this scream, we have risked falling into an old blackmail of all ‘vertical’ organisations: unite around this party, this programme, this line, this meaning of the words, because the horrors are great, because the reasons to scream are great, because the urgency is great and we do not have time to waste with all the nonsense outside our own little circle. We must, instead, recognise that organising is always affirmative, positive, constituent, relational. And this is precisely for the reason advocated by Holloway: ‘militancy cannot be the axis of revolutionary thought, although certainly the work of “militants” is crucial in any form of organizing’.38 Indeed, the axis of revolutionary thought is another world, other modes of doing, other ways to relate to each other, other ways of organising our reproduction as species on this planet. The axis of revolutionary thought is this other world, not as projection into a future, not as one model others have to conform to, but as a social force emerging in the present. But the problematic of its emergence is the problematic of its organisational means. What a powerful loop! The end: other ways of organising our webs of relations. The means: our organising webs of relations in the here and now. When the organisational means correspond to the ends, we have realigned the politics of revolution with the revolution in politics. There is no excuse, there is no procrastination, your mode of doing, of organising speak for the type of world you want, indeed, they are that type of world!

Here, we realise what the stuff of ‘another world’ is all about, how really complicated it is, how our ideals are put to the test. In this realm, we realise that the subject does not simply relate to the ‘feeling of helplessness that seems now to pervade everything’ – hence the scream, hence the struggle ‘within and against capital’. No, within the relational doing of organising that goes beyond the circle of militants, the subjects struggle against that feeling of helplessness that negates their dignity, their community, their sociality, and the specific form in which the subjects’ struggle is a negation of that negation, hence affirmative, propositive, always re-defining what they are for in a relational dance that constitutes their incessant organising. And this organising as form of doing, is, to follow Hannah Arendt, is

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38 Holloway 2002, p. 211.
‘conditioned by the fact of human plurality’, and plurality implies both speech and act – indeed,

without speech, action loses the actor, and the doer of deeds is possible only
to the extent that he is at the same time the speaker of words, who identifies
himself as the actor and announces what he is doing, what he has done, or
what he intends to do.39

Organising also means taking responsibility for one’s action, to be a doer
who acknowledges one’s relations to others. Can the doers-speakers also
speak about and make the norms of their interaction?

But here one also realises, paradoxically, the strength of Holloway’s emphasis
on doing rather than on the done. Because, if it is true, as he says, that ‘it is
not only particular groups of people that are oppressed (women, indigenous,
peasants, factory workers, and so on), but also (and perhaps especially)
particular aspects of the personality of all of us: our self-confidence, our
sexuality, our playfulness, our creativity’, then it is in the relational doing of
organising that these oppressions are overcome. But, as mentioned, every
doing has scale and context, and, at certain scales and in certain contexts, a
doing might clash with other doings, with other powers to. So, what then?

6. The beast

Then there is the state and the problematic of its overcoming. Then, on the
heads of these clashing subjects and clashing doings, the theoretical vultures
circle around with their interpretations, categorisations and definitions, using
them to divide goods and bads, to draw lines of inclusion and exclusion,
who is right and who is wrong. Instead of regarding the problematic of
organisation as the problematic of the articulation among different measures
among those social subjects who want a different world, they measure the
positions of these subjects with their own fixed doctrine. The traditional
Marxists thus repeat their phraseology and divide the world among ‘reformists’
and ‘revolutionaries’. An old and crude model indeed, yet an attempt to
recognise the strategic problem we face, the need to deal with the question
of the state, rather than avoid it. The problem is that their strategic thinking,
which links up the self-activity of class with the problematic of the party, of
the state and of revolution, reiterates an improbable script if we consider that

history is open. Thus, for example, Alex Callinicos, in his critical review of Holloway’s book,\(^40\) reminds us that revolution \textit{has} to be about seizing power, because otherwise the capitalist state will survive to become the launching pad for counter-revolution’. In his view, this seizure occurs in the last step of a process in which ‘workers’ councils . . . embrace an entire national society [and] they have the organizational capacity and the economic power to replace the state as a whole’. Yet, once they have done this, there still remains the need of ‘overcoming – by force if necessary – the resistance of the core apparatuses of capitalist state power’. It is unclear, in Callinicos’s argument, who are the people under the command of ‘capitalist state power’, if it is assumed that workers’ councils are everywhere. Hence it is unclear why there is a need to ‘seize’ the power of a state that is unable to run a society. His explanation is that

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\text{this is fundamentally a political and not an organizational problem. It requires a political struggle within the new forms of workers’ power – to win the majority to the recognition that, unless the capitalist state is dismantled, sooner or later it will use its coercive power to crush the mass movement.}
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But, if workers’ councils are already organising production of society, clearly also the ‘state’ as a \textit{moment} of this capitalist production is already run by workers’ councils. Or, better, the illusory community of the capitalist state has been replaced by a real community of communities that articulates the different ‘councils’. Yet, again, here as in Holloway, what is really left out is the question of the how.

Indeed, to me, ‘the supreme function of a mass revolutionary party’ is utterly useless. What is the need to ‘win the argument that the new democracy should storm the last strongholds of capitalist power’ when the exercise of capitalist power is a mode of doing which has already been abolished by the organising of society of workers’ councils?

Surely, the problematic of state power, of repression, of the exercise of coercive power to crush the mass movement, is not an issue that needs to be tackled and conceptualised theoretically \textit{after} society is reshaped in its production and reproduction by networks of self-organisations? On the contrary, the problematic of repression, hence of state power, is the problematic that needs to be talked about \textit{during} the reshaping of society, during the battles for new social relations that we fight at whatever scale and in whatever

\(^{40}\) See Callinicos 2004.
context. The power exercised within the illusory community (state) and the power that we must learn to exercise in the production of real communities, the organising forces of capital versus the organising forces of socialised humanity in the making.

So, while it appears that traditional Marxism deals with the question of the state, and of clashing between exercises of power, it actually avoids it as much as Holloway does, although in different ways. In their reviews collected by Herramienta, both Bonefeld and Wright note that there are some strands of autonomist Marxism that share with structuralist traditional Marxism the belief that ‘capital and labour [are] standing externally to each other as two opposed subjects, two armies at war’. Open Marxism, instead, ‘was always at pains to show that capital was nothing but our alienated subjectivity and that there is no actual “us” and “them”, but us against ourselves’. And what about if both these ways of putting it are right, and the issue becomes, yet again, that of how they are articulated, how a process or social force that recreates an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ is articulated with a process or social force that instead recomposes the many subjects, that dissolves the ‘us’ and the ‘them’, or that dis-empowers the ‘them’?

Indeed, the contraposition between ‘open’ and ‘autonomist Marxism’ is, I believe, fallacious and divisive, preventing us from staring in the face the problem of the state and its power-to-do in clashing opposition to de-fetishising power-to-do. This is the problem that emerges once we focus on the question of the ‘how’ of our organising, the question of the articulation of the many ‘I’s in making another world. Because it is precisely in the process of recomposition, in the open process in which we find ways of constituting the ‘us’ by articulating the many ‘I’s, of constructing and producing what we are for, in different contexts and in different scales, in the process of overcoming fetishising forces, that we discover . . . what? That they are sending the army! And who are they? I thought, following Holloway, that there was no ‘us’ and no ‘them’. Are they the class? Are they traitors? Are they the excluded from our movement of recomposition? Are they sectarianists? Are they scum? Who cares what call them, when ultimately they exercise the power-to crush our hopes? At that point, on the streets covered in blood, at the juncture of the end of history, we discover who is ‘us’, and who is ‘them’, and what we discover is that it is we who ultimately have allowed this to happen, in our
refusal to embrace even the possibility that, even if it is true that there ‘is no actual “us” and “them”’, for it is also true that ‘us’ and ‘them’ are produced all the time. There is no de-fetishising without context and scale, there is no context and scale without affirmation, discourse, and engagement in the organising terrain of the ‘how’. There is no revolution, not even the one in which power is not taken but is exercised, without strategic thinking.

References
Leigh Binford  

**Holloway’s Marxism**

*Change the World without Taking Power* is a work of (anti?)power, imagination and even optimism. One might well argue that it is precisely what we need in these dark times, marked by imperialist wars, a recrudescence of racism and unprecedented ethnic strife. To assert that ‘we’ are powerful, that ‘we’ are deserving, and that, however bad things appear, ‘we’ can change them, offers a strong message of hope that can, indeed, potentially inspire action. But I will argue in this short essay that, despite the message and the seemingly rigorous manner in which it has been developed, *Change the World* fails in its principal mission of outlining an approach to Marxism that improves on earlier formulations. To arrive at the critique, a brief exegesis of the text is in order.¹

According to Holloway, capitalist fetishisation has an ontological point of origin in the separation of worker from the means of production and the production of goods for sale on the market. Under capitalism, the worker is alienated from the product

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¹ I wish to thank Marcus Taylor for saving me from several egregious errors and prodding me to elaborate on points previously un- or underdeveloped. I have also brazenly appropriated several of his ideas. Of course, the errors that remain, egregious and otherwise, as well as any misrepresentations of the purloined intellectual property remain my responsibility.
of her collective labour, which she re-encounters in a fetishised form through the exchange of products on the market. In the workplace, she experiences labour as differentiated and specific use-values; in the marketplace, she encounters products that, whatever their use values, are exchangeable with one another:

Relations between doers really are refracted through relations between things. ... These things are the fetishized forms of the relations between producers, and, as such, they deny their character as social relations.²

Once this system of production becomes dominant, it pre-shapes every aspect of our vision of the world. We remain fetishised creatures – at least immersed in a process of struggle over fetishisation – as long as capitalist production persists. Because fetishisation is constitutive of human beings as subjects, all individual resistance and progressive movements for change develop within the process and not outside it. Thus, Holloway argues:

The concept of fetishism (rather than any theory of ‘ideology’ or ‘hegemony’) thus provides the basis for an answer to the age-old question, ‘Why do people accept the misery, violence and exploitation of capitalism?’ ... Fetishism is the central theoretical problem confronted by any theory of revolution.³

Fetishisation converts capital into a decentred, capillary power that saturates society and culture, but it is also an internally contradictory process that contains the seeds of its own negation. Holloway refers to that negation as defetishisation, which is a product of ‘the scream’ or resistance. Resistance or the scream are not positive forces, but refusals to accept things as they are. If fetishisation throws up rock-hard images and fixed concepts that disrupt what he calls ‘the social flow of doing’ (social process), defetishisation negates these images and concepts in order to restore the flow. If fetishisation identifies, names and defines social relations so as to take capitalism out of history and make it appear permanent, defetishisation rejects identities, refuses names and undermines definitions.

The conceptual apparatus as described has numerous implications. First, the capillary forms of power and power’s decentred nature, as well as its role as constitutive of biological humans as social beings, implies that power

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² Holloway 2002, p. 49.
cannot be ‘taken’. Direct assaults on power, such as the power of the state, are out because they do not address the internalised power that constitutes human beings as subjects under capitalism. Second, the ontological source of all power is the creative process of work (broadly conceived of here as ‘doing’); the subjugation that workers experience results when they collaborate in turning their own power against themselves (the domination of dead labour, that is, means of production over living labour). The ‘working class’ (see below) is the only powerful class, but the process of fetishisation prevents this potentiality from becoming fully conscious. Seen thus, workers produce their own subjugation, though they do not do so wittingly; there exist no innocent subjects. Third, classes are indefinable, because classes are always in a process of constitution, but class struggle is ubiquitous. The fourth, controversial, point is that all struggle is class struggle. Holloway’s rationale is that the key to class is classification (fetishisation), and that struggles against sexism, racism and so forth are struggles against imposed (fixed and thus fetishised) identities. Here, a citation may help clarify his position:

> Class struggle does not take place within the constituted forms of capitalist social relations: rather the constitution of those forms is itself class struggle. All social practice is an unceasing antagonism between the subjection of practice to the fetishized, perverted, defining forms of capitalism and the attempt to live against-and-beyond those forms. There can be no question of the existence of non-class forms of struggle.4

The fifth point is that living against-and-beyond fetishised forms advances the revolution, the time of which is now. Since class struggle is internal to capitalist reproduction (the mutual flight of labour from capital and capital from labour), and not an external factor projected upon it by a more or less class-conscious working class, there can be no political reason to postpone the revolution while waiting for the development of a class-conscious party or organisation (inconceivable here) or an economic crisis or political conjuncture favourable to it. Revolution is an ever-present possibility because the reproduction of capital can never be assured until it has taken place, which is to say that capitalist reproduction is always in question. That capital has succeeded in reproducing in expanded form over a long period of time is no more than a historical fact that, presented as such, offers a fetishised appearance of stability that belies the constancy of the resistance that had to

be overcome along the way. Holloway’s message is positive (‘We can change the world’), without thereby being predictive or messianic (‘We will change the world’).  

**Process without structure?**

Let me begin by noting that Holloway’s is a particularly abstract and philosophical rendering of Marxism, with strong reductionist tendencies that make it difficult to connect up the theory with daily life. He reduces the differentia and specie of life to three root concepts: capitalism, fetishisation and struggle (resistance or ‘the scream’). Once we acknowledge that all struggle is class struggle and that fetishisation is the singular process through which this struggle unfolds, what more is there to say? With revolution on the table, a present possibility, is it possible, or even desirable to attempt to register – even for a moment – the status of the struggle? And, presuming that it is desirable, is it feasible? And, were it feasible, would the analysis involve anything more than a ‘measure’ of the ‘ratio’ or ‘balance’ between fetishisation and defetishisation, a dubious task that presumes a privileged (nonfetishised) means of discriminating between two moments in a process?

The totalisation of fetishisation places all analysis of concrete social relations into question, but, systematically pursued, it should also bring into question the results of Holloway’s abstract and philosophical approach, since we have no independent means of knowing that the ‘movement’ of criticism, intended to restore process to frozen social relations through dialectical criticism, is not itself succumbing to fetishisation – despite our best efforts to avoid it. The only means of avoiding that problem would be to suppose the existence of a critical (non-fetishised) approach that would provide a neutral means of assessment, but such a claim would imply that, in a society saturated by fetishisation, one domain of thought remained immune to and outside the process. The dilemma exemplifies the problem of all deconstructionist approaches, to which Holloway’s – despite his proclaimed materialism – bears a close relationship. Once it is claimed that nothing can be known, criticism can be nothing more than polemic, with no necessary relationship to history.

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5 By ‘change the world’ here, I refer only to progressive change, and specifically to the creation of an egalitarian, i.e. non-capitalist society. For better or worse, the world changes, and ‘we’ play a role in that change. According to Holloway, ‘Marxism, as a theory of struggle, is necessarily a theory of uncertainty’ (Holloway 2002, p. 98).
or social relations. Of course, it does appear that some things can be known, despite the epistemological problems, for, without a ‘positive’ and not merely negative conception of capital and capitalism, Holloway’s entire discourse would not be possible. We also apparently ‘know’ when to refuse or resist (the ‘scream’ of rejection), and when relationships have been (partly) defetishised, that is, we know or can recognise real friendship, the value of collective labour and so on, love and so on.

The preceding comments stress Holloway’s exaggerated concern with process and his flight from considerations of structure. Of course, an extreme structuralism, such as that posed by Lévi-Strauss, or within Marxism by Althusser, deprives human beings of agency; history becomes a process without a subject in which we are the unconscious bearers of relationships that we cannot affect or know. On the other hand, an extreme emphasis on process (Holloway) empties history of meaning, in the sense that pure process would involve an endless flow of changing images and an uninterpretable movement of being, deprived of the social, cognitive and linguistic structures required to make sense of them. We socialise the flow of being in order to bring it under a modicum of control. Classification, definition, identity, routine and ritual are means to this end; they preceded capitalism and they will be present in any postcapitalist society as well. In this sense, some level of fetishisation, in Holloway’s highly generalised sense, would seem to be instrumental to life in any society. Finally, as I noted earlier, Holloway cannot avoid structure either, since capitalist relations of production and exchange present the overarching system that conditions the relations he criticises and define a ‘capitalist epoch’: a period during which, whatever transformations capitalism might experience, capitalism in some form or other persists. Taken to its logical ends, his approach deconstructs itself under the weight of its internal contradictions.

A proper dialectic would involve neither the anti-humanist unfolding of the contradictions inherent in structural analysis, nor the supra-humanist negotiation of contradictions lodged in the head (what I call the shifting ratio between fetishisation and defetishisation), but the contradictory playing out of actions undertaken by human agents whose decisions are constrained by particular social, political and economic relationships. These relationships are historical rather than transcendental; they are relatively structured at any one moment, which is to say that those sets of relationships are interwoven in complex ways; and they are real and objective social facts, which both constrain and enable the action of individuals and groups.
My point is that structured social relations are historical human creations; they are formed in the context of inequality, oppression and struggle, and they are malleable, permeable, interpretable and transitory. Capitalism is such a set of structured relations, and every culture of capitalism – which varies from one place and time to another – and capitalist epoch generates other relations that are nested and interwoven so as to form the specific societies and cultures in which we reside and to which we relate. At any one point in time, these relationships constitute the parameters within which social agents (individuals and groups) make decisions and act on them; they also shape actions without determining them in any simple manner. Over time, some social relations persist and are adapted to new conditions; others disappear and yet others come into being. Such relationships also have histories, through which they undergo adaptations, transformations and metamorphoses without thereby necessarily disappearing. Class struggle occurs in and through these structured relationships, which condition (without thereby determining absolutely) its forms and results.

Hegemony is a useful mediating concept in this regard. Against the widespread but erroneous belief that hegemony is ‘the name that Gramsci gave to ideological domination’, William Roseberry suggests

... that we use the concept [hegemony] not to understand consent but to understand struggle, the ways in which the words, images, symbols, forms, organizations, institutions, and movements used by subordinate populations to talk about, understand, confront, accommodate themselves to, or resist their domination are shaped by the process of domination itself. What hegemony constructs, then, is not a shared ideology but a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination. ... To the extent that a dominant order establishes ... legitimate frameworks of procedure, to the extent that it establishes not consent but prescribed forms for expressing both acceptance and discontent, it has established a common discursive framework.

Raymond Williams characterised hegemony as follows:

A live hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and
activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. . . . Moreover (and this is crucial, reminding us of the necessary thrust of the concept), it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, and challenged by pressures not all its own. We have then to add to the concept of hegemony the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony, which are real and persistent elements of practice.8

Hegemony retains many of the merits of fetishisation-as-process: it is based in struggle (not consent), is never complete, and the results are indeterminable beforehand. But hegemony has the advantage of assisting us in ‘defining’ (anathema to Holloway) the conditions under which concrete struggles unfold, of plotting strategies and assessing results. Without doubt, it works best when wedded – as in the case of Gramsci – to organised and directed political practice.9 Holloway restricts the role of intellectuals to theoretical critique (theoretical practice), leaving the work of strategising to others, a division of labour that Gramsci, at least, would never have sanctioned.

Finally, further inquiry might even reveal that the concepts fetishisation and hegemony function at different levels of analysis, and that ‘hegemony’ helps specify the precise character and internal composition and meaning of some fetishised forms (discourses, images, symbols, practices, and so on) that condition the struggles of both dominant and dominated.10 But, in itself, fetishisation or ‘identity’ (as fetishisation’s most pernicious form) is not adequate to the task of either social analysis or, more importantly, political action.11

Class struggle without classes

I take the title of this section from a famous article by E.P. Thompson. Thompson argued that, in eighteenth-century England, class struggle between plebs and gentry preceded the formation of capitalist classes proper, and that class

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9 See Crehan 2002.
10 Compare Raymond Williams’s observation (cited above) that hegemony is ‘continually resisted . . . [l]imited, altered and challenged by pressures not all its own’ to Holloway’s statement that fetishism ‘points not just to the penetration of opposition by power, but also to the penetration of power by opposition’ (Holloway 2002, p. 177).
struggle was itself constitutive of classes-in-formation. Holloway might agree, but would go on to point out that, under capitalism, classes are never constituted with finality because of the mutual repulsion/attraction that workers and capitalists exert on one another, and the contradictory identity/dis-identity through which workers adopt/struggle against their classification: ‘Class struggle, then, is the struggle to classify and against being classified at the same time as it is, indistinguishably, the struggle between constituted classes’. Since all struggle (ethnic, gender and so forth) turns partly around classification, then all struggle is class struggle; and, logically, just about everyone is/is not working-class, since they struggle against their classification.

The simplicity and elegance of the scheme makes it exceedingly attractive; that, with a wave of his magical philosophical wand, Holloway has simply passed over all the sticky social and historical problems that hundreds of investigators and activists have confronted in the course of studying and acting upon ethnic, feminist, green and numerous other identities seems beside the point.

Holloway’s perspective on classes-in-process creates problems for the analysis of dominant groups, which, by the logic of his discourse, should, like dominated groups, also be classes-in-process and thereby indefinable (unnamedable). If everyone is immersed in a process of fetishisation – how could anyone escape classification at some level? – everyone is a member of the same class-in-formation, and there exist neither capitalists nor workers: capitalism without class. There are two ways to get around this: (i) some people classify others (assign identities) without thereby being classified, but that would set limits to fetishisation not contemplated in the theory; (ii)

12 Thompson 1979.
13 Holloway 2000, p. 143. ‘Only if we were fully class-ified could we say without contradiction “we are working class” (but then class struggle would be impossible)’ (Holloway 2002, p. 144).
14 I have deliberately avoided dealing with the Zapatista influence on Holloway’s thinking, confident that other commentators will take it up. I wish only to note that Holloway’s fascination with the Zapatistas derives largely from a reading of public documents and discussion of some public activities as opposed to an examination of the movement’s internal relations, which, given the ‘low-intensity’ war in Chiapas, are extremely difficult to study. But, in any wartime situation, hierarchy imposed by the men-with-guns limits popular participation in decision making, for which reason one must be sceptical of claims to grassroots or popular democracy produced for external consumption. Based on twenty months in northern Morazán during and after the Salvadoran civil war, I had numerous opportunities to record the difference between public presentation and backstage behaviour of the People’s Revolutionary Army and the popular organisations under its control (Binford 1999).
capitalists or dominant classes economically exploit the labour-power of others. On several occasions in the book, Holloway mentions that we hate the class enemies, but the closest he comes to explaining who they might be is on p. 147, where he states: ‘Some, the very small minority, participate directly in and/or benefit directly from the appropriation and exploitation of the work of others’. But participating ‘directly in . . . the appropriation and exploitation of the work of others’ comes dangerously close to a designation based in structured economic relationships, precisely what Holloway attempted to avoid in his consideration of subordinate groups. As regards the latter, Holloway reduces the significance of economic considerations when he defines exploitation as involving

not just the exploitation of labour but the simultaneous transformation of doing into labour, the simultaneous de-subjectification of the subject, the dehumanization of humanity. . . . Exploitation is the suppression (-and-) reproduction of insubordinate creativity.15

It then becomes possible to include among the subordinated ‘those whose lives are overturned by accumulation (the indigenous of Chiapas, university teachers, coal miners, nearly everybody) . . .’.16 In the last chapter, Holloway takes this idea further when he maintains, ‘[W]e are all revolutionaries, albeit in very contradictory, fetishized, repressed ways’.17 This returns us to the first point above, for if ‘[W]e are all revolutionaries’, then there are no exploiters, no capitalists, no beneficiaries of the system – and nothing to be revolutionary against but a system of capillary power that flows through us all. Shades of Foucault.

Either we follow the economic route and the subordinate groups are those who do not participate ‘directly in . . . the appropriation and exploitation of work’, or we follow the broad, non-economic route to conceptualising exploitation, in which case we would have to significantly expand the group of enemies to include large numbers of waged and salaried managers, intermediaries, bureaucrats and members of security forces, whose basic social role entails ‘the suppression . . . of insubordinate creativity’. The first route remits Holloway to structured economic relations and an approach to class

15 Holloway 2002, pp. 148–9. ‘The suppression of creativity does not just take place in the process of production, as usually understood, but in the whole separation of doing and done that constitutes capitalist society’ (Holloway 2002, p. 149).
17 Holloway 2002, p. 211.
that he has sought to avoid; the second route problematises the conception of exploitative classes and expands its empirical referent significantly beyond the ‘very small minority’ to which he would restrict it. Nor does this approach assist very much in analysing the very large and differentiated strata occupying contradictory social positions whose occupants exploit some people while being subject to exploitation by others; they benefit from the system even as they suffer from it: the female factory owner, the ethnic businessman, middlemen of all sorts subject to cost-price squeezes which they attempt to pass on to consumers, large strata of professionals endowed with a certain opportunity to pursue creative projects of a personal nature, and so on. A reductionist conception of class (or class struggle) deprives us of any reason even to examine the material and non-material costs and benefits of complex class relations that involve differentiated and often contradictory positionings. Abstract philosophical argumentation substitutes for concrete sociological analysis (which, in itself, can be considered a manifestation of fetishised thought antithetical to Marxist historiography); indeed, it makes such analysis unnecessary – a manifestation of fetishised social science reasoning which I would think Holloway would want to struggle against.

It seems worth asking: just what happened to materialism? At the beginning of Change the World, Holloway seems at pains to ensure the reader that his conceptual apparatus was inspired by Marx’s Capital. As we advance into later chapters, however, he argues in the ‘spirit’ of Capital. One important point of slippage comes with the move from ‘class’ to ‘classification’. Holloway attempts to ground the move by referring to the original, material conditions of capitalist production and exchange that gave rise to fetishisation, which then spreads through the social system saturating subjectivities and being represented in objective social relationships. Once capitalism has become ‘established’, by which I mean it has eradicated or subordinated precapitalist relations of production, new subjects are formed in and through those fetishised relations. The Marxist materialism with which analysis began gives way to a left postmodernism in which identity and not class takes centre stage, organised political movements are regarded sceptically and fetishisation presents the subject with a disarticulated, fragmented reality. The ubiquity

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18 This interpretation is supported by the following statement: ‘The separation of the worker from the means of production (in the classic sense) is part of, generates and is supported by, a more general process of de-subjectifying the subject, a more general abstracting of labour’ (Holloway 2002, p. 148).
and internality of ‘class’ struggle notwithstanding, accepting Holloway’s confident assertion that just about anytime is the time for revolution requires an enormous leap of faith.

Revolution

In 1976, New Left Books published Perry Anderson’s brief assessment of what the author called ‘Western Marxism’. Anderson noted how the stabilisation of parliamentary democracy in the advanced industrial world, capitalism’s long post-war ‘boom of unprecedented dimensions’ and the survival of the Soviet bloc constituted the ‘altered universe’ within which there developed ‘an entirely new intellectual configuration within historical materialism’. Anderson named that configuration ‘Western Marxism’, characterised by a turn away from classical Marxism’s interest in economics and politics and a turn towards philosophy (especially epistemology), art and culture.¹⁹ Marxism did not ‘stop’ from 1924 to 1968, but ‘advanced via an unending detour from any revolutionary political practice’, which Anderson analyses as a product of defeat: ‘The failure of the socialist revolution to spread outside Russia, cause and consequence of its corruption inside Russia, is the common background to the entire theoretical tradition of this period’.²⁰ In other words, Western Marxism could not overcome the social conditions of its production – an example of the complex effects of structured social and historical relationships mentioned earlier.

In order to advance, Marxism needed to establish a close connection with the practical activity of revolutionary masses. The events of May 1968 in Paris (and elsewhere in the world), as well as a wave of strike activity in Europe and Asia in the late 1960s and early 1970s gave Anderson hope for a reunification of theory and practice that would transform Marxism, ‘recreating conditions which, in their time, produced the founders of historical materialism’.²¹ Those conditions did not mature. Over the course of the following two decades, working class gains were rolled back, workers’ organisations weakened, the Soviet bloc collapsed and Third-World revolutions

²⁰ Anderson 1976, p. 42. ‘For the root determinant of this tradition was its formation by defeat – the long decades of set-back and stagnation, many of them terrible ones in any historical perspective, undergone by the Western working class after 1920’ (Anderson 1976, p. 95).
²¹ Anderson 1976, p. 96.
were defeated. The likelihood of a transition to socialism, not to speak of communism, seemed less likely than ever, and many Marxists, acknowledging this, capitulated to the predicted ‘end of history’ and jumped on the capitalist bandwagon.

To his credit, Holloway did not give in to fashion, nor did he abandon himself to esoteric studies of aesthetics or epistemology far removed from everyday struggles. And, yet, I would argue that the theory of revolution he offers does represent an abandonment of the hard work involved in theorising contemporary capitalism and building the type of mass movements capable of checking the capitalist juggernaut and creating the objective conditions for revolutionary change. By linguistic sleight of hand, class is reduced to classification, and the problem of differentiated social positionings – real and objective and not merely apparent – are reduced to the singular problem of ‘Identity’, for Holloway the most pernicious form of Being and the main impediment to the restoration of Becoming or social process. Resistance is struggle and all struggle is class struggle, reasoning away an enormous series of analytical and practical difficulties; and revolution seems to be a fortunate concatenation of the ‘good will’ of millions of oppressed souls who, with a minimum of organisation, pick away at the margins of power until the capillary system collapses. The seizure of capitalist property (means of production) is secondary to the creation of alternatives beyond the purview of capital (anti-power), although it is unclear where the material resources to construct the alternatives might come from if not from the seizure of property itself. And the state is reduced in significance, as a revolutionary objective but also as a barrier to revolution, despite the frequently made observation that, even as states lose control over their internal economic affairs and become increasingly susceptible to outside political pressures, they continue to exercise internal discipline, often wielding violence in the process, over the populations residing within their borders.

In sum, under current conditions of working-class defeat – the postwar low of the formally organised working class, identity fragmentation (which stretches to social movements), individualisation and US military domination – the only imaginable way to put revolution on the table is through a leap of faith of Grand Canyon proportions, the equivalent of Evel Knievel seeking to bridge the crevasse’s mile-wide gap by propelling himself full tilt up a thirty degree ramp and into the void . . . on a bicycle. The author offers hope, and hope is certainly important for change, but he is able to do so only because
of a reductionist analysis that bypasses, skips over or abstracts away problems that historical materialism will have to negotiate if theory is to establish an organic link to practical revolutionary activity. Given the recent past and current world situation, I think it fair to suggest that a strong dose of reductionism – ignoring negative signs or, better yet, converting them to positive ones – is one of the only ways of putting revolution on the immediate agenda. As Holloway would surely agree, saying that revolution is possible does not make it happen.

References


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I.

Holloway could have started with these yeses and said that at the beginning there are needs, desires, relations, affects, and their denial by capital leads us to scream. (Massimo de Angelis)

Why do I start with the scream, No, negativity? The question of negativity and positivity is one of the central issues often raised by both sympathetic (Massimo de Angelis) and less sympathetic (Michael Lebowitz, for example) commentators on the book. This is the main point I want to focus on in the first half of this note. It should allow me to address most of the criticisms voiced in this symposium. In a subsequent section, I shall address explicitly the other main criticisms.

II.

Why no? Here are some of the reasons:

a) No is experiential. The no arises directly from our experience, from what we see around us. It is
revulsion against injustice, exploitation, violence, war. It comes before reflection, before reasoned thought – it is pre-rational, but not irrational or anti-rational.

b) No is uncouth. It is difficult to take away from its origins, difficult to civilise, difficult to represent, difficult to convert into the language of politicians or political scientists. However far we may fly into abstract fancies, the no pushes our face back into the mud of rude anger.

c) No is urgent. We are lemmings rushing towards a cliff. Humanity is on a highway that leads straight to its own self-destruction. The only possibility is to say no, to refuse: ‘No, we will not go down this highway to our self-destruction’. Not ‘we should go more carefully, or more slowly, or we should drive on the left rather than on the right’, but simply no.

The temporality of no is one of urgency. To think in terms of yeses suggests a different temporality, the patient construction of another world. This is important, but we are forced by the destructive dynamic of capital itself into giving priority to the urgency of the no.

d) No is unity, yes is multiplicity: one no, many yeses. The yeses are necessary and the multiplicity is desirable. To start with the no is not to deny the importance of the yeses, but to insist that they must be understood as being within a negative logic. It is the no that gives internal (rather than external) unity to the yeses.

The yeses invite us to go our own way, to build our own spaces, our own different movements and ways of doing things. Our unity is then a question of alliances, of linking up with other likeminded movements. Our no (to capitalism, to war, to neoliberalism) is something we share, something that invites us to connect with other expressions of the same no, a coming together that is not a question of building alliances but of extending our own no.

The yeses invite us to focus on our own autonomous spaces or movements, to strengthen and deepen them. That is important, but we need more than that. The no leads us rather to think of our struggles as cracks or fissures in the texture of capitalism, cracks that derive their strength from spreading. Where the yeses invite us to build a beyond capitalism, the no reminds us that the only beyond that makes sense is an against-and-beyond, and that, although we may have many different dreams of the beyond, we all share the same against. If I think of the contributors to the present discussion of the book (or many of the discussions of the last two years), I am sure that we have quite different concepts of what a postcapitalist world would be like and quite different ideas of how to get there. In other words, if I think of the movement
in positive terms, then I know that our comradeship does not go very far and I quickly fall into sectarian distinctions. On the other hand, I know that we all share the same against, the same no to capitalism. They may be comrades of the yes only in a limited sense, but they are certainly comrades of the no, and, since no takes priority over yes, I think it important to respect and engage with them. Yes can easily become the logic of sectarianism, no reminds us of the unity of our multiple struggles.

e) No is the key to our power. Our power is our power-to-do, but it is refusal that unlocks it, refusal to do at the bidding of others.

Those who rule always depend on those who are ruled. The capitalists cannot make profits without their workers, the generals cannot make war without their soldiers, the presidents and prime ministers cannot rule without their subjects. If the servant says no to the master, then the servant is no longer a servant and the master is no longer a master: both start to become humans. Those who command live in fear of the refusal of those whom they command and spend much of their time and a very large part of their resources trying to prevent it. Refusal is at the core of the struggle for another world: strike, mutiny, boycott, disobedience, desertion, subversion, refusal in a thousand different ways. In order to make another world, we must refuse to make capitalism. We make capitalism (as Marx insists in his labour theory of value). If capitalism exists today, it is not because it was created in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, but because it was created today, because we create it today. If we do not create it tomorrow, it will not exist tomorrow. The question of revolution is not ‘how do we destroy capitalism’, but ‘how do we stop creating capitalism’?

Certainly, refusing to make capitalism makes little sense and has little perspective unless we do something else instead, unless we unfold our power-to do all the yeses that de Angelis mentions, but we cannot go very far with our yeses unless they are grounded in refusal. Our refusal does not create another world, but it unlocks the possibility of doing so.

f) No breaks. All around us, in the media, schools and universities, in the shops, on the streets, there is a yes to the social organisation of capitalism – not so much an affirmation as an assumption of the permanence of capitalism. Bourgeois theory is that: the assumption of the permanence of capitalist social relations. To which we say no. This no brings us into a different problematic (the problematic of revolution) and therefore a completely different conceptual world – the conceptual world of Marxism, in which critique, form and the
aspiration to totality become key categories. There is no continuity between bourgeois theory and Marxist theory, between the positive theory of capitalism and the negative theory of revolution. This is important not because negative theory creates revolution (it is no more – and no less – than a moment of practice), but because the positivisation of theory hinders the movement against capitalism – and this is true both of Leninism and of much of the current theory of the anticapitalist movement.

No is much more difficult for capitalism to assimilate than yes, however alternative the yeses. Negative theory poses rupture as the constant preoccupation: how do we break from capitalism? Obviously, the only complete answer is world revolution, but we also look for partial answers on a daily basis: how do we break now from capitalism? How do we stop reproducing capitalism, how do we stop making capitalism? The question leads to the creation of alternative practices, but the alternative practices, unless they are founded in rupture, run the risk of being easily absorbed.

g) No is asymmetry. No to capital is no to the forms of social relations implied by capital, no to capitalist forms of organisation. There is, then, a fundamental asymmetry in class struggle. Our forms of organisation are and must be radically different from capital’s forms of organisation. To the extent that we imitate capital’s forms, we are quite simply reproducing capitalist social relations. This is the core of the argument against adopting the state as a form of organisation. The state is an organisational form developed for the purpose of excluding people from the social determination of their own lives. The organisational form developed in many revolutionary struggles to articulate people’s drive to determine their own lives is the council, or commune, or soviet, or assembly – an organisational form which has inclusion rather than exclusion as its central principle. The council is asymmetrical to the state, radically incompatible with the state as form of organisation.

The term ‘anti-power’ used in the book refers quite simply to the asymmetry of class struggle, to the fact that anticapitalist forms of organisation are and must be radically different from capitalist forms of organisation. Since capital is nothing other than a form of organising people, a form of bringing their doing together, a form of social relations in other words, to say that anticapitalism means radically different forms of organising is an obvious tautology: obvious, but important and often obscured by the ambiguous term ‘counter-power’. Why Daniel Bensaïd should find this controversial or objectionable is beyond my comprehension, unless he wishes to argue that our forms of organisation should mirror those of capital.
h) No points to doing and the attempt to understand the world in terms of doing rather than being: critique *ad hominem*, as Marx puts it.

i) No opens. It opens a new conceptual world. It also opens a new world of doing. It opens to all the *yeses* that de Angelis wants to put as the starting point of discussion. But, in a world which negates our yeses, the yeses cannot be the starting point: they can only bloom through negation. Our *no* is a negation of the negation, but the negation of the negation is not positive, but a deeper negation, as Adorno points out. The negation of the negation does not bring us back to a reconciliation, to a positive world, but takes us deeper into the world of negation, moves us onto a different theoretical plane.

The *no* opens cracks, the *yes* opens autonomous spaces. Perhaps they look the same, but they are not. The idea of ‘autonomous spaces’ suggests a space in which we can enjoy, maintain and defend a certain degree of autonomy. This is very attractive but also dangerous. If such a space becomes self-referential, it can easily stagnate: socialism in one social centre or one region is probably not much better than socialism in one country. Cracks, on the other hand, do not stay still: they run, they spread. They cannot be defended; or, rather, their only defence is to run faster and deeper than the hand of the plasterer that would fill them.

j) No moves. It pushes against and beyond, experiments and creates. Cracks run, seek other cracks. A movement that does not move is no movement. It very quickly becomes converted into its opposite: a barren and stagnant Left.

k) No is a question, yes is an answer. No leaves us unsatisfied, wanting more, asking, admitting that we do not have the answers. No pushes against verticality, pushes against dogmatism, pushes us to listen.

l) No is immediate, without mediations. No to capitalism means revolution now. That is perhaps what most disturbs the more orthodox critics.

### III.

There are two ways of thinking of revolution, both intimately linked with the question of time.

The more traditional conception puts revolution in the future. It is unlikely to happen in our lifetime. The objective conditions are not right. For now what we need is

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2 Adorno 1990, p. 158.
the hard work involved in theorising contemporary capitalism and building
the type of mass movements capable of checking the capitalist juggernaut
and creating the objective conditions for revolutionary change. (Binford)

In this view, revolution is a great event. The death of capitalism is conceived
in terms of a dagger blow to the heart: this is not the moment to strike because
‘the objective conditions for revolutionary change’ do not exist. (We leave
aside for the moment that many of the proponents of this view have no idea
where capitalism’s heart is: they conceive of it in terms of taking state power.)
The blow to capitalism is conceived in terms of totality: something that can
happen when there is a Movement or a Party capable of representing the
totality.

And, since revolution is in the future, there is an in the meantime. In the
meantime, there is ‘the hard work involved in theorising contemporary
capitalism and building’ a mass movement. In the meantime, until the
revolution, we live within capitalism. Within capitalism, we have a space for
positive theory (and practice). Theorising contemporary capitalism means
above all talking of capitalist domination – or indeed hegemony, the great
cop-out category, the great crossover concept to bourgeois theory.3 And, indeed,
in this perspective, there is no need to make a clear distinction between
Marxism and bourgeois theory since, in this in-the-meantime space (which
may, of course, last for ever, since the objective conditions keep disappearing
over the horizon), we are within capitalism and what we want to do is
understand how capitalism works. In other words, revolution-in-the-future
turns the ‘revolutionary’ theory of the present into a theory of society, rather
than a theory against society, distinct in its sympathies but not in its method
from bourgeois theory. Marxism becomes a left sociology, 4 or economics or
political science.

If revolution is in the future, then capitalism is until that future comes. A
duration is attributed to capitalism: it is assumed that capitalism exists until

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3 I should explain: my objection to the concept of hegemony is that, unlike capital,
it does not contain its own grave-digger. Certainly, there are attempts to complement
the category of hegemony with notions of counter-hegemony, but they are additions,
not integral to the concept itself. The endless left analysis of domination and hegemony
is self-defeating, reproducing rather than dissolving the domination it purports to
combat.

4 The concerns of Leigh Binford are very much those of a left sociologist concerned
with the behaviour of subordinate and dominant groups.
it is destroyed. Consequently, of course, there is a dominance of structure. Leigh Binford states this very clearly when he says that we cannot avoid structure either, since capitalist relations of production and exchange present the overarching system that conditions the relations he criticises and defines a ‘capitalist epoch’: a period during which, whatever transformations capitalism might experience, capitalism in some form or other persists.

That is precisely the point: with revolution in the future, capitalism persists or has a duration until that future comes, and, logically, structuralism rules (though – of course – process or agency is also important).

History, in this view, acquires a revered importance. History is the building up towards the future event. It tells us of the heroic struggles of the past, helps us to understand what went wrong, shows us how the objective conditions are maturing. Sometimes, this history goes hand in hand with an analysis of the long-term cycles of capitalism, encouraging us to think that the pendulum of history will again swing our way, that however ridiculous it may seem today to dream of communism, the tide will turn in our direction.

The other conception of revolution says no: no to capitalism, revolution now. Revolution is already taking place. This may seem silly, immature, unrealistic, but it is not.

*Revolution now* means that we think of the death of capitalism not in terms of a dagger-blow to the heart, but, rather, in terms of death by a million bee-stings, or a million pinpricks to a credit-inflated balloon, or (better) a million rents, gashes, fissures, cracks. Since the issue is not when to strike at the heart, it makes no sense to think of waiting until the objective conditions are right. At all times, it is necessary to tear the texture of capitalist domination, to refuse, to push against-and-beyond. Revolution is now: a cumulative process, certainly, a process of cracks spreading and joining up, but revolution is not in the future, it is already under way.

We can put it in terms of birth rather than death: capitalism is pregnant with communism, but gestation and birth are not like human gestation and birth – the baby does not grow inside the mother and then come out when the time is ripe. Rather, from the moment of conception, the embryos start to burst through the pores of capitalism.

To speak of revolution now is not to engage in vacuous triumphalism. The gash or crack does not mean (necessarily) that capitalism will disappear
immediately, but the emphasis is on saying ‘No’, refusing, puncturing capitalist command and (within that) constructing alternative ways of doing things. That any such ‘break’ will be limited and contradictory and vulnerable to re-absorption by capital is clear – as indeed will anything short of world revolution (and even that) – but that is not the point. What is important is that the thrust of the struggle is to go against-and-beyond capitalism now, not in the future. This introduces a completely different language of struggle, a different logic, in which the existence of capital is always at issue. Every moment is opened up as potentially revolutionary. There is no waiting, no patience.

There are no mediations, no stepping stones to revolution. The aim is not to build a force within capitalism which will then (when?) make the revolution, but to break, to push against-and-beyond now. This means taking as one’s direct and immediate point of reference not the taking of state power, nor even the building of a movement, but, rather, the creation and making explicit of social relations that project against-and-beyond capitalism, the social relations for which we are struggling – communism, in other words. This question is often addressed in terms of prefigurative struggle, but perhaps it is better to think of it as directly figurative: not as a pre-anything but as the immediate creation of an alternative society. The direct creation of alternative social relations has, of course, always been a feature of anticapitalist struggle: this is what comradeship means and it is the stuff of classic working-class strikes – the point most emphasised by the participants in the great miners’ strike in Britain, to take just one example that leaps to mind. Yet this aspect of struggle has often been smothered by orthodox theory, which has generally regarded such questions as secondary, irrelevant or even contrary to party discipline.

Struggle is not just a question of content but of form, not just of what we do but of how we do it. It is anti-fetishistic, de-fetishising, the practice of critique ad hominem. There is no pretence of taking the standpoint of totality: important is, rather, the aspiration towards totality – the cracks that spread, not the Party.

To say revolution now is to say that the existence of capitalism is constantly at issue. This is not to say that it is about to collapse, but to open up each moment as containing the possibility of radical change. This means refusing to project the present existence of capitalism into the future (whether as a paradigm – Hardt and Negri – or a mode of regulation – Hirsch – or simply ‘persistence’ – Binford), because to do so is to incarcerate ourselves theoretically.
What interests us about capitalism is its fragility, not its strength, as Michael Lebowitz would have it. This is not to deny its strength (which is obvious enough), simply to say that the hope for humanity lies in finding the weakness of that strength, its fragility. Unlike Lebowitz, I read *Capital* not as a theorisation of the strength of capitalism, but of its weakness, as a theory of crisis: the issue of crisis does not appear only in the third volume but is present from the opening sentence of Volume I, in the concept of form (a concept to which Lebowitz, like many ‘Marxist economists’, is totally blind). To emphasise the strength of capitalism leads to a long-term view of revolution, with the perspective of building up our counter-strength so that, one day, we can seize the commanding heights (take power), whereas the focus on the fragility of capitalism points in the direction of exploiting that fragility now, opening up cracks in the texture of domination wherever we can.

We live, then, not within capitalism, but in-against-and-beyond capitalism, at any moment. Rupture is central, not the Great Rupture-in-the-future, but rupture now: how do we and how can we break capitalism now? There is no *in the meantime*, no *within capitalism* within which we can construct our theory of society, our cosy blend of leftishness and bourgeois theory. Similarly, there is no mixture of process and structure, because the whole point is not to deny the existence of structure (or identity) but to grasp that we are the revolt of process against structure, of non-identity against identity, of living doing against dead congealed labour.

Capitalism does not ‘persist’. It has no duration. Marx devoted much of his work to showing that capitalism does not *persist*: it exists only because we make it. It does not *persist* until the day that we destroy it: at the core of the notion of revolution-in-the-future is a lapping up of the bourgeois concept of duration. One of Marx’s central arguments, that we make capitalism (the labour theory of value), is simply forgotten. If we make capitalism, then it is clear that capitalism does not simply *persist*: it *persists* only to the extent that we make it. If we cease to make it, it ceases to persist, and to exist. If we do not cease to make capitalism, then we make it. There is no in-between, there is no standing outside and innocently observing the persistence of capitalism. We are in it, with one hand dirty and steeped in blood and guilt and the other trying to pull capitalism apart; we are, like Penelope, knitting and unravelling capitalism at the same time, but we are certainly *not* outside it contemplating its destruction in fifty or a hundred years’ time. If we treat capitalism as simply persisting, then we lose the whole point of Marxism,
and, more important, we lose the source of our capacity to change the world –

namely that capital depends on us, that the rulers depend on the ruled. The

problem of revolution is not to destroy an external structure, but to stop

creating capitalism: to shift, decisively and collectively, the balance between

our two hands.

In other words, we must break history, smash duration, shoot clocks.

Revolution is not the culmination of history but the breaking of history and

that means now. History is not the building up to the future revolution.

History is a nightmare from which we are desperately trying to awake.5

Revolution must drive its cart and its plough over the bones of the dead.

The revolution-in-the-future view tends to construct history (and time)
as a prison, as in the view expressed by Leigh Binford (and many others)
that this is a time of historical defeat of the working class and therefore
we must act accordingly, put aside our dreams of revolution and work
hard at understanding capitalism-as-it-is and building the movement. This
understanding of history incarcerates us, limits our expectations, puts ‘objective’
limits on what we can propose or even think. Today is projected onto tomorrow,
tomorrow onto the day after and so on, constantly pushing revolution beyond
the horizon of ‘realistic’ thought. This view of history dulls the senses, limits
what we can see: yesterday’s patterns of struggle define what we perceive
as struggle today. Defeat there may be, but the struggle has already moved
on while we are shaking our grey heads about the situation, moved on in
ways that we often do not even recognise. The defeat was of a form of struggle
and from that defeat spring new forms of struggle which we are only learning
to see. The decomposition of the working class is turning (and has turned)
into a recomposition, but those who look at the world through the lenses of
1970s’ Marxism cannot see, do not want to see.

History is not on our side. In the revolution-in-the-future view, there is the
view that the tide of history will come back to us, that, one day, the objective
conditions will be right (provided, of course, that we do the necessary hard
work in the meantime). In the revolution-in-the-future view, it is assumed
that humanity will still exist in fifty years’ time (or whenever). The argument
for revolution now starts from a much sharper sense of urgency. The existence
of capital is an aggression against humanity and this aggression has now
become so virulent that it threatens to annihilate humanity completely. Although

5 Certainly, it is also a dream which we are trying to redeem, but, for the moment,
the dream exists in-against-and-beyond the nightmare.
it is certainly true that human creative capacity has developed to such an extent that a very different world is possible, the violence of capitalist aggression seems to be taking us away from the realisation of this possibility and towards imminent catastrophe. That is why it is important to think of revolution now, revolution as revolt against the flow of history.

This does not mean that history is unimportant, but, in the argument for revolution now, there is no need to pay it the same reverence as in the revolution-in-the-future argument. However we analyse our present historical situation, there is no option but to break with capitalism now, to try to recognise the ways in which people are already breaking with capitalism and to try and expand and multiply these breaks: our revolt does not depend on history. History is important, no doubt, as the history of our struggles, but it is important to recognise that that history is a history of struggles against history. Above all, history is not a benevolent force leading us towards a happy ending, but just the contrary. The history which we are making is filled with the potential of another world, but is going very fast in the opposite direction. And vice versa: the history which we are making is going very fast in the opposite direction, but it is filled with the potential of another world.

There are two distinct concepts of time here. The revolution-in-the-future view is a pivotal concept. The revolutionary event acts as a pivot between two temporalities: the temporality of patience and waiting and preparing, and then the temporality of rupture and rapid change to a different society. The argument for revolution now also involves two temporalities, but very different ones. First comes impatience, rupture, break, revolution in every way possible, supported then by the patient construction of a different world: the temporality of the explosive ¡Ya basta!, followed by the temporality of ‘we walk, we do not run, because we are going very far’. In the first view, it is patience that takes the lead, in the second it is impatient urgency that shows the way, with patience following in support.

IV.

‘All very well’ you say, ‘excellent stuff if you’re that way inclined, but aren’t you being a bit slippery? Have you really answered the criticisms of the other authors?’.

6 Indeed, you do not need to say it, dear reader, because the excellent editors of *Historical Materialism* have already said it on your behalf, for which I am grateful.
I think that most of the main criticisms are addressed by the ‘No’, but perhaps it is now better to take each of the authors in turn and address their principal points. It should be clear that, however unkind my replies may be, I am immensely grateful to all of the contributors to the symposium for taking up the book’s invitation to discuss the meaning of revolution today. It is this sort of discussion (whether hostile or friendly) that makes the writing of the book worthwhile. (Let me say here in the text, and not just in a footnote, that I am also extremely grateful to the editors of Historical Materialism for creating this space for discussion.)

There is an overall tonality that shapes Leigh Binford’s argument. We are living in ‘dark times’, ‘under conditions of working-class defeat’, and it is simply not realistic to think of revolution under these circumstances. The attempt to do so, he argues, leads me to a ‘strong dose of reductionism’ which bypasses the ‘hard work involved in theorising contemporary capitalism’. My response is that the times are far darker than he seems to realise, that the destructive forces of capitalism are now so great that we cannot take it for granted that humanity will exist in fifty or a hundred years’ time. There is no alternative but to think about revolution today. My question is not ‘is it realistic to put forward a theory of revolution today?’, but rather ‘how, in these miserable times, can we conceptualise revolution?’. My driving force is hope, but I am very aware that it is a hope against hope. The ‘realism’ advanced by Binford (and many of the other critics) is built upon an assumption of stability which is very far from realistic. If, as Binford, claims, the only way of ‘putting revolution on the immediate agenda’ is through a ‘strong dose of reductionism’, then perhaps the response should be ‘well, so be it, that is what we need to do’. But I do not agree that that is the case, nor that the argument of the book is reductionist. What the book proposes is that the antagonistic organisation of human doing is the key to understanding capitalism and the potential for revolution, but that the only way in which we can perceive that doing and its potential is critically, through the critique of the appearances which the current organisation of doing generates and which conceal the centrality of human doing. I do not see this as being reductionist.8

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7 For further discussion of the debate around the book, see the Epilogue to the new English edition of the book (Pluto 2005). Most of the debate in all languages can be found in the web page of Herramienta: <http://www.herramienta.com.ar>.

8 The accusation of reductionism arises, I think, from a failure to distinguish between formal and determinate abstraction, abstraction on the basis of being and abstraction on the basis of doing.
Most of the other points raised by Binford have to do with our basic difference of perspective. Thus, when he says that my ‘perspective on classes-in-process creates problems for the analysis of dominant groups’, this causes me no sleepless nights, simply because I am not interested in the ‘analysis of dominant groups’ but in the movement of capital as a social relation. Capitalists are of interest as personifications of capital, but not as ‘dominant groups’. Similarly, his concept of hegemony does not touch the point, since, despite his attempt to broaden the concept, hegemony is still a conceptualisation of domination, and my argument is that the great disease of the Left is that, by starting our discussions of capitalism from domination, we effectively incarcerate ourselves within the domination we are trying to criticise.

Michael Lebowitz claims that my book ‘represents a profound rejection of Marx’. He develops this argument in relation to Capital and in relation to the Communist Manifesto and The Civil War in France (he does not actually refer to this work, but he does speak of the Paris Commune).

For Lebowitz, Capital is ‘an attempt to explain precisely how capitalism reproduces itself and why’. For me, that is not the case. Like many others, I take seriously the subtitle of Capital, namely that it is intended to be A Critique of Political Economy. Capital, in other words, is not a work of political economy, but a critique of political economy, which pierces the categories of political economy to reveal the self-antagonistic organisation of work under capitalism, and then goes on to derive from this pivotal dual character of labour the forms of existence of capital. Marx presents his own work very clearly in these terms in the summary that he gives in Chapter 48 of Volume III.9 Marx devotes his life work to the critique of political economy precisely because he is concerned to show the transitory character of capitalism, its fragility. Hence the centrality of crisis, to which I have already alluded; hence too the centrality of the concept of form, a category which Lebowitz has apparently censored from his copy of the book (and quite rightly so, of course, since it is too dangerous). All this is explained in Change the World; here, in this paragraph, I boil my cabbage twice.

A more interesting point is the argument that I focus on commodity fetishism rather than exploitation:

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the centrality of the sale of labour-power is displaced by the sale of commodities; the exploitation of labour by the fetishism of commodities.

It would have been correct, he suggests, to focus rather ‘(as Marx did) upon commodity production as a condition for the exploitation of the wage-labourer’. I do not think that such a separation can be made. Marx is concerned in *Capital* with the specific historical form that exploitation takes under capitalism. In this society, exploitation is mediated through the sale and purchase of labour-power as a commodity. The existence of labour-power as a commodity means, inevitably, that there is a generalisation of commodity production and that all social relations are fetishised. This general commodification is not just a side-effect of exploitation (as Lebowitz would have it), but is inseparable from the capitalist form of exploitation. I do not substitute fetishism for capitalist exploitation, as Lebowitz claims: I argue, rather, that they are inseparable. I do not think that Marx sees commodity production as a mere ‘condition for the exploitation of wage-labour’.

What is at issue in this difference of interpretation? For Lebowitz, the principal consequence of my interpretation seems to be that it leads me to a ‘broad concept of class struggle’, in which ‘there is no reason to attach particular significance to the producers of surplus-value’. For me, Lebowitz’s interpretation de-radicalises Marx. The separation of exploitation from commodity production suggests that it might be possible to get rid of exploitation in a commodity-producing society (that it might be possible to have a socialist market, or that value might have some role to play in communist society), whereas I think it is clear that Marx’s argument is that the elimination of exploitation means the elimination of commodity production and exchange and, therefore, a radical transformation of relations between people. The struggle against capital cannot be reduced to the struggle of the direct producers of surplus-value against surplus-value production: it is, inevitably, also the struggle against commodity production by all of us who are riven by the self-antagonistic organisation of work under capitalism.

Lebowitz’s attempt to de-radicalise Marx is present also in his reliance on Marx’s and Engels’s comments in the *Communist Manifesto*. He prefers to forget that they revised their understanding of revolution and the state after the experience of the Paris Commune, commenting in the Preface to the German edition of 1872 that after the experience of the Paris Commune
this programme has in some details become antiquated. One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz. that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the state machinery and wield it for its own purposes’. 10

In Marx’s study of the Commune in The Civil War in France, he pays great attention to the forms of organisation developed in the Commune, forms that are radically distinct from the state, fundamentally asymmetrical to the state. Lebowitz argues that Marx concluded from the experience of the Paris Commune that the struggle should be fought ‘through a state of the Commune-type’. This is Lebowitz’s, not Marx’s expression: Marx is quite clear that the Paris Commune is not a state. To speak of ‘a state of the Commune-type’, is both disturbing and dangerous. It is disturbing because it suggests that Lebowitz has understood nothing of the argument of Change the World, which hangs on the distinction between the state and a commune (or council): he has understood some of the implications of the argument, which he does not like, but has not understood the argument itself. But, much more seriously, to speak of ‘a state of the Commune-type’ (or indeed a ‘soviet state’, a kindred barbarity) is profoundly dangerous. It is dangerous because it conceals the distinction and the inevitable conflict between two different and antagonistic forms of social relation: the state and the commune (or council) – the one developed to exclude people from determining their society, the other designed to articulate social self-determination. This is not just a question of conceptual clarity: the concealment of the distinction has served historically to justify the suppression of councils by the state in the name of the working class, to justify the suppression of the working class in the name of the working class.

What more can I say in response to Michael Lebowitz? Please, Michael, go and read Marx again, without fear of the radical implications.

Daniel Bensaïd makes a number of arguments in his critique of the book. The question of anti-power I have already dealt with explicitly. The other points I take up here relate to the Zapatistas, history and newness.

Bensaïd says that I appoint myself the ‘theoretical spokesman’ of the Zapatistas and asks elsewhere if I am the ‘prophet’ of Zapatismo. I have never in any sense at all claimed to speak for the Zapatistas. Like millions of others, I admire and respect the Zapatistas, but that does not mean that I am, in any sense, their spokesperson, nor that I am necessarily uncritical of their discourse

or their practice. I state this clearly, simply because a number of critics have used their criticism of my book as a pretext for attacking the Zapatistas, but the two questions are quite distinct.

The more substantive point that Bensaïd makes, to the effect that the Zapatistas have simply made a virtue of necessity, that they have concluded from the proximity of the United States that taking power is impossible in Mexico and have therefore chosen ‘not to want what they cannot achieve in any event’, is peculiar. It can be read in two senses. It might mean that the Zapatista discourse is cynically manipulative: they really want to take power, but, since this is not realistic in Mexico, they develop an alternative discourse about not taking power to cover their own incapacity – a silly argument, if I may say so. Alternatively, it could mean that, since taking power is not a realistic option in Mexico, the Zapatistas have rightly concentrated on an alternative strategy of building up autonomous structures of (anti-)power. If that is Bensaïd’s argument, then one would have to ask whether taking state power is a more realistic option in France or the UK and, if not, whether he is arguing that a similar (Zapatista) strategy should be pursued by the Left in those countries as well. It is a pity that Bensaïd does not develop his argument more clearly.

The issue of history I have already discussed. The importance we attribute to history is clearly related to how we conceive of revolution. If, as I suggest, we think of revolution here-and-now, then the notion of history as human trajectory must be abandoned. In this sense we must take seriously William Blake’s advice: ‘Drive your cart and your plough over the bones of the dead’. Certainly, it is important to recognise our continuity with the struggles of the past, but we do this best by ploughing those struggles into the soil of our present struggle, not by building monuments. Taking Blake’s aphorism as a title, I already wrote a reply to Bensaïd’s initial criticism of the book and the last part of his article in this issue is a response to my reply. In what follows, I shall focus specifically on his final comments.

I am happy to admit that the advice to ‘spit on history’ was probably an unhelpful turn of phrase. The hyperbole was provoked by the common use of history on the Left as a way of avoiding thinking about the meaning of revolution in the present, and particularly the use of the term ‘Stalinism’. One strand of my argument is that authoritarian forms of organising for revolution lead to authoritarian revolutions, as witness the Russian Revolution – a logical argument with a historical reference. The reply from the critics comes:
'no, you must study history – Stalinism’. The concept of Stalinism is used to break (and worse, to avoid even thinking about) the link between forms of revolutionary organisation and the outcome of the revolution, ‘between the revolutionary event and the bureaucratic counter-revolution’ (Bensaïd’s third point). Bensaïd goes further and portrays the argument that there might be a connection (not ‘a strict genealogical continuity’, for I never maintained that) between the Bolsheviks’ form of organisation and the outcome of the revolution as a right-wing argument (a ‘reactionary thesis’), when he knows quite well that it was an argument put forward by the Left (Pannekoek, for example) from the time of the Russian Revolution. So, yes, in the face of such arguments, it is difficult not to want to spit: but better to restrain myself.

Critical history: yes, of course. This was already clear in the article to which Bensaïd is claiming to respond, where I argued that we need

A history of broken connections, of unresolved longings, of unanswered questions. When we turn to history, it is not to find answers, but to pick up the questions bequeathed to us by the dead. To answer these questions, the only resource we have is ourselves, our thought and our practice, now, in the present.\textsuperscript{11}

On Maoists and Pol Pot: if we follow Marx in arguing that we create capitalism, then the central issue of revolution is how we stop making capitalism. This is not a symbolic question, as Bensaïd wishes to portray it, but a very practical question. Refusal has to be at the core of revolutionary thought.

Bensaïd says ‘Holloway blots out with his spit the criticisms that Atilio Boron, Alex Callinicos, Guillermo Almeyra and I have made of his work’. It is not so: with Boron, Callinicos and Almeyra I have, on different occasions, debated the points at issue in public and in a comradely atmosphere of mutual respect, and I have also published written replies to all of them.

Finally, Bensaïd says, on five or six occasions, that there is nothing new about the argument of the book. I have no problem with that. The book is, after all, as Stoetzel points out ‘an essentially orthodox intervention’.

Massimo de Angelis, apart from the general point on negativity, which has already been discussed at length, argues that the question of how the scream creates a new world is not even addressed. That is not completely true, since the last three chapters of the book are largely devoted to this issue: I agree,
however, that this is not an adequate discussion, nor with the degree of detail that he would like to see. In part, this is because the intention of the book was more modest than that: the book asks, quite explicitly: ‘How can we even begin to think of changing the world without taking power?’.

The aim of the book was to open a discussion and, certainly, I now feel the need to advance further with this discussion. The Epilogue to the new edition in English attempts to do this by developing the notion of moving against and beyond capital.

Behind this objection of de Angelis’s is a related point, that I do not devote enough attention to the question of organisation. I think there is a problem here, an assumption on de Angelis’s part that the question of organisation and the question of capital are distinct. Capital, we know, is a form of social relations, but this means that it is a form of organisation, a form of bringing together subjects in a way that negates their subjectivity: this can be followed into the details of our everyday interaction. Fetishism is a question of organisation, and anti-fetishism (the struggle for us to relate to one another as subjects, the struggle for dignity) is and must be the basic principle of anticapitalist organisation. This too is a question of detail, the stuff of daily struggle all over the world at the moment, waged over such key concepts as dignity, horizontality, love [amorosidad], but there are no rules to be laid down, and, anyway, my argument is that, beyond the details and problems of horizontality (excellently discussed by others), what we need is to integrate these many struggles conceptually into an understanding of capital and anti-capital as organisational forms.

I do not follow de Angelis’s point on ‘clashing powers-to’. The contrast between power-over and power-to relates to the bi-polar antagonism in the organisation of doing in capitalist society: a bi-polar antagonism in which doing exists antagonistically as labour, use-value as value, power-to as power-over. To dilute this into a multitude of powers-to is to dilute the class antagonism into a multitude of antagonisms (rather than seeing the multitude of antagonisms as the form in which class struggle exists), and that is a path I am not prepared to follow, above all because the analysis of capitalist society as a bi-polar class society points to our strength and the dependence of capital upon us.

That leaves us with the commentary of Marcel Stoetzler. Stoetzler’s commentary is elegant and seductive, just the sort of commentary I was

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13 See, for example, Sitrin 2005 or, more critically, Thwaites Rey 2004.
hoping for when I was writing the book. The book contains some arguments that are experimental, many points at which I felt in the course of writing ‘I think this is right, but it would be good to have somebody to discuss it with in more detail, or it would be good if some reviewer could take it up and develop it further or argue against it’. This is just what Stoetzler’s commentary does. Thus, he argues, for example, that I conflate three different meanings of negativity: I think this is probably right, that there is, indeed, a slippage from one concept to another. What I am not yet clear about is whether this is a harmful slippage and what its political implications are. Stoetzler suggests that it leads either to an ‘affirmation (sometimes pride) of being a (bourgeois) producer-creator-subject, or its rejection’: for me, however, the combining of screaming and doing in the concept of negation leads to an affirmation (and indeed pride) of being doers-against-labour. And so it is with many of Stoetzler’s points: they are very helpful indications of the tensions and contradictions that exist in the book but, often, I disagree with his judgements. Thus, for example, when he says that ‘the concept of “anti-power” is dangerous as long as it remains under-determined’ because it may, for example, include anti-Semitic or even fascist forms of anticapitalism, then he is right and this is a problem that should be discussed: but I think the ‘determination’ is not so much a theoretical determination or process of exclusion as one that can only come about through the forms of articulation of the struggle (council organisation, for example). When he says at the end of his commentary that ‘it is perhaps part of [the] appeal [of the book] that it gives expression to real contradictions by being itself contradictory’, then I am delighted. The book is intended as a stimulus to move forward, not a correct statement of revolutionary theory.

Certainly, I do have a difference with Stoetzler. At the end he says perceptively

A criticism of the weak sides of the book can almost entirely be based on its strong sides: or, in other words, selective reading can construct either a crowd-pleasing, romantic ‘anti-global-capitalism’ Holloway, or an austere ‘back-to-Marx-via-Adorno-and-Italian/German-autonomism’, anti-identitarian Holloway.

And he says that he prefers the latter. For me, however, the question cannot be that of preferring one side to the other, but of how we bring the two together. The book is deliberately Janus-faced: an attempt to say to activists that, in order to take their activism seriously, they must read Marx and theorise austere; and to say to the austere Marxist theorists that they must break
through their austerity and think politically, and thereby transform their own theory. Stoetzler is clearly happier in the world of austerity, and that I respect, but that too must be criticised. However, to criticise this is deliberately to venture (with care) where austere angels fear to tread and it is no doubt from this that many of the tensions of the book arise. But I would not change that.

My hesitation in writing this last part of the article is that I have no wish to defend the book. The aim of the book is to promote discussion, a discussion that moves forward, that recognises that we all desperately want to change the world but that none of us knows how to do it.

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Democracy, Dissensus and the Aesthetics of Class Struggle: An Exchange with Jacques Rancière*

Introduction

In an effort to compensate for the liberal complacency still dominant in the graduate departments of philosophy and political science at the University of Chicago, three doctoral students decided to examine some political heterodoxy coming their way from France via the work of Jacques Rancière. Weekly discussions on his recent political writings (chiefly, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy, 1999; On the Shores of Politics, 1995; Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique, 2000) unpacked dense, meticulous arguments, matched by a staccato, machine-gun-like prose – an architectonic structure and polemical style worthy of Logical Revolts [Les Révoltes logiques], the title of Rancière’s 1970s journal which tracked the struggles and speech of the poor. A historian no less

* Interview conducted in English at Northwestern University on 10 April 2003. The interviewers would like to thank Miguel Vatter and Jacques Rancière for inviting us to their seminar on aesthetics and politics.
than a philosopher, Jacques Rancière’s intellectual itinerary – from his precocious collaboration with Althusser (his essay on Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts in the 1965 Lire le Capital) to his break with the latter and his work on the poetics of historical knowledge and the heresy of democracy – bespeaks an ongoing and unforgiving refusal of consensual thought, an intelligence too restless not to verify what is covered under a name, a concept, a classification.

Jacques Rancière here responds to questions on his theory of class struggle. The intention is to draw attention to a cornerstone of his thinking on democracy and to reveal thereby a line that marks him off from those – whether theorists of ‘radical democracy’ or otherwise – who dismiss the universal supposition of class struggle as a figure of the past. In what sense is Rancière’s theory of class struggle responsive to contemporary struggles for emancipation? How is this theory expressive of democratic agency, of the irreducible opposition between politics and police, or of the conflict between democracy proper and the rising ‘identification of politics with the management of capital’? How does this reworking of class struggle draw on Marx, the litigious demand for rights, the aesthetic reorganisation of social space and the utopian impulse?

One of the most stimulating aspects of Rancière’s work is the way in which these questions of democracy, universality, and class struggle are insistently bound to the very form of his writing. Rancière has an idea of method – performed rather than stated – according to which the thinking of democracy is organised and composed. Gilles Deleuze famously proclaimed that ‘doing philosophy is trying to invent or create concepts’. If the Rancièrian method of political thinking exemplifies a similar concept-creating device, we may note, as Rancière suggests toward the end of this interview, that the ‘declassing’ reconfiguration of concepts is itself a ‘backfire’ of politics – another instance of its universal struggle and import.

Question: You have relocated the site of politics from forms of political régime to the operation of class struggle. For you, the present decline of politics is directly related to the eclipse of the Marxian signifier of class

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1 In Disagreement, Rancière uses the term ‘police’ to refer to ‘the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution’ (Rancière 1999, p. 28). Politics, by contrast, is ‘an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing; whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration’ (Rancière 1999, pp. 29–30).

2 Rancière 1999, p. 113.

3 Deleuze 1995, p. 25.
struggle. Yet you rethink class struggle in terms of political subjectification and take your distances from any ideal politeia, or from what Marx called ‘true democracy’ and communism. We would like to know the reason for this shift from Marx, how it modifies the Marxist signifier of class struggle, and in what respect the struggle for rights plays a central role in this modification.

Rancière: Rights as such, you think so?

We thought this implicit, for instance, in your critique of Marx’s account of human rights in On the Jewish Question.

This is not actually the way in which I did put the issue. My critique of the young Marx was not so much concerned with rights as with political subjectification. In the young Marx, there is a kind of debasement of politics, politics for him being only superstructural appearance, and the real thing being the subterranean process of class war. I tried to overturn the position by appropriating for myself the enigmatic sentence of the Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right where he writes that the proletariat is a class of society that is not a class of society, and is actually a ‘class’ that entails the dissolution of all classes. The question is: what does this mean, how do you think of this class which is not a class? In the same text, Marx makes the proletariat akin to a kind of chemical or biological idea of dissolution. The proletariat is thought as the process of the decomposition of old classes. From this point on, Marxism oscillated between a negative idea of class as dissolution and a positive idea of class as identity. And, ultimately, this second sense, the proletariat as a positive class of labour, obviously became the mainstream sense of class in Marxism.

I tried to put differently this process of ‘dissolution’. It is not a matter of the historical and quasi-biological decomposition of old classes. I rather think this dissolution as a symbolic function of declassing. The class that is not a class thus becomes an operator of declassification. The proletariat is no longer a part of society but is, rather, the symbolic inscription of ‘the part of those who have no part’, a supplement which separates the political community from any count of the parts of a society. The idea of the dissolving class can thus give the concept of what constitutes a political subject.

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4 See Rancière 1999, p. 35: ‘By subjectification I mean the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the field of experience.’

5 See Rancière 1999, p. 38: ‘Proletarian subjectification defines a subject of wrong – by superimposition in relation the multitude of workers. What is subjectified is neither
This is, then, precisely what makes it possible to get out of the trap of ‘either formal democracy or true democracy’: thinking the proletariat as a form of the *demos*, as a political subject? What is important for me is not restoring the formal democracy, the rights of man as such, against Marx. Instead, the issue is to relate democracy – and the rights of man, possibly – to this idea of the political subject as a class that is not a class but an operation of declassification. What matters to me is to understand the *demos* as precisely an operator of class struggle – but class struggle in a very specific sense. Ancient philosophy explicitly acknowledged that the war between the rich and the poor is at the centre of politics. But these names did not refer to economic classes. The poor were those who were ‘nothing’, who were not entitled to govern. Democracy was the power of those who were ‘nothing’. It is in this sense that politics is class struggle, and that the struggle defines itself as the re-symbolisation of the community.

*It seems to us, however, that your political thinking underscores rights in class struggle in the excess of egalitarian logic over police logic, especially if we understand rights with Claude Lefort as a symbolic dimension that is irreducible to the objective legal forms of liberal and formal democracy. Isn’t this irreducibility of community to its own body, this excess of the symbolic where Lefort situates the struggle for rights, also where class struggle as you understand this term is located?*

Well, I think you can put matters that way. But, at the same time, my view of the ‘excess of the symbolic’ is different from Lefort’s. Lefort thinks this excess in terms of sacrifice. Modern democracy would be born from an originary sacrifice, from the disincorporation of the ‘double body’ of the king.6 My view of democracy does not link the excess to any kind of political theology. Rights are not a kind of absolute for me. They are inscriptions of the *demos*, an inscription of the part of those who have no part. As such, they are always litigious, oriented toward staging conflict in the process of verification. There is a basic uncertainty about what and whom rights include.

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work nor distribution, but the simple counting of the uncounted, the difference between an inegalitarian distribution of social bodies and the equality of speaking beings’. For class struggle, see, for instance, Rancière 1995, p. 33: ‘In the democratic age, declassifying division has taken on a privileged form whose name has fallen totally out of favour, yet if we are to know where we are we must look at the form face-on. The name given to this privileged form was class struggle.’

The act of the political subjects is to build such or such case for the verification of their extension and their comprehension. From the beginning, the duality of the ‘rights of man and the citizen’ has been denounced as a neat trick. Marx interpreted the difference as a mark of illusion. He contrasted the concrete privileges of ‘men’ – i.e. the bourgeois – to the celestial rights of citizens. Conversely, Burke – and Arendt after him – opposed the national rights of citizens to the abstract rights of abstract man. But, as I view it, the gap between ‘man’ and ‘citizen’ is not the mark of illusion. It is an interval where political subjects can act and put rights to the test. Political subjects are not definite collectivities, they are surplus names, names that can stage dissensus concerning who is included in their count. Correspondingly, political predicates – such as freedom or equality – are not properties belonging to individuals or groups. They are open predicates, I mean predicates susceptible to a litigious challenge concerning whom they exactly refer to and the cases in which they are considered actual. What is important is thus the capacity of subjectification induced by the very indeterminacy of the names ‘man’ and ‘citizen’. The ‘rights of man’ are first of all operators of subjectification. They are abstract as long as you make nothing of them.

For you, ‘the proletariat’ is significant precisely as a polemical, empty name for re-symbolisation, as a pure operator for class struggle. Given this sort of formalisation of class, your position seems different from many contemporary theories of radical democracy. Why politics based on class struggle and not politics based on something like fractured plural identities? Why frame politics as class struggle in this way?

I don’t so much frame politics in terms of class struggle as reinterpret class struggle from a political point of view: class struggle as the power of declassification. This is why I resist the replacement of the proletariat by a multiplicity of minorities. This is not a choice between a ‘big’ subject and a multiplicity of little subjects. It is much more the choice between an additive and a subtractive way of counting the political subjects, between the pluralisation of identities and the universality of disidentification. What is important in politics as class struggle is political subjectification, that is, not only the fact of the action of minorities, the action of groups, but the creation of what I call empty names of subjects. What was the proletariat? The proletariat was an empty name for a subject – for anyone, for counting anyone. I think there is a difference between thinking the necessity of this kind of universal subjectiviser, and thinking politics as a matter of minorities in the way certain
theories of ‘radical democracy’ do. At the same time, I get out of the socioeconomic identification of the political class.

Is the logic of declassification and dissolution, as expressed in the operator of class struggle, a way of distinguishing universalistic political movements from more sectarian or identitarian movements, such that universalistic movements, ones you would call properly political, would be movements that work toward their own dissolution, while a movement that does not work toward its own dissolution would be particularistic and anti-political?

I am not so much emphasising class as a process of self-dissolution. I am interpreting what dissolution means. Basically, I think the important distinction is between what I call a universal subjectiviser and representations of identity, minority, community, and so on. What I put under the name of dissolution or self-dissolution is the action of subjects that play precisely on the difference between a natural status and a political function. This is the importance of the idea of the proletariat for me. It can at one and the same time be the name of a class and the open name of the uncounted. What I call positive subjectification is this process of disidentification. What is important is the disidentifying moment that shifts from an identity or an entity as a worker, as a woman, as a black, to a space of subjectification of the uncounted that is open to anyone. This means making the same words mean different things, so that it can refer to closed groups or to open subjects. This open process of disidentification is also a process of universalisation. Take the declaration ‘We are all German Jews’ in Paris, May ’68, or the present ‘We are all children of immigrants’ slogan in France. These names of subjects don’t designate groups, they disrupt the system of designations that frame the community in terms of definite standards of inclusion. A ‘movement’ invents for this operation specific names, provisory names bound up with a specific speech situation.

There is a disidentification that takes place, and another identification that takes place, let’s say the bourgeois citizen who claims he is an immigrant, or indeed, ‘We are all immigrants’. But precisely that disidentification and that identification are made possible by a primary or implicit identification with the empty name of the proletariat as such. Is the decline of politics, to return to our first question, linked to the decline of the universal signifier that allows for these kinds of playing off on identities?
Yes, I think that certainly the most effective political subjects were those subjects that involved a strong identity, and therefore, a strong process of disidentification, and the possibility of transferring the power of identity to the power of disidentification and the power of universal subjectification. So, when those class subjects disappear, what in fact we have generally is either the kinds of identities that cannot lend themselves to processes of disidentification, or, I would say, some kind of residuals of the universal subjects. Today we have the ‘we-are-on-this-side’ identities, we are this minority asking for its own rights, and, on the other hand, we have these kinds of volatile universal subjects – subjects that operate under a banner like ‘We are all children of immigrants’. And, in this case, a disidentification is declared – precisely, the absence of difference – that is not given the name and the consistency of a dissensual subject. I think that the state of politics today is played out in the relation between volatile subjects of disidentification and identity groups.

Does framing politics as disidentification and interruption in the police order reject or presuppose a reference to some sort of utopian political community? What does a community based around this model of political interruption look like? In *On the Shores of Politics*, you appear to want to bypass Agamben, Nancy and Derrida – with their locutions like ‘the community to come’, ‘the community in-difference’, etc. – in favour of thinking about the way in which political communities determine who counts. But how does this understanding of politics include or exclude something like an ideal of political community. In other words, what status does the utopian have in your work?

If you think that politics in general is the gathering of human beings in some sort of community, you raise the problem: what is the best kind of community that we can imagine? But, in my view, politics always comes as a kind of exception to the way in which, generally, communities are gathered, it comes as an interruption. There are factual communities, grounded in the power of birth or money, and there is politics as the process of challenging the meaning of these factual communities through the operation of declassification. The process of politics creates dissensual collectivities. These collectivities give birth to new capacities and they bear ideas of future communities. But it is impossible to think of the future community as a projection of those kinds of communities that are involved in political conflict.
One cannot think of a future dissensual community. This is meaningless. So when you think of utopia, you think of a form of community that would not lend itself to dissensus. This means, in fact, a community where everybody has the same ‘meaning’. This is a metapolitical project, a project that, through aesthetics, jumps from politics to ethics.7

So, either ‘utopia’ goes back to some new form of the old Platonic project of the ‘living’ consensual community, or it plays the part of the supplément d’âme giving us the energy for political action. But political action, in my view, is not about ideal future community. I’m not fond of the lingering idea that we need utopia for the future. Much more important to me is the empowerment of the actual capacities of anyone through dissensual practice.

As regards your reference to Nancy, Agamben and Derrida, I don’t think that any of them projects a future of the community even if Agamben wrote a book called The Coming Community.8 What they try to do, rather, is to relate the thinking of the political community to some prior form of anthropological or ontological ‘being-together’ that would be tied to an ontological or anthropological structure, such as the Heideggerian Dasein. The ‘difference’ of utopia is, in some way, traced back to an originary difference that would give the political community its full meaning. I’m really very suspicious about this pre-political requirement of community. In my view, the exceptionality of politics does not need to be grounded in some ontological configuration of ‘being-together’. In Agamben’s case, this requirement ultimately results in a dismissal of politics: we are trapped within a ‘state of exception’ from which only an ontological revolution can save us. It was already the Heideggerian idea. I believe that we should first be saved from this kind of salvation.

**But what does emancipation within your theoretical framework look like? What are the emancipatory possibilities and ends of this anarchic politics of dissensus?**

Emancipation is a process rather than a goal, a break in the present rather than an ideal put in the future. It means first breaking with the law of the police, where everybody is in his own place, with his own job and his own culture, her own body and her own forms of expression. Social emancipation was first made of individual breaks with the kind of ‘identity’ that pinned

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7 See Rancière 1999, pp. 81–2: ‘... modern metapolitics presents itself as a symptomology that detects a sign of untruth within every political distinction – that between man and citizen, for instance’.
8 Agamben 1993.
workers down to ‘their’ place and ‘habitus’. It was an ‘aesthetic’ revolution as I understand the term, an overturning of the partition of the sensuous which assigned to workers their place in (or outside of) the symbolic space of the community, in the ‘private’ realm of production and reproduction. It is what I studied in The Nights of Labor, which is about the beginnings of social emancipation among French workers in the nineteenth century.9 I called it *La nuit des prolétaires*, precisely because the argument is about day and night. For these workers, emancipation meant breaking the partition of the sensuous that determined the day as the time workers work, and night as the time they rest. The beginning of emancipation was the decision to make something more of their night: to write, read, think and discuss instead of sleeping. Emancipation first meant reframing their own existence, breaking with their workers’ identity, their workers’ culture, their worker’s time and space.

It is in this sense that the Schillerian idea of an ‘aesthetic’ revolution was relevant to my understanding of social emancipation. Schiller’s idea of a new revolution grounded in the aesthetic suspension of the conditions of domination was close to the kind of aesthetic neutralisation that shaped proletarian subjectification as a break with proletarian identity. Emancipation, for them, first meant constituting themselves as aesthetic subjects, capable of this kind of ‘disinterested’ gaze that Kant analyses in the *Critique of Judgement*.

It is interesting that you give the example of Schiller, since, for him, that suspension is fundamentally a utopian moment. Doesn’t Schiller think the aesthetic state as a human need akin to the Kantian pure republic? And isn’t the aesthetic restructuring of space and time in proletarian experience also necessarily tied to an imaginary signifier of ideal community that allows for that very restructuring, that creates a gap between the extant structuring of space and time and an alternative that is merely possible? We wonder whether the aesthetic staging of alterity in class struggle points logically to the utopian.

It depends on what you call the utopian. Social emancipation was not about showing the way to an ideal society to come, it was not about implementing a utopian programme for a new society. It was, first of all, people constituting themselves into new kinds of human beings, with a new sense of space and time in the present. Sure, utopian programmes could help constitute the gap

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with the extant order. But the awareness that you can begin *hic et nunc* a new life of equality, use a new language, have ‘new senses’ is a more powerful way to stage this gap than the dream of a future community. This is why, nowadays, the name of utopia is very often more or less explicitly transferred to this very impulse. This means that it cannot create the impulse by itself. Equality has to be practised before being dreamed. It is not the same thing to have a utopian goal to fulfill and to have the new, and concrete, intent to reframe here and now your space, your time, your relation to speech, to visibility, and all of these aspects of everyday life. There are so many things that are lumped together in the idea of utopia that I prefer to dismiss the term. And this is why I speak in terms of aesthetic revolution, in terms of the reconfiguration of one’s body, of one’s lived world, of one’s space and time.

In *Le Partage du sensible*, you distinguish between two types of avant-gardes in modernity.\(^\text{10}\) There is the ‘strategic avant-garde’, the authoritarian or military model that determines the meaning, orientation, and historical possibilities of a movement. But there is also the avant-garde that underscores a more aesthetic anticipation of the future, following the Schillerian model of free play. Now, the aesthetic model distinguishes itself from the strategic one by decentring emancipation and by inventive forms of subjectification. And it seems that your idea of emancipation is on the side of this aesthetic model – that this is the context for what you put forward as ‘aesthetic revolution’, only without the slide towards metapolitical anticipation. Would it be fair to say that the aesthetic qualifier changes what is understood by ‘revolution’ in the same way the aesthetic qualifier distinguishes for you a specific modality of the avant-garde?

I made this distinction when answering questions about the avant-garde in modernity; it is not a concept with which I am comfortable. That said, it is true that the idea of the ‘aesthetic state’ and the ‘aesthetic education’ framed a new vision of what revolution means. Schiller explicitly opposed the aesthetic suspension of the power of ‘understanding’ over ‘sensibility’ or ‘form’ over ‘matter’ to the ‘power of the law’ as it had been implemented by the French Revolution. The aesthetic revolution appeared as a revolution in the partition of the sensuous, in the forms of the lived world itself, instead of a revolution in the forms of government. It fostered an idea of avant-garde as a power of

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anticipation rather than a power of commandment. But you cannot equate it with an opposition between ‘artistic avant-garde’ and ‘political avant-garde’. The opposition is an opposition between two ideas of the revolution, between two ‘aesthetics’ of revolution: there is, I would say, the ‘representational’ idea of the avant-garde as the power of those who know the ends and are able to choose the better means for those ends and the aesthetic idea of a global change in the ways of living, thinking and feeling. In Marxism, the idea of the ‘human revolution’ challenges the idea of the revolution led by the expert avant-garde. The revolutionary artists played on this tension and tried to identify the social revolution with the invention of a new life. But the revolutionary powers imposed the scheme of art as illustration of the new order.

We’re interested in some moments of your work where something like the Hegelian problematic of recognition surfaces. In On the Shores of Politics, for example, you point out how the superiority of the superiors collapses in the act of explaining to inferiors why they are inferior. One finds the same sort of argument made in the introductory chapters of Disagreement. We wonder what role something like recognition plays in your work. More specifically, does this push your use of class struggle closer to something like the unfolding of the pre-political actualisation of the human expectation to be recognised in some way? Are you comfortable with pushing the quasi-Hegelian overtones of this position?

First of all, the question is not whether it is Hegelian or not. There is an ethical reading of Hegel as a thinker of recognition, and I myself am supposed to be a thinker of recognition. Recently I stumbled upon an essay, ‘Jacques Rancière’s Contribution to the Ethics of Recognition’. I understand why: I strongly emphasised the issues of politics as the ‘count of the uncounted’ and as a way of making visible demands and agents of demand that were invisible. But I don’t think that Hegel’s dialectic of the master and the slave is concerned with such issues. And I think that the ‘count of the uncounted’, as a structural configuration of the political community is something different from individual problems of recognition. I fear that, by setting the issue in terms of recognition, we make it into a matter of individual suffering – ‘I’m not recognised, I want to be recognised’. This has, for me, a rather patronising overtone. It is not the same thing as the idea of framing a sensory visibility of equality. In On

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In *The Shores of Politics*, I mention a strike in the 1830s where the workers demanded ‘relations of equality between the bosses and the employees’. In fact, they demanded that the bosses take off their hat when they stepped into the workshop. You can interpret it as an ethical claim for recognition. But I think it is more relevant to see how this demand underscores a specific connection between politeness and politicity. This demand was about the visibility of equality, about the ‘public’ status of the workshop and the workers rather than about their dignity (they also asked for the right to read the newspapers in the workshop). The idea of redistributing the relation between the spaces, the uses and the rules appropriated for them is more than a claim for recognition. Politics is first of all a sphere of appearance.

Perhaps the reason one might take your work to point to an ethics of recognition is that so many of the examples you use are historical examples in which people are in some sense not yet counted as human. What you’re emphasising now is very helpful, because you’re saying that the count of the uncounted is much broader than who gets counted as a human. The uncounted is a much more diffuse terrain of struggle, interrogating not only personhood but also all the rules, the whole structure of appearance that determines everyday life. Is that correct?

Yes. It is not a question of a humanity that allegedly would be resolved in our societies where everyone is counted as a human being. On the one hand, it is a kind of structural law: the count of the uncounted is the difference which opens the field of politics as such. On the other hand, it is the operator which redistributes the relations between the modes of being, the modes of doing, the forms of visibility and so on. And this process operates on such or such form of the uncertain border separating the private and the common, the visible and the invisible. You may be considered in general as human beings, called as electors to choose your president, etc. and become entirely inaudible when you set out, for instance, to express your own idea on the law that regulates your work, your future or the education of your children or students. The relation between inclusion and exclusion is at play everywhere and has to be made explicit everywhere.

You have stated that a political act ceases to be political when the wrong it addresses is a ‘mere matter of redistribution’. But when is a matter of redistribution?  

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12 Rancière used this precise phrase during the question and answer session of his seminar on aesthetics and politics held at Northwestern University on 10 April 2003. The basic argument, however, may be found in *Disagreement* and other works.
distribution ‘a mere matter of distribution’, a matter that does not reconfigure the political space or lead to a new division of the sensuous, but rather appeals to the extant police order? What fundamentally draws the line between distribution as an instance of reconfiguration of the political space as opposed to mere shifts within the police order?

On a general level, the distinction is whether it is a question of distribution of parts or whether it is a question about the distribution of the common. I think that a question is political as long as it is a question about who in fact takes part in the common, or about what is related to the distribution of the common itself, meaning precisely the universality of the capacities of the common. Of course, very often, the two things are tied together and it’s difficult to say, ‘at this moment we are out of politics and we are in questions of social repartition’. I think that trying to identify politics is trying to identify what concerns the common in the issue of, for example, strikes, pensions, and so on. What concerns the fact that some workers want to keep their historical advantages? What concerns the relationship of matters of pensions with the configuration of the common itself? The question may also be raised in view of health and the organisation of hospitals, for instance. There are problems of who pays for what, of course. And then there is also the issue of whether equality involves the possibility for anybody to be treated by the best doctors, in the best hospitals, etc. These kinds of conflicts raise the issue of equality before life and death. There is very often a connection between what is purely a matter of interests between particular groups or the interests of individuals, and the consideration of community, of the effects of equality.

It seemed to us that there is a tragic dimension of politics in your work, insofar as the dynamic element of politics is always working towards disillusion in form, towards incorporation within the police order and social sedimentation.

I try not to think politics in such a tragic mood. I don’t represent politics as this kind of dynamic, but always collapsing, process that inevitably becomes mere social sedimentation. First, I think that the fact that the dynamic is always temporary and provisional is not such a tragedy. It does not come down to the eternal attempt of human beings to achieve a good that always escapes from their grasp. Also, what you call sedimentation cannot be thought only in terms of reincorporation. It is also a living memory of politics, a set of inscriptions that can be re-enacted. Political movements lead to forms of
sedimentation such as laws, social institutions, and so on. But it doesn’t mean that it is only a kind of retombée of the great dynamic; it means that there are new inscriptions of equality.

Equality is not only inscribed in the law, but inscribed in social institutions – I mentioned the hospital, but this is also true of schools and so on. So there are a lot of places where the dynamic is sedimented, but ‘sedimented’ also means that it is there and ready for a kind of revival. For instance, take the question of education. Sometimes a little reform is a Pandora’s box that gives way to a new dissensus because, in its bluntness, it raises the issue of whether it is equality or whether it is inequality that gives its law to the whole system.

In On the Shores of Politics, I mention the great strike that challenged French schools and universities in 1986, and which was less concerned with the content of a right-wing plan of reform of education as with the keyword of this plan, which was selection. For many years, sociologists had denounced the ‘illusion’ of equality in the schools as veiling the reality of social reproduction. But the reality of social selection under the egalitarian appearances is one thing, the political reality of those appearances is another matter. So the official dismissal of the egalitarian appearance in favour of selection did not amount to a mere ‘return to reality’. It meant a reconfiguration of the community under the signifier of inequality. That attempted dismissal restored to the egalitarian signifier all its power.

So, the places of sedimentation are also places of inscription of the democratic signifiers that can open, and do open, new spaces of dissensus. You can say that it is tragic because it doesn’t open straightaway into a stable egalitarian achievement. It is always a partial achievement, some reduction of the political dynamic to legal or social acquisitions. But, at the same time, there is this dialectic that makes the sedimentation of politics also something of a springboard. So I don’t consider my conception tragic.

A final remark. We are intrigued by the very way in which you philosophise, by what doing philosophy means for you. Schematically speaking, we find in your work something like a combination of two different techniques. One would be the Deleuzean idea that what philosophy ought to do is to create concepts. So you give us a series of concepts – archipolitics, parapolitics, metapolitics, politics verses the police. And what we also find interesting, and we are actually very thankful for it, is that you offer these concepts

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without all the usual deconstructionist pieties about how one concept inevitably slides in the other, and so on. But, at the same time, we find in your work a quasi-Heideggerian tendency to use familiar terms in order to destabilise them. So politics and police come to mean something very different than they usually do, and democracy correctly understood in your terminology becomes synonymous with politics and class struggle itself. Is there a strategy to this technique? Does the strategy itself have political import?

Creating concepts and changing the meaning of the words is one and the same process. I neither try to come back to some originary secret hidden in the etymology of the words, nor to destabilise meanings for the pleasure of destabilising them. I ask myself questions such as: what do ‘proletariat’, ‘politics’, ‘democracy’, or ‘aesthetics’ mean specifically? I need not destabilise these words because they have no stability at all in the first place. Democracy, for instance, means, according to the case at hand, a virtue, a form of government, a state of society, and so on. Many social scientists or philosophers exploit this indetermination and the supposition of a ‘common sense’ that would ultimately make clear what these terms are about. I began my work by throwing this ‘common sense’ into question, by showing for instance that ‘worker’ – as a political concept – designates a form of disidentification of ‘worker’ as a socio-cultural identity. When breaking with the referential system of this ‘common sense’, I would hear complaints of incomprehension. So I then tried to ‘reconstruct’, to propose new concepts by giving to the old monsters (democracy, politics, etc.) restrictive determinations. And I used the Greek signifiers (such as demos or polite) as illustrations of this reconfiguration rather than as tools for a ‘de-construction’. Anyway, it is not clear to me how I could reconstruct without doing some deconstructing.

In my work, I never asked myself what kind of philosophy I was doing or whether I was doing philosophy or something else. Creating concepts also means destabilising the borders between the disciplines (philosophy, political science, history, sociology, literature, and so on). The point is less to destabilise words and meanings than to destabilise the order of the disciplines that say that each thing must be in its place. For me, of course, this is a political question. There is a return or a kind of backfire of the political question on the theoretical question. All my research came up against the issue of the border: how do you draw a line separating public life and domestic life, the political and the social, the common and the private, the visible and the
invisible, the audible and the inaudible? Ultimately, this comes down to knowing how to draw the line separating in general those who ‘can’ from those who ‘cannot’ and how, conversely, you can cross the border, deny it, play upon it, and so on. You cannot understand anything of this if you enclose yourself in the field of one discipline. A discipline is always the anticipated implementation of a decision about the relation of thought and life, about the way thought is shared. What is at stake in a social movement is unintelligible if you view it through the separate lens of political science, sociology, philosophy, and so on. And what is at stake in a literary text is unintelligible if you try to understand it only in terms of literary theory. I don’t cross the borders because I want to destabilise things – I’m really a very quiet person! What interests me is trying to find the point of intelligibility. Creating concepts means trying to find the point of intelligibility, and you have to blur the borders and reshape the territory to find this point.

Social scientists are inclined to think that this is mere empiricism and that this creativity is an attempt to get rid of any protocol of science. For me, it is a higher form of rationality. You have to be anarchical if you want to be a good rationalist in these matters.

As a consequence, I cannot really situate myself in the field of philosophy in the sense that I would be doing what philosophy has to do. I don’t know exactly what philosophy has to do. What I can say is what philosophy has been about in its historical existence. I can say philosophy was or was not about such and such knot in so-called political, scientific or artistic issues. And I try to displace the way we understand these knots. One of my books, The Names of History, has ‘A Poetics of Knowledge’ as its subtitle. The point here is to frame the question of how things become philosophical or become political or become literary in a kind of metapoetics or general poetics. This is to say that this kind of general poetics for me takes the place that is usually occupied by ontology. I have no interest in relating what I do to a kind of general ontology, as, for instance, the ontology of being and event in Badiou or the ontology of potentia and act in Agamben. An ontology can be a supplementary tool for bringing such and such knot of ‘politics and philosophy’ or ‘aesthetics and politics’ to light. But an ontology remains a kind of poem and you still have to understand how it constructs poetically its own relation to what it is supposed to ground.

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La dernière génération d’octobre
BENJAMIN STORA

Reviewed by IAN BIRCHALL

So-called Trotskyism has been among the most trivial of movements. It transformed into abstract dogma what Trotsky thought in concrete terms at one moment in his life and canonized this. It is inexplicable in purely political dimensions, but the history of the more eccentric religious sects provides revealing parallels. . . . But I doubt if it is possible to lay Trotsky’s ghost so easily.1

Capitalism tends to transform everything within its reach into a commodity. By a dialectical twist, it now turns out that – at least in France – Trotskyism, the sworn enemy of capitalism, sells books and magazines. The eleven volumes listed above are only a small sample of the flood of books and articles published in France in the last few years.2 Nobody – and certainly not the present reviewer – could read all the relevant literature, while at the same time continuing with the paper sales, meetings, electioneering, street-fighting and perusal of factional documents which make up the daily life of any good Trotskyist.

The reason why Trotskyism is suddenly boosting publishers’ profits is clear. In the first round of the presidential elections in 2002, the three Trotskyist candidates took over ten per cent of the vote. Meanwhile, the Socialist Party candidate, Lionel Jospin, had to face a succession of revelations – whose significance Jospin magnified by foolish denials3 – about his former involvement with a Trotskyist organisation. The Trotskyist electorate – even at its more normal level of 4–5% – is large enough to swing elections in many constituencies, while Jospin’s misadventures constituted an original and recondite form of sleaze.

While the French are generally unimpressed by sex scandals, it seemed briefly as if there might be the bizarre twist of a ‘no-sex’ scandal. Two members of Lutte Ouvrière (LO)4 were apparently expelled for a moment of illicit pleasure during a summer

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1 MacIntyre 1971, p. 59.
2 I am grateful to Sebastian Budgen for pointing me in the direction of several of the books under review, and to Edward Crawford and Jim Wolfreys for commenting on a first draft.
4 The three main Trotskyist organisations in France since 1968 have been Lutte Ouvrière (LO), the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and the group led by Pierre Lambert since his split with Bleibtreu in 1955. This organisation has had several names over the years, so the term ‘Lambertist’ is the most convenient label to use.
propaganda campaign. But LO’s leader, Robert Barcia, wisely recognising that some things do not stop even for the Transitional Programme, assures us that ‘we have never expelled anyone for making love, or prevented them, wherever it may be… if that had been our attitude, our recruitment would have dried up immediately!’.

Faced with this pile of tomes, I – having been active in Trotskyist politics for over forty years – feel rather like a goldfish reviewing books on ichthyology. For those of us who remember the time when J. Roussel’s *Les Enfants du prophète* was the only key to the mystery of French Trotskyism, which seemed to have emerged from nowhere during the events of 1968, this profusion of information has a certain fascination. But can we learn anything from these books? What do they tell us about the real, lived experience of the world of revolutionary politics, or about the possibilities of achieving the goal to which so many have devoted their lives, often at the cost of great sacrifice and sometimes physical danger?

The books under review – and a few others mentioned in passing – fall into four categories:

(i) criticisms from outside, more or less hostile to their subject matter;
(ii) responses to alleged slanders emanating from the various Trotskyist groups;
(iii) historical overviews;
(iv) autobiographical accounts by individual militants.

Christophe Nick’s *Les Trotskytes* is a puzzling book. Who exactly is it aimed at? With 583 pages of text, it is no easy introduction for the mildly curious. Yet those with any serious interest in the topic are unlikely to be taken in by its rather facile arguments. Nick has conducted interviews with a number of veterans of French Trotskyism, among them Pierre Broué, Jean-Jacques Marie and Jean-René Chauvin. These are people with long experience of the movement, and, in the first two cases, distinguished historians. The passages from such interviews, plus the extracts from Raymond Molinier’s unpublished memoirs, mean that this book will be consulted by serious researchers.

However, Nick’s book should be used with extreme caution. A comparison of his quotations from Craipeau’s autobiography with the original show that they are often neatly lifted out of context to emphasise the negative connotations and minimise the essentially positive view Craipeau gives of his own past. Thus he quotes at length Craipeau’s account of the problems of working in the French Socialist Party (SFIO) in 1934 – but makes no mention of the following page, where Craipeau tells that in the Socialist Youth the entrists ‘felt like fish in water’. He subtly amputates a paragraph in which Craipeau evokes the atmosphere of ‘absurdity’ created by the outbreak of World War II, in order to imply that the absurdity lay in the aspirations of the Trotskyists.

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5 Barcia 2003, p. 23.
6 Roussel 1972.
And, where Craipeau recounts that ‘many of’ his comrades were opposed to his proposal to link up with a maquis formed by members of the youth hostel movement, Nick translates that they ‘condemned’ him, adding an inane and irrelevant comment about kulaks (pp. 201, 295, 313).7

The book – like several of the others under review – has obviously been produced in a hurry. A large number of small errors undermine the reader’s confidence in the writer’s historical accuracy. Thus the name of the veteran Pierre Frank is misspelt throughout as Franck (perhaps Nick is confusing him with the composer César Franck), and Max Shachtman becomes at one point ‘Chatman’ (evoking the horrifying thought of a Shachtmanite chatroom) (p. 347). Obviously, a man like Nick is too busy to read his own proofs – he is probably already hard at work on his next oeuvre, perhaps a study of the Rosicrucians – while copy-editors seem to be fast going the way of the lamplighter.

Nick quotes from an impressive number of sources. What is much less clear is whether he has read the books he quotes from. An account of malpractice in students’ union elections is followed by the assertion: ‘The end justifies the means, said Trotsky’ (p. 530). No, actually, he did not. A cursory reading of Their Morals and Ours reveals he said almost the exact opposite, namely that there must be a dialectical interrelation of ends and means.

Nick refers us to one of Victor Serge’s ‘masterpieces’, The Danger from Within [Le péril est en nous] (pp. 154–5). I was somewhat surprised at a reference to a Serge masterpiece I had never heard of, till I realised he was in fact referring to a chapter of Serge’s Memoirs, leading me to suspect that he had not read the whole of this work. Serge should be quoted with extreme care; he often makes uncomfortable reading for both pro- and anti-Bolsheviks. In an effort to prove that Trotsky in power was no different from Stalin, Nick cites Serge on Makhno and the Bolsheviks, and the situation prior to Kronstadt. Simple honesty would have led him to add that, in 1921, Serge supported the crushing of Kronstadt, albeit with ‘unutterable anguish’.8 Serge changed his mind later.9 (Like Lenin and Trotsky, but unlike Thatcher and Blair, Serge did not believe that changing one’s mind was an admission of weakness.) But a proper consideration of Serge would at least show that Kronstadt, if scarcely Bolshevism’s finest hour, was not such an open-and-shut case as Nick would have us believe.

Nick’s account begins in melodramatic fashion, evoking the myth of Trotskyist infiltration:

‘The Trotskyists are everywhere’. How many remarks shared in confidence by ‘people who are generally well-informed’ end with this judgement, uttered in a secretive tone. For several years Paris has been buzzing with this rumour.

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8 Serge 2001, p. 606.
9 For the Kronstadt debate see Weissman 1994.
The Trotskyists are said to have placed their men in all the positions of power that seem to them to be of strategic importance. (p. 7.)

We are frequently reminded that we are never more than five metres from a rat. Apparently, the Trotskyists are nearly as close. (Rats are also reputed to be able to swim up sewers and bite our buttocks when we are sitting on the toilet; whether any Trotskyist group has yet perfected this technique is unclear.)

The reality is rather more prosaic. In the aftermath of 1968, a good many young men and women, including the ‘best and brightest’ of their generation, passed through the ranks of revolutionary socialism. The phenomenon was most marked in France, since there the student upsurge was accompanied by a general strike of ten million workers, which greatly increased the attractive power of revolutionary Marxism. Thirty years on, many have found employment in the academic world, in politics and in the media. Nick claims that more than 15% of the editorial staff of the prestigious daily *Le Monde* are ex-Trotskyists. And while many ex-Maoists have made spectacular disavowals of their earlier beliefs, the ex-Trotskyists, though making their peace with the old order, fail to flagellate their earlier selves. Thus Edwy Plenel, ex-LCR member and, from 1996 until recently, ‘Directeur de la rédaction’ at *Le Monde*, has written: ‘Not only have I never concealed my past but, moreover, I have never been ashamed of it: I know what I owe to it.’

From across the Channel, this looks rather quaint. We, too, have our renegades, but nobody suspects Peter Hitchens and Garry Bushell of propagating ‘cultural Trotskyism’ (pp. 575–82) in the media, nor Kate Hoey of building a Trotskyist current within the Parliamentary Labour Party. But Nick’s aim is to build up the threat, and he does so by blurring the lines between fact and rumour. After all, if the Trotskyists were marginal and irrelevant, why should anybody buy a very large book about them?

Yet, as ever, there is a contradiction. If the Trotskyists really did represent a substantial current in French political life, it would be necessary to enquire *why*. If Trotskyist ideas have a real resonance, then it must mean that a significant number of people perceive something seriously rotten in French society. So Nick takes us on a roller-coaster ride in which he builds up accusations and then deflates them again. And, if this appears self-contradictory, then it is all the fault of the Trotskyists for spreading rumours. Thus, in his introduction, he evokes ‘murders and gang rapes among the Lambertists’. But there is no need to substantiate these appalling charges, designed to titillate us; he has already covered himself by stating: ‘The Trotskyists are the first to feed the rumours. As if they enjoyed it.’ (p. 9.)

The other striking fact about Nick’s account is its ahistorical approach. Despite the apparent weight of detail, the history of Trotskyism is recounted without any concern for context. Nick makes much of what he calls the ‘scandalous’ article published in

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10 Plenel 1992, p. 91.
La Vérité at the time of the Normandy landings under the headline ‘They’re no different’ (‘Ils se valent’), which urged workers not to trust in Eisenhower for their liberation, but to organise militias on a class basis in the factories (pp. 314–15). The article can certainly be criticised for understimating the impact of the restoration of bourgeois democracy on working-class consciousness. But is it as self-evidently ‘scandalous’ as Nick claims? The total number of deaths attributable to US imperialism over the last half-century, either in wars (including Vietnam, where more bombs were dropped than in the entire course of World War II) or through starvation resulting from the economic system spearheaded by the USA, far exceeds those for which Nazism was responsible.

Nick makes no attempt at a historical framework; the account of Trotsky’s rôle in the Russian Revolution is immediately followed by a discussion of the activities of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) in street demonstrations in the 1970s, as though there were a causal link. What he completely fails to draw out is that revolutionary violence is generally a response to the violence institutionalised in capitalist society. Trotsky’s alleged brutality in the Civil-War period is abstracted from the context of a besieged revolution and the intervention in Russia of armies from some fourteen foreign states. (Most of the references to the Russian Revolution are to the virulently anti-Communist Black Book of Communism.) Likewise, the violence of the post-1968 French Left must be put in the context of the violence of the French state. Between 1939 and 1962, France was almost uninterruptedly at war; German occupation was followed by colonial wars in Indochina and then Algeria. Use of riot police against workers was frequent in the postwar period, and deaths were not uncommon. As recently as 1962, nine demonstrators for peace in Algeria were crushed to death by the police at the métro Charonne.

Nick quotes a description of an anti-fascist demonstration in the early 1970s in which Henri Benoîts, a long-standing Trotskyist militant and Renault worker, was seen ‘to hit one of the CRS on the helmet with a bar and to strike and strike again until the helmet shattered’ (p. 102). What Nick fails to mention is that, a decade earlier, in October 1961, Benoîts and his wife Clara had been observers appointed by the Algerian FLN on the night when the Paris police, with official encouragement, ran amok and killed some four hundred Algerian demonstrators. This puts both the scale of Benoîts’s violence and its moral significance into perspective.

This is not to say there are no legitimate criticisms to be made of the LCR’s tactics up to 1973. There were elements of foolish adventurism in the LCR’s attitude to violence. The attack on the far-right Ordre Nouveau meeting in 1973 was clearly a serious error of judgement. Michel Recanati, a very talented, but very young and...
inexperienced comrade, planned a military-style confrontation with an ample supply of Molotov cocktails. But, though some accounts suggest that Recanati was acting independently, Daniel Bensaïd has acknowledged that he fully shared responsibility on behalf of the LCR leadership. What is palpable nonsense is for Nick to try and blame the sorry affair on Trotsky, who knew a thing or two about military matters and would never have countenanced the absurd venture.

Nick is also preoccupied with ‘entrism’. Unfortunately, he has no idea what the word means. For Trotsky, it meant working, openly if possible, clandestinely if necessary, within mass working-class parties in order to fight for revolutionary ideas. For Nick, it seems to mean the practice of infiltrating individuals into other organisations in order to spy, disrupt or manipulate. The image of the mole recurs interminably in the book; Nick tells us that ‘The Trotskyists identify with the mole. They venerate this animal and have made a totem of it’ (p. 12). Of course, there is nothing new about infiltration. From the time of Babeuf’s conspiracy, the authorities have attempted to infiltrate working-class organisations. Journalists – Nick’s own profession – take a pride in working undercover to make exposures. So, if it is true, as Nick claims, that the LCR have sent spies into Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front National (p. 103), there is nothing whatsoever discreditable about such activity. Fascist organisations deserve to be kept under close surveillance – so long as the excitement of such clandestine activity does not detract from the main priority of waging an open political war against fascist ideas. But none of this has the remotest connection with ‘entrism’.

Charpier’s history is simply an inferior version of Nick’s, for those who want to get the job done in a mere 345 pages of text. It betrays all the same symptons of a book written to a deadline, with uncorrected proofs and a mass of minor errors. Charpier also suffers from the same dilemma as Nick, whether to magnify the threat posed by his subject, or to belittle it with patronising sneers. He, too, is obsessed with entrism – he seems to believe that, before 1917, Trotsky was a Menshevik oppositionist trying to influence the Bolshevik Party from within, a singularly bizarre reading of Russian history. He also claims that Pierre Naville was practising ‘entrism’ in the surrealist movement, although Naville’s evolution from surrealism to Marxism is amply documented by a series of honest and open polemics. Yet we are also informed that ‘Since Marx, the history of the Communist movement and then that of social democracy are only an interminable succession of splits, quarrels and squabbles’ (pp. 11, 28–9, 21 [my emphasis]). So, that puts the Russian Revolution and the postwar welfare states in their place.

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14 Karl Marx’s use of the mole image in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte refers to the way in which the revolutionary process continues although unseen (Marx and Engels, 1979, p. 185). It has nothing whatsoever to do with spies or infiltrators.
15 See Naville 1975.
Charpier’s main concern is to ‘expose’, and he is – to say the least – cavalier in his use of sources. Thus, he tells us that the rally of the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (in which some Trotskyists participated) in April 1949 was manipulated by the CIA, citing as his source Annie Cohen-Solal’s biography of Sartre, which says no such thing. Charpier claims the CIA contacted Rousset and Altman, when, in fact, it was the latter who had gone to New York to seek money from the American trade unions – the rather naïve applicants were promptly referred to the State Department. Charpier goes on to confuse the speakers with those at earlier RDR meetings, and, in particular, to suggest that the rally was addressed by Richard Wright, when, in reality, he joined Sartre and Merleau-Ponty in boycotting the rally, and sending a highly critical ‘neither Washington nor Moscow’ message which was warmly applauded by the audience (p. 166).

Charpier is particularly interested in the finances of the French Left. He names a number of possible donors, though is far from clear why Daniel Guérin or the singer Léo Ferré, both publicly declared anarchists, should give money to the Trotskyists when they had organisations of their own that needed it. The spectre of foreign gold is also evoked, though the suggestion that either Albania or China would give money to Trotskyists in contravention of their own overtly Stalinist ideology is somewhat far-fetched. But Charpier covers himself neatly – the whole section is written in the conditional tense – the French equivalent of ‘it is said that’. Thus he can conveniently wave the allegations in front of his readers’ eyes in titillating fashion, and at the same time distance himself from them. What Charpier fails to realise is that Trotskyist organisations have a long experience of bleeding their members – and that many of these members have a genuine capacity for self-sacrifice, something that must be utterly incomprehensible to a career journalist like Charpier with no principles in life other than increasing his royalties.

Alongside the generalised attacks on Trotskyism are a number of books aimed at exposing particular organisations. As early as 1999, François Koch’s La Vraie nature d’Arlette attempted to penetrate the particularly secretive world of the LO grouping. But the whole tone of the book is oriented to exposure rather than understanding. The great revelation is that LO’s long-standing leader Hardy doubled up as head of a company which trained commercial travellers to sell drugs to doctors. Koch describes this activity as being at the heart of ‘the very capitalist pharmaceutical industry’ (a charge repeated on the book’s cover). The phrase is a nonsense. In a capitalist economy, all companies are capitalist; it is no more possible to be ‘very capitalist’ than ‘very pregnant’. We all have to eat, and, if Hardy (Robert Barcia) finds running a small business fits better with the life of a professional revolutionary than working on the
assembly line at Renault, who can blame him? Nowhere is there any suggestion that
Hardy has personally benefited from the situation; indeed, the singularly ascetic
personality who emerges from all accounts would probably not know what to do
with any additional wealth if it came his way.

Having made his revelations, Koch proceeds to pad out his book with criticisms
that are just plain silly. LO are mocked for their obsession with punctuality. But there
is not a lot of point doing a paper sale outside a factory when the workers are already
inside. Anyone who has done such a paper sale, and watched workers literally running
to get inside before the hooter sounds, knows that it is employers, not revolutionaries,
who have an unhealthy fixation with punctuality. LO members are mocked for being
‘allergic’ to nationalism and failing to join in the euphoria when France beat Croatia
in the World Cup – a peculiarly totalitarian version of the ‘Tebbit test’. The expulsion
of seventy members of LO in 1997 is described as ‘an insane parody of a Moscow
Trial’.19 To the best of my knowledge, none of the expelled were executed or sent to
labour camps in the Massif Central.

Philippe Campinchi’s Les Lambertistes falls into more or less the same pattern. (Added
spice comes from the fact that this is the organisation which Jospin belonged to – my
copy had a bright red band around the cover marked ‘The Former Party of Lionel
Jospin’.) Technically, Campinchi is not an ‘outsider’ – he was a member of the Lambertist
organisation for five years20 – but this is merely noted in passing; he does not use his
own experiences or recount his own attitudes. The book would have been a good
deal more interesting if he had, but, of course, that would mean facing up to his own
political evolution.

Instead, Campinchi, like Nick and Charpier, prefers to give us . . . rumours. He tells
us that ‘Lambertism attracts rumours like a magnet’ – a bit rich coming from someone
who is producing a book based precisely on such rumours. The text is strewn with
phrases like ‘no doubt [sans doute]’ or ‘it goes without saying [cela va de soi]’ to
accompany statements for which there is no evidence. The conditional is used so
frequently that the book could become a treasure-house for teachers of French grammar.
Campinchi himself notes the problematic nature of his sources:

Thus Christophe Bourseiller quotes Edgar Morin who quotes Gilles Martinet,
who is said to have confided in him that Patrick Kessel, former Grand Master
of the French Grand-Orient21 was an infiltrated Lambertist. (p. 322.)

Martinet himself claims not to recall the remark! Later, Benjamin Stora is cited (without
reference) as describing the Lambertist organisation as a ‘madhouse’ (p. 361).22 In his
autobiography (discussed below) Stora is considerably more nuanced in his appreciation.

20 Stora 2003, p. 197.
21 The oldest organisation of French freemasonry, describing itself as liberal and progressive.
22 I have not managed to locate the phrase in question in Stora 2003.
Campinchi seizes on any detail to discredit the Lambertists. Thus he makes great play of the security guard at the entrance to the organisation’s headquarters, as though it were somehow suspicious that those working there do not want hordes of journalists, police informers and simple citizens inflamed with curiosity by Campinchi’s books trampling through their offices (pp. 160–1). He even finds something symptomatic in the name of the CERMTRI, the research institute supported by the Lambertists. Its name, he points out, is ‘Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches sur les Mouvements Trotskyste et Révolutionnaires Internationaux’. While ‘revolutionary’ is in the plural, ‘Trotskyist’ is in the singular... because ‘there can only be one Trotskyism’ (p. 113). The thorny question of adjectival agreement can be safely left to the Académie française; if Campinchi were to visit the CERMTRI, as I did recently, he would discover that this excellent library stores literature from every conceivable Trotskyist tendency around the world.

Campinchi too is infatuated with entrism, by which he generally means the sending of members into another organisation; for example, he alleges that the 1979 split in the LCR, which led to some five hundred LCR members joining the Lambertists, was engineered by Lambertist moles within the LCR (pp. 345–6). Perhaps, though as ever the proof is thin. Campinchi seems more interested in anecdotes than serious political assessment.

Campinchi even invents a new concept – ‘external entrism’! ‘For Lambert, it is simply a question of defining his politics as if his organisation remained within such and such a tendency of the labour movement’ (p. 332). There is certainly scope for criticism of the Lambertist strategy towards the major left parties – for example, the call for a vote for Mitterrand in the first round of the 1981 presidential election when Arlette Laguiller was running a revolutionary campaign – but contorted reasoning of Campinchi’s sort merely leads to an evasion of real political issues.

Since not much is to be learnt from the outside critics, it may be more fruitful to turn to the insiders’ replies. The leaderships of both LO and the Lambertists have been stung to respond to their critics. Robert Barcia (alias the veteran LO leader Hardy) has published a series of interviews with Christophe Bourseiller under the title La véritable histoire de Lutte Ouvrière.

Barcia is relatively open about his commercial affairs (unlike Jospin, he realises that trying to cover up the facts only makes things worse in the long run). But, elsewhere, he is disingenuous or evasive about the organisation. He insists that he has never concealed himself, and that he can be seen every year at the LO fête strolling around and talking to members and non-members (p. 19). This is true – I have seen him myself. But I suspect that, if a passing journalist had demanded his real name and details of his financial affairs, the LO service d’ordre would have put in a rapid appearance. More seriously, when asked about the use of pseudonyms in the organisation, he responds by saying that they are common practice among actors, writers and journalists
Doubtless true; but the real question is whether the use of pseudonyms builds a barrier between those initiated into the organisation and those outside it. Obviously, revolutionaries have to take reasonable precautions against persecution by the state and employers, but their most important defence will always be the support of workmates. Of course, many LO members have won the well-deserved trust of their fellow-workers, but there remains a real question as to whether their indulgence in unnecessary forms of clandestinity aids or detracts from their relations with their periphery. Barcia’s debating-society answers do not begin to face the real problems.

Much of the book is devoted to Barcia recounting his own life story. The early parts, dealing with own first involvement in revolutionary politics, his imprisonment during the German Occupation, and then the Renault strike, are fascinating reading. If they do not constitute definitive truth, they are certainly an important contribution to our understanding of the early years of the LO tendency.

But, as the story continues, it gets less interesting, and there is a fundamental reason for this. Barcia describes his own initiation into Marxism, then Trotskyism, and the way he acquired a new way of looking at the world (including copying out the Communist Manifesto by hand while in jail). But, having acquired the knowledge, his curiosity seemed to dry up. The new phenomena of the postwar world – the long boom, the expansion of the so-called ‘socialist’ bloc, the wave of struggles for national liberation in the Third World – seem to have left Barcia untouched. The organisation had the analysis – there were no unanswered questions. All that was needed was to build an organisation which could communicate that analysis to the working class.

Thus, in describing the co-operation at Renault in the 1950s between militants from Socialisme ou Barbarie (SouB) and Pierre Bois of Voix Ouvrière (LO’s predecessor), Hardy dismisses the position of SouB, which is characterised as ‘state-capitalist’ and therefore not ‘Trotskyist’. State capitalists were alleged to believe that ‘the French Communist Party was the agent of a capitalist country and the unions were the organisations of the bourgeoisie’ (p. 171). Now, this is a caricature of the positions of SouB, one of the few groups actually making an attempt to rethink a changed world. It certainly does not describe the inevitable logical consequences of the theory of state capitalism. Between 1970 and 1975, Barcia attended a series of international conferences at which the British International Socialists (including myself) were also present. The most elementary honesty would require an admission that the IS did not hold the ultra-left positions attributed to ‘state capitalism’. But Barcia seems moved not so much by dogmatism as by boredom; understanding the epoch is just not of any interest to him. If François Koch is to be believed, LO still believed in 1996 that Yeltsin’s Russia was a ‘degenerated workers’ state’. But Koch is a hostile critic, and this may be just a malicious slander.

This lack of concern for analysis is reflected in one of the very few books published by the LO tendency, *Paroles de prolétaires*, edited by Arlette Laguiller.24 This is intended to address the debate about whether the working class, in the classic sense, is disappearing. It consists simply of a collection of accounts of working life, stressing harsh working conditions, poor hygiene and the speed of production lines. It establishes without doubt that there are a large number of workers who still have a very unpleasant time at work – an eminently valid point. But there is no analysis of class beyond a very elementary notion of exploitation, no attempt to discuss the changing patterns of manual and non-manual work, or of productive and unproductive labour. There is no real account of workers’ fightback, no proposals for future strategy.

The vacuum left by political analysis in Barcia, and hence in LO as a whole, is filled by moralism. Barcia stands clearly in a tradition which emanates from Robespierre, and was continued by the revolutionary syndicalists with their ‘refus de parvenir [refusal to make a career]’. Moral exhortation becomes a substitute for a political strategy based on scientific analysis of the objective conditions. This is not so much ‘Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’ as ‘Abnegation of the intellect, moralism of the will’.

This comes out clearly in a 1992 document quoted at length by Nick, in which Hardy asks whether it is time to throw in the towel (pp. 498–500). Hardy begins with a piece of pessimism worthy of a Samuel Beckett hero:

> Our achievement is nothing. . . . We’re a little group. . . . We’re nothing. . . . We aren’t rooted in any workplace. We never have been.

(It is worth juxtaposing this to the claim that, in the 1990s, LO distributed regular factory bulletins to 558,000 workers.25) He then goes on to compare the cadres of today with those of yesteryear:

> I don’t say that the people who come to our meetings are not as good as the old ones, but in any case, there’s a qualitative and political difference. For the young people we sent off hitch-hiking, in the conditions of the Algerian War and facing the Stalinists, with five to ten kilos of leaflets to be given out in the Saint-Nazaire shipyards, in Lyon, Marseille or Clermont-Ferrand, it was a much more rigorous selection than the one we exercise with our young people at the present time. . . . The comrades who were in the workplaces, who produced bulletins and distributed them inside, ran much greater risks.

It is almost a parody of a typical grumpy old man complaining that ‘things aren’t like what they were when I was a lad’. Except that Hardy has always been like this. Over
thirty years ago, I attended part of an LO editorial board meeting, and I still recall
Hardy haranguing members of his own leadership about how they did not appreciate
what a hard time the working class had of it.

Hence the description of LO members as ‘soldier-monks’ is not wholly unfair. For
LO, the revolutionary organisation is a necessarily small group of hyperactive militants.
Necessarily small, because only in a revolutionary situation will the vast majority of
workers abandon their everyday pursuits in favour of politics. The revolutionary
organisation is not part of the class – ‘the companion in struggle’ as Tony Cliff argued
that genuine Marxists should be – but is composed of outsiders, who support workers’
struggles, aim to educate the class, but remain separate from it. (A similar view
prevailed in the Lambertist organisation, summed up by Benjamin Stora as ‘the
mysterious world... of the party, separated from the rest of society, but able to
enlighten and organise it’ [p. 65]. If this view of the party can claim support from the
Lenin of 1902, it gets none at all from the Lenin of 1905 or 1917.)

This explains LO’s notorious position of discouraging its members from having
children. As Hardy puts it:

It is scarcely possible to rear children properly and give them the affection
and attention they require while at the same time leading the life of a militant
at a certain level of activity.

And he cites none other than Céline Dion as one who did not have children in order
to further her career (p. 225). Now, it is clearly the absolute right of any woman to
determine whether or not to bear children. But there are certain disadvantages facing
a childless party. Prolonged strike action hits workers with families hardest, especially
as most strikers are anxious that the children should not suffer. So, if outside
propagandists urging militant action are always themselves childless, they may carry
less conviction. Again, the revolutionary organisation presents itself as something
separate from the class, not as part of it.

The political implications of this became clear to me in 1981 when I attended Arlette
Laguiller’s final rally in the presidential election campaign. It was held in a huge
marquee in Northern Paris. There were perhaps three thousand people there. Arlette
gave a speech which was excellent, if a trifle long. We were then urged to vote for
her the following Sunday. The many non-members present were offered no other
means of maintaining contact with the organisation; there was not even any serious
attempt to sell us papers. Either we joined the fortress-monastery, or we remained as
mere voters. This concept of the party clearly reflects the division in bourgeois society
between professional politicians and mere passive voters.

\[^{26}\] It was apparently first used by Olivier Biffaud in Le Monde, 14 August 1987. Bourseiller
1989, p. 46.

\[^{27}\] Cliff 2001, p. 129.
The Lambertist response is even more disappointing. *Itinéraires* is presented in the form of a dialogue between Pierre Lambert, the veteran leader of the tendency, and Daniel Gluckstein, his dauphin. (The French word ‘dolphin’ refers not to an endangered species, which the Lambertists would take no interest in since it is not a class question, but to the named successor to the French monarch.) Since the time of Plato the dialogue, and later the interview, has been a valuable way of developing political argument. This, however, is not so much dialogue as antiphony. The two speakers alternate, constantly stressing their agreement, or setting up questions for the other to answer in predictable fashion.

On the Jospin affair, Lambert’s answers, like Barcia’s, are honest enough as far as they go – but they do not go very far. Lambert provides a good deal of biographical information on himself and adds as an appendix articles he wrote for a trade-union journal about industrial accidents among construction workers. Here, he reveals an everyday violence which does not seem to arouse the indignation of the media anything like as much as a few broken windows on a demonstration. And he exposes as utter nonsense the argument that he has in some way been guilty of infiltration (entrism!) in the trade-union movement. On the contrary, such writing was a real service to his fellow-workers. But though the book claims to present ‘itineraries’, we learn far less about Gluckstein. It would have been interesting to learn more about his period in the LCR; why he joined and why he decided to leave.

Most disappointing, however, is the exposition of the Lambert organisation’s current politics. A good part of the book is a denunciation of non-governmental organisations and of bodies like ATTAC and the campaign for the Tobin tax. It is not that the criticisms do not have a certain formal validity. But, if it was once true that radicalised workers and youth looked more or less automatically to the traditional socialist organisations, the bankruptcy of Stalinism and the repeated betrayals and ever deepening corruption of social democracy mean that many will look elsewhere for a radical alternative. For Marxists to refuse to enter into constructive and fraternal debate with such forces condemns them to remain as marginal propagandists.

Daniel Bensaïd and Jean-Jacques Marie are both highly regarded intellectuals (a philosopher and a historian, respectively); they are both also long-standing militants, of the LCR and the Lambertist organisation. Each has provided us with a brief overview of the history of Trotskyism. The two books are linked. In 1980, Marie published a volume in the well-known *Que sais-je?* series (No. 1830) on Trotsky, Trotskyism and the Fourth International.28 This has now been replaced by a new *Que sais-je?* (No. 3629) by Bensaïd with the mildly provocative title of ‘Trotskyisms’ (plural). Marie, meanwhile, has gone to a different publisher with a volume whose title is an ironic recall to orthodoxy, ‘Trotskyism [singular] and Trotskyists [plural]’.

28 Marie 1980.
Both authors are wiser, if not sadder, men than they used to be. After 1968, Bensaïd launched the phrase ‘Comrades, History is biting the nape of our necks’. Marie completed his 1980 volume by summing up the perspective of his own organisation, the OCI, which saw the fall of de Gaulle in 1969 and the defeat of the Gaullist candidate in 1974 as ‘the death agony of Gaullist Bonapartism’, while the Portuguese revolution of 1974 was the ‘prologue of the European revolution’. The period was thus characterised as that of the ‘imminence of revolution’ in both East and West. In addition, recent splits in the LCR and the United Secretariat of the Fourth International were seen as ‘profoundly modifying’ the facts of the crisis in the Fourth International in favour of the Lambertist current.

The 2002 volume reveals a distinct mellowing on Marie’s part. He deals with the emergence of ‘Pabloism’ (the turn to ‘entrism’ in the perspective of an imminent world war) at some length, and, while his criticisms are severe, he does allow his opponents to speak for themselves. He also recognises that his tendency was wrong to support the Algerian MNA, the main and increasingly fratricidal rival of the FLN, in the earlier part of the Algerian War (pp. 117–22, 125). However, he holds out few hopes for a united Left; the book concludes by stressing the differences between the Lambert tendency and both LO and the LCR, and, while he now foresees the recomposition of the labour movement in France and in the world as being a slow process, he expects that this will further sharpen the differences between the major French Trotskyist organisations (p. 188).

Moreover, his definition of Trotskyism remains strictly ‘orthodox’. Indeed, he claims that ‘the fall of the USSR has liquidated the so-called “Third Camp” currents which put “American imperialism” and “Soviet imperialism” on the same level’ (p. 185). A glance across the Channel might show him that the ‘state-capitalist’ Socialist Workers’ Party remains unliquidated and, in fact, is doing rather well.

Daniel Bensaïd’s book on the plurality of Trotskyisms takes a more inclusive view. Thus, he devotes some four pages to a generally fair summary of Tony Cliff’s theory of state capitalism, insisting – contrary to Barcia and Marie – that it remains within the parameters of Trotskyism (though he claims Cliff left the Fourth International in 1948, when, in fact, he was expelled in 1950) (pp. 69–73).

To remain a revolutionary through four decades one requires either unshakeable faith or a certain ironic distance. Bensaïd, who entitles one of his chapters ‘Waiting for Godot’, has opted for the latter. The danger of such non-sectarianism, of course, is a collapse into pure eclecticism, in which all the follies and monstrosities of self-styled Trotskyism are accepted as having some validity. Within the narrow compass of his little book, Bensaïd avoids the twin dangers of relativism and triumphalism.

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29 Bensaïd 2004, p. 126.
30 Marie 1980, pp. 123, 125.
He criticises the guerrillaist turn of his own organisation in the 1970s (pp. 100–3), and, while seeing much that is positive in the contribution of Pablo, he recognises quite clearly the dangers of long-term entrism:

But burying oneself in reformist and Stalinist parties also has a high price. On the one hand, militants end up by envisaging politics by proxy: instead of advocating what should be done in the actually existing balance of forces, they imagine what the leadership of their party ought to do . . . if it were revolutionary. They enter into a fictitious world where pedagogy takes the place of building real relations of forces. Living as parasites in an alien apparatus, they gradually lose their own organisational culture which is difficult to recover. (p. 92.)

The framework of Bensaïd’s book – little over a hundred pages – makes it too short to offer an adequate balance-sheet of the history of Trotskyism, and it is marred by too many inaccuracies (when one looks at how many books Bensaïd has published over the last fifteen years, one is powerfully reminded of Lenin’s injunction ‘Better Fewer but Better’). But the tone is one of dialogue, suggesting that the LCR is the most likely of the French Trotskyist organisations to allow serious debate on the problems of a new epoch.

The scope of Michel Lequenne’s Le Trotskyisme sans fard [Unvarnished Trotskyism] is, in fact, very much smaller than the title suggests. After an account of the earlier period which tells us little new, Lequenne’s main focus is on the period 1944 to about 1960; the period after 1960 is dealt with only very sketchily. Moreover, although there are some general considerations on the state of the world, there is no serious consideration of Trotskyism in any country other than France.

The story of French Trotskyism in this period is a sad one – a failure to adapt to the radically changed conditions of the postwar world, a substantial loss of membership, two disastrous splits, and, with the solitary exception of the 1947 Renault strike, no discernible impact on the course of class struggle. It is just as well that Lequenne has decided to tell the story ‘unvarnished’; it would need an awful lot of varnish to make that look good.

Lequenne has been active as a Trotskyist since 1943, and played a significant part in many of the events he describes. There is always a problem for a participant historian of integrating personal memories into an objective account. Lequenne adopts the device of appending to each chapter a short section in which he recounts his own role. Certainly, this enables readers to disentangle Lequenne’s own personal perspective; at the same time, he is very aware of what he calls the Fabrice del Dongo effect (p. 114). (Fabrice was the hero of Stendhal’s Charterhouse of Parma; he participated in the battle of Waterloo, but was so caught up in the chaos of his own bit of the battle that he was quite unable to grasp its overall historical significance.)
In this respect, Juan Posadas was simply following Pablo’s logic with his prophecy that ‘immediately after the atomic war... we shall be in power’ (cited Cliff 1999, p. 19).

The most important section of the book, which will make it indispensable reading for any serious historian of Trotskyism, is his account of the 1952 split following the new perspectives introduced by Michel Pablo (Raptis). Some elderly readers may recall the days when, in certain circles, the term ‘Pabloite revisionist’ functioned rather like the label of a medieval heresy.

LeQuenne shows that Pablo’s strategy was indeed open to criticism. Believing that a Third World War was imminent, Pablo believed that in this war the class struggle would acquire the new form of a conflict between blocs of states. He therefore argued that Trotskyists must enter the mass Communist Parties in order to intervene in the new situation.

The problem was not that, as some claim, world war was impossible. Accidental war was a real possibility in the 1950s, but would certainly have developed rapidly into a nuclear war in which the Trotskyists would have had little chance of intervening.

More seriously, the whole affair revealed the massive gap between grandiose perspectives and real capabilities. The part of the organisation that went with Pablo agreed to entry. But some members were publicly known as Trotskyists and the PCF would have refused to accept them. In the end, LeQuenne claims, on the basis of a recent academic thesis, just seven comrades actually entered the PCF (p. 284). A little modesty might have worked wonders. If the warring factions had both recognised that they were a tiny, marginal tendency with no roots in the working-class movement, and that they needed to aim for nothing more ostentatious than the slow recruitment of individuals, then a great many internal documents and self-justifications might have remained unwritten.

LeQuenne opposed Pablo’s perspective, but broke with the opposing faction when Pierre Lambert assumed the leadership. LeQuenne has a profound dislike of Lambert, though he never fully expounds the reasons. He is thus able to give a fairly ‘unvarnished’ account of the dispute. The only problem is that it is not a matter likely to arouse much interest today. Both sides were patently wrong, and they achieved little; it was only with the later years of the Algerian War that the fortunes of French Trotskyism began to revive. If entrism survives today, it is with an utterly different rationale. Perhaps the only lesson of the whole sorry affair is that we should not take ourselves so seriously.

LeQuenne himself was subsequently active with the Voie Communiste and the revolutionary tendency of the PSU. After 1968, he was active in the LCR, and despite Hubert Krivine’s rather arrogant insistence that the old timers had to ‘prove themselves’ (p. 336), he rapidly became part of the leadership. LeQuenne is a man who has defended the anti-Stalinist content of Trotskyism over several decades, and for that he is deserving of respect.

31 In this respect, Juan Posadas was simply following Pablo’s logic with his prophecy that ‘immediately after the atomic war... we shall be in power’ (cited Cliff 1999, p. 19).
Unfortunately, the virtues of defence have associated vices. Lequenne has little sympathy for those who attempted to move beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. Though he commends Daniel Bensaïd’s autobiography (see below) he clearly does not embrace Bensaïd’s notion of plural ‘Trotskyisms’. Tendencies other than that represented by the post-war PCI and the later LCR get short shrift; Lequenne is still in the world of apostolic succession.

Thus, Lutte Ouvrière is dismissed in a couple of sentences as ‘workerist’ and guilty of ‘archaic and closed dogmatism’ (pp. 317–18). True, but not the whole story. LO have developed a real presence in a number of workplaces, and have also, by their successful electoral campaigns, raised the public profile of Trotskyism. (If French voters today were asked to name one Trotskyist, I suspect Arlette Laguiller would be mentioned more than anyone else.)

Likewise, Lequenne remains doggedly attached to the definition of Stalin’s Russia as a ‘degenerated workers’ state’. The grouping around Castoriadis and Lefort which split to form Socialisme ou Barbarie are mentioned only for their departure. And his claim that the theory of state capitalism led to the defence of Western democracy can only be described as an ignorant slander (p. 153).

Bourseiller’s *History of the Ultra Left* is, in some ways, tangential to the concerns of the other books under review. It covers the mass of groups that have existed, often briefly, in the *terrain vague* between revolutionary Marxism and anarchism. Bourseiller clearly has some sympathy with the current he is discussing; unlike Nick and Charpier, he is not concerned to expose. (Not that there is much to expose; unlike Trotsky, who did not fear to assume power and all the grim decisions that came with it, the ultra Left have the clean hands that come with permanent impotence.) He pursues his topic with relentless detail. Names are named, often with whole paragraphs composed of lists of individuals. If everyone who gets a name-check in the book buys a copy, Bourseiller will be doing well. And where else would one find a record of such ephemeral groupings as Internationale Hallucinex, Vivilib, Plasma, Ludd and King Kong International?

The book begins with the period after the Russian Revolution, and contains much useful information, though more could have been said of the efforts made by Lenin and Trotsky to win various ultra-left currents to the Comintern. But the centrepiece of the work is a consideration of the Socialisme ou Barbarie grouping, and its influence on the subsequent Situationist current. SouB is given short shrift by most historians of Trotskyism, who consider it to have moved outside the framework of Trotskyism. Yet, in the difficult period after 1945, when most Trotskyists clung to orthodoxy like a frightened child to a teddy-bear, SouB set out to explore what had changed in the new and unexpected world. While the likes of Pablo argued that the class struggle

\[32\] [Editorial note: a separate review essay on Bourseiller’s book by Loren Goldner will appear shortly in *HM*.]
now took the form of a conflict between blocs of states, SouB focused its attention on the day-to-day realities of class conflict in its primary location – the workplace.

SouB played a creditable rôle in the Algerian War. Daniel Mothé, a Renault worker, attempted to organise against the War, meeting opposition from both employers and the Communist-dominated trade union. Meanwhile Jean-François Lyotard was developing the most thorough analysis of the FLN and its potential to become a new ruling bureaucracy.

SouB had its faults, but they were the faults of a brave grouping prepared to take risks. In particular, though increasingly critical of Leninism in theory, it inherited some of the worst elements of vanguardism from mainstream Trotskyism. A very high level of activity was demanded of members – an early statement said every member should devote four evenings a week to the group, and, at one point, it was proposed to expel anyone who missed two consecutive meetings. The mismatch between politics and organisation undoubtedly led to the collapse of the grouping just one year before 1968.

But Bourseiller also shows the profound weaknesses of ultra-leftism. By focusing on the weaknesses of those closest to it, the ultra Left sometimes lapsed into overtly reactionary positions. Munis and Benjamin Péret, with whom Trotsky’s widow Natalia Sedova was for a time associated, were undoubtedly courageous revolutionaries, but their final position, that the first task of revolutionaries is to destroy the trade unions, was a disastrous lunacy which cut them off from the majority of workers who recognise that a union, however corrupt and bureaucratic, is better than no union at all.

Worst of all is what might be called ‘anti-anti-fascism’. Most sections of the bourgeoisie oppose fascism most of the time, preferring bourgeois democracy except in situations of grave crisis. Thus cross-class alliances against fascism are often formed, notably the Popular Fronts of the thirties and after. But to see such alliances (except in very special historical conjunctures) as the main enemy can lead to a dangerous underestimation of fascism. Hence the sad story of La Vieille Taupe, in the late 1960s a delightful Left Bank bookshop where many of us discovered socialist books that were virtually unobtainable elsewhere. By the evolution of ‘anti-anti-fascism’, it became a centre of Holocaust denial. This does not prove – as some would like it to – that the extremes of Right and Left converge, but it does serve as a reminder of the monumental stupidity of which apparently intelligent people are capable.

Bourseiller concludes by pronouncing the ultra Left dead (pp. 520–3). He is undoubtedly wrong. Ultra-leftism is the product of a rising movement, when a new wave of militants think they can by-pass such means of reaching the mass of workers as elections and trade-union activity. Such tendencies are already visible in the

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33 Gottraux 1997, p. 33. Gottraux’s book is the definitive study of SouB. This sort of pseudo-Bolshevism was often a feature of organisations that professed a vigorous anti-Leninist rhetoric.

34 Péret and Munis 1968, pp. 51–2, 82.
anticapitalist movement. And their advocates will undoubtedly look back to their predecessors; we have not heard the last of Kronstadt. The problem for Marxists will be to reject the easy road of denunciation and engage a constructive dialogue.

But, for anyone who really wants to understand French Trotskyism over the last seventy-five years, the best source is the autobiography of individual militants. In his 1850 novel of working-class life *Alton Locke*, Charles Kingsley has a chapter entitled ‘How Folks Turn Chartists’.35 A comprehension of ‘how folks turn Trotskyists’ is far more likely to come from the study of militant lives than from the perusal of congress documents, let alone the accumulation of Parisian political gossip. The autobiographies of such veterans as Pierre Naville, Maurice Nadeau and David Rousset are a valuable source of information.36 Others, like the memoirs of Pierre Bois (leader of the 1947 Renault strike and veteran of LO), remain unpublished.37

One of the most delightful autobiographies is Craipeau’s *Memoirs of a Trotskyist Dinosaur*,38 written just before his ninetieth birthday. Despite repeated batterings on the head in anti-fascist street-fighting, Craipeau remembers not only political events but his childhood in rural France, his marriages and children, his experiences teaching in Guadeloupe, giving us an authentic presentation of the interaction of the personal and the political. In particular, he gives a critical account of the postwar crisis of French Trotskyism, arguing that had the Parti Communiste Internationaliste had pursued a less sectarian line and fused with two left splits from the SFIO, it could have achieved a membership of ten thousand and become a significant influence during the following decade.

Arlette Laguiller’s autobiographical volume is more disappointing.39 There is certainly some interesting material on trade-union activity; she describes her involvement in the establishment of an independent strike committee, and gives an account of her daily activity as a full-time official for the Force Ouvrière trade union, still immersed in the affairs of her workplace. But the whole thing has a certain sanitised air, as though it were part of the public-relations effort for Arlette the candidate, rather than the story of Arlette the woman who, presumably, over the last forty years has had, like the rest of us, occasional moments of doubt and friction.

A better perspective on LO may be gained from the posthumous articles and correspondence of Jean-Pierre Hirou.40 Hirou joined Voix Ouvrière, the predecessor of LO, in 1963 at the age of fifteen, and left in 1979. He believed that LO had, in general, made smaller concessions to social democracy than either the LCR or the

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37 There is a very short extract in Laguiller 1999, p. 211.
38 Craipeau 1999.
39 Laguiller 1996.
40 Hirou 2003.
Lambertists. Yet he was strongly critical of Hardy’s authoritarian style of leadership, and he had some acute observations to make on the evolution of the tendency.

Three recent contributions to autobiographical literature are those of Benjamin Stora, Daniel Bensaïd and André Fichaut. Stora is well-known as a historian of Algeria, but, throughout the 1970s, he was a full-time organiser for the Lambertist grouping. He gives a lengthy account of the factional struggles within the student movement and the frequent futile and counterproductive violence that characterised the milieu. In particular, he provides an honest account of the violence used by his own organisation in the absurd affair of Balasz Nagy, accused of being simultaneously a GPU and CIA agent! Politically, most of this was froth; the repeated demonstrations, campaigns and take-overs of organisations had little impact on anyone outside the declining ranks of the revolutionary Left.

Eventually, Stora succumbed to sheer weariness, combined with the efforts he was making to pursue his academic studies at the same time as his political duties. He also notes the anti-intellectualism which pervaded the organisation: ‘The leaders continually mocked the “dear professors” who understood nothing about the “class struggle”’ (p. 199). Yet there is a curious paradox here. For whatever criticisms can be made of the Lambertist tendency, it is indisputable that from its ranks have emerged some of the finest historians of the French Left. An organisation that has produced the likes of Pierre Broué, Jean-Jacques Marie, Benjamin Stora and Jean-Marc Schiappa has made an unquestionable contribution to the patrimony of the Left. Stora himself notes that Lambert’s constant recourse to historical arguments influenced his own choice to become a professional historian (p. 192). The power of Trotsky’s personal example has overflowed the narrowness of many of his disciples.

Stora does not repudiate his past and shows no desire to excoriate the Lambertists. He devotes only one paragraph to the tedious Jospin affair (pp. 170–1). His conclusion shows an admirable sense of balance:

Militancy remains a period of my life which I do not repudiate. I retain a nostalgia for these youthful commitments, as though they were a ‘paradise lost’. . . . Today I see my commitment as a mixture of idealism and blindness, of romanticism and a disturbing desire for purity, intelligence and dogmatism.

(pp. 261, 270.)

Daniel Bensaïd’s memoirs, Une lente impatience, adopt a very different tone from the apologias of Barcia and Lambert discussed above. For over thirty years, Bensaïd was a leading figure in the LCR and the Fourth International, but, while he has no regrets, he is capable of self-criticism, and above all does not see his own tendency as the sole repository of truth. The account combines a personal autobiography, an account of his political activities, and a number of rather rambling disquisitions on various
political and historical themes. His style is far removed from the brusque propagandism of his contemporaries; his writing drips with literary allusions.

His childhood was lived under the shadow of the Holocaust. His Jewish father’s two brothers were killed during the German Occupation. Chillingly, Bensaïd reproduces the official document certifying his mother’s ‘non-membership of the Jewish race’. Without it, he notes, he would never have been born (pp. 38, 244ff). Such barbarity had taken place on French soil little more than twenty years before 1968; the awareness of the depths to which their bourgeoisie could sink was undoubtedly a factor in the radicalising of the 1968 generation. It is no surprise that so many of the LCR’s 1968 influx were of Jewish origin. Even more striking is the fact that so many of them resisted the lures of Zionism and stood by a firmly anti-imperialist position. Bensaïd’s thoughts on his own Jewishness are one of the most memorable sections of the book. His reflections on ill-health and impending death will arouse empathy from many of his older readers.

Bensaïd is a genuine intellectual; he loves books and has read a prodigious number of them. Indeed, every few pages, he includes a footnote containing a hefty reading list, just to help his readers keep up with his intellectual development. He contextualises his own development by relating it not only to changing Parisian fashions in Marxism, but also to the international political context, and especially the rise and fall of Latin-American guerrilla movements, in which he took a special interest. The one gap, like a gaping hole in the middle of the doughnut, is the French working class. Apart from a few cursory references to the strike wave of 1995, Bensaïd has virtually nothing to say of the ups and downs of the French working class after 1968.

Nonetheless, there is plenty of interest in Bensaïd’s account of the history of the LCR. He describes the hectic events of 1968, some of the LCR’s more spectacular stunts, such as the occupation of Notre-Dame cathedral, the Krivine election campaigns of 1969 and 1974, and the launch and collapse of Rouge as a daily paper. He also makes it quite clear that, after 1968, the LCR was working with a mistaken perspective. Ernest Mandel (towards whom Bensaïd shows a peculiar ambivalence) had promised revolution within five years (p. 140).

But Bensaïd is less helpful in disentangling the main lines of revolutionary strategy in the thirty-six years since 1968. Without raking over the debate about the class nature of Russia, he nonetheless believes that the events of 1989 were a ‘historic defeat for the working-class movement’ (pp. 370–1). And, despite a reference to Castro’s ‘outbursts of senile megalomania’, he still finds something progressive in Cuban society (pp. 368–9).

He concludes by rejecting ‘cold’ (mechanical) Marxism in favour of the ‘hot’ variety (methodologically open, recognising the vicissitudes of history). In this, as in his desire to see a new ‘fighting Left’ (pp. 419–20, 467–8), it is difficult to disagree with him –
difficult, because the formulations are so abstract that they point to no concrete analysis or strategy.

In this retreat into abstraction, Bensaïd stands in stark contrast to a rank-and-file member of his own organisation. André Fichaut has been an active Trotskyist since the 1940s, and, for most of that time, an active trade unionist and an industrial worker. His memoirs tell the story of a rank-and-file revolutionary, whose simple commitment to human justice and social transformation stands in stark contrast to the world of rumour and conspiracy in which the likes of Nick and Charpier delight to wallow.

Fichaut describes his first encounters with the Trotskyist movement, in the immediate postwar period. He notes that, though he attended several meetings and even an education course, nobody asked him to join (p. 30). Clearly, the organisational habits of the war-time period had not been abandoned.

Fichaut worked, first in the shipyards, then for many years in a power station. Much of the book is devoted to details of his trade-union activity, including such small-scale activity as a strike for better toilet paper: ‘our fundaments were just as delicate as the employers’ (p. 105). There is an account of the creation of an independent strike committee, and the successful involvement of non-unionised workers, an essential in a country like France, where only a small proportion of workers are unionised. He also tells us of activity in the union machine, including attendance at congresses where bureaucrats gave seven-hour speeches and delegates fought like animals to get their snouts in the trough of free food (pp. 60, 212).

Fichaut was also an ‘entrist’, and his inside account tells us far more than innumerable ignorant expatiations on the subject. He joined the French Communist Party in 1953, and one of his first duties as a trade-union official was to send a message of condolences on the death of Stalin (pp. 64–6). Since he was there for the long haul, he gritted his teeth and consented. Entrism lasted until after 1968, when the organisation was initially sluggish in pulling out its cadres. And there were problems with exit. One of his fellow-entrists resigned from the LCR because, after fifteen years of entry, he had developed habits of activity and established personal friendships which made it difficult for him to resume his previous forms of activity (pp. 159, 163–4). Obviously, entrism was an experience which only the toughest and most principled could survive.

During this period, Fichaut also managed to be a member of the central committee of the Parti Communiste Internationaliste. Though his main activity was always centred on the workplace (he worked 52 hours a week), he made his contribution to the struggle for Algerian independence and smuggled reprographic equipment into Czechoslovakia. He also found time to raise two children, both of whom were later politically active – an effective response to Hardy’s claim that children are incompatible with the militant life. His wife, of whom we learn disappointingly little, was also an activist, much less sympathetic to the entry strategy than he was.
Anyone who wants to understand what motivates Trotskyists, what they have been able to achieve and what real problems remain unresolved, will learn more from Fichaut’s little book than from a dozen exposés by self-satisfied outsiders.

The reader who has waded through all the volumes mentioned above will have acquired a wealth of detailed knowledge, yet the most important questions remain unanswered. Capitalism, which Trotsky before his death believed to be in terminal crisis, has survived, though it has killed many millions, and blighted the lives of millions more. The competing Trotskyist organisations (of which there are said to be thirty-eight in Argentina alone41) have been excellent at analysing the weaknesses of their rivals’ positions, but rather weaker at producing positive solutions.

What none of the works under review seriously considers is the crisis of Trotskyism in the postwar period. By 1945, it was already clear that Trotsky’s prewar prediction of the collapse of reformism was grievously mistaken.42 Reformism, as Trotsky knew, could thrive only if the system had some capacity for reforms. Over the next thirty years, capitalism once again proved itself to be rather more resilient than most Marxists had been prepared to admit. Reconstruction after the Occupation meant bitter poverty for French workers, but it was soon clear that the post-1918 scenario would not repeat itself. Added to this was the appearance of alleged ‘workers’ states’ which the working class had played no rôle in establishing, followed by a series of a national-liberation struggles in which the rhetoric of socialism was rather more present than any trace of socialist reality.43

Yet, for the most part, the Trotskyist movement did not recognise any necessity to revise its analysis. Individuals like Craipeau had argued, even in the 1930s, that Russia was not a workers’ state, but they did not attempt to foreground the issue after 1945. Only small groupings around such people as James, Dunayevskaya, Cliff or Castoriadis made valiant efforts to develop a new analysis of a new situation.

The fragility of French Trotskyism was made clear in the crisis of 1948. This was provoked by the establishment of the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (RDR) by Jean-Paul Sartre and David Rousset, which aimed to draw together all who opposed both Stalinism and Western imperialism.44 Neither Bensaïd nor Marie show much interest in the RDR episode. Bensaïd dates it wrongly in 1947–8 (p. 66) and Marie claims that Marceau Pivert was one of its leaders (p. 110) when, in fact, Pivert

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41 Marie 2002, p. 156.
42 ‘Attlee and Pollitt, Blum and Thorez work in the same harness. In case of war the last remaining distinctions between them will vanish. All of them together with bourgeois society as a whole will be crushed under the wheel of history’ (Trotsky 1973, p. 43).
43 The best account of these issues is to be found in Callinicos 1990. However, Callinicos blurs the issues by his nugatory deployment of the Popperian Lakatos’s concept of a ‘research programme’. Marxism is not a research programme; it is a strategy to change the world.
44 For a full history of the RDR, see Birchall 1999.
was instrumental in getting the SFIO to ban its members from joining the RDR.\textsuperscript{45} Lequenne gives the fullest account of the debate and split within the PCI, but even he evades the real issue. The RDR was open to members of all left-wing parties and did not require them to renounce their membership. There was no need here for entrism (which as Lequenne notes was discussed in the PCI [pp. 156–61]). The PCI did not need to abandon its programme or to dissolve its press; it could simply have urged all its members to participate actively in the RDR. Whether such Trotskyist participation could have saved the RDR from its disintegration is debateable; but the PCI could certainly have avoided a disastrous split in which it lost half its membership.

This was a crucial test for postwar Trotskyism. How could it relate to a novel movement that was broad – indeed excessively vague – in its politics, but which did have some real evidence of popular support? Even if the RDR had proved short-lived it would have provided a sphere of activity and a possible source of recruits. Instead Pierre Frank and Pierre Lambert – soon to be deadly rivals – united to oppose the RDR, with the result that their organisation was reduced to a rump by the early fifties. There are lessons for today to be learnt from this experience, and no service is done by writing it out of history.

Next came the period of entrism. Several of the books reviewed above give learned expositions of the two classic forms of entry. The ‘French turn’ of 1934, masterminded by Trotsky, meant that the Trotskyist organisation, in the crisis period between the Hitler’s coming to power and the Popular-Front government, openly joined the Socialist Party. It stayed there around a year and grew from just over one hundred to 300 members.\textsuperscript{46} Michael Pablo’s theory of ‘entrism \textit{sui generis }’ (his bizarre use of a Latin term suggests he knew his case was being argued to a small group of intellectuals) was predicated on the imminence of a Third World War.

In fact, what came to dominate in most parts of the world was a third type of entrism – untheorised but which can best be called ‘entrism \textit{faute de mieux },’ entry because the Trotskyist organisation is too small to agitate openly, and needs a milieu to relate to. This is well described by Rob Sewell, formerly of the Militant Tendency, writing of British Trotskyism in the 1950s: ‘Work inside the Labour Party was not based on a previously worked out strategy or tactic, but simply a matter of necessity’.\textsuperscript{47}

Yet it is undeniable that the section of the French Trotskyists who entered the Communist Party (PCF) did make some real gains; their whole organisation was renewed and rebuilt through entrism in the period from the latter part of the Algerian War to 1968. But it is also true that the gains were made almost exclusively among

\textsuperscript{45} It is perhaps a refusal to study this episode that accounts for Bensaïd’s vitriolic and unfair attack on Sartre as one who always confused the revolutionary project with Stalinism. Bensaïd 2004, p. 26.

\textsuperscript{46} Dannat 1997. Dannat’s study of French Trotskyism in the 1930s is the most full and objective available. Unfortunately it is in German, and has had little impact in France.

\textsuperscript{47} In Grant 2002, p. 195.
the PCF students and youth. The experience of Britain and other countries suggests that this is a generalised phenomenon; if entrism succeeds at all it is among youth.

In any case, the nature of entrism has radically changed since the 1950s. At that time, the PCF was still nominally a revolutionary organisation. Its overt doctrine was revolutionary socialism and it recruited on that basis. Hence it was possible for entrists to play on the discrepancy between declared aims and bureaucratic practice. To a lesser extent, this was also true of the British Labour Party, where at least the Left retained a commitment to something recognisable as socialism. Fifty years later, neither ex-Stalinist nor social-democratic parties offer any such scope.

The present-day French Trotskyist Left derives its shape and most of its members from 1968. This provided a major challenge for the Left. The results were uneven. All the main groups played their part – as did Socialisme ou Barbarie, which, though defunct, had helped to educate Cohn-Bendit and other student leaders. The Lambertists were widely said to have discredited themselves when they walked away from the barricades on 10 May with the declaration ‘Until half a million workers join us in the Latin Quarter, go home’ – a classic example of the juxtaposition of abstract correctness to messy reality. But it was a Lambertist militant and central committee member, Yvon Rocton, who played a key rôle in launching the Sud-Aviation occupation in Nantes on 14 May which transformed a student insurgency into a general strike.48

For LO, the danger was underestimation. Its correct insistence on the centrality of the working class led it to underestimate the importance that struggles of other groups can play in particular conjunctures. Hardy’s later estimate – that May 1968 ‘was not a very deep social crisis, even if there was a general strike’49 – reveals a pessimism verging on complacency; for him, nothing short of the Winter Palace, snow and all, would suffice.

The LCR was probably best placed to react to the immediate needs of 1968, and it responded well. It was far weaker in adapting to the subsequent downturn in struggle, when the workers returned to the factories and the student movement carried on erupting. It nourished dangerous illusions in sub-military confrontations on the streets and in guerrilla warfare abroad. Yet it has stayed on the road, and is probably now the milieu most receptive to new ideas and new analyses.

The current interest in Trotskyism, of which these books are just a symptom, is not merely a matter of rumours and trivia. Capitalism’s drive to war, and its aggravation of the divisions between rich and poor, are increasingly apparent, and the mainstream Left does not even pretend to be looking for the answers. In this situation the ideas of revolutionary Marxism can exercise a real attraction.

Leon Trotsky was one of the great original Marxist thinkers. In the theory of permanent revolution, in his analysis of the rise of Stalinism and in his writings on

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fascism, he applied Marxist categories to new problems, regardless of whether he
distressed the ‘orthodox’ Marxists of his own day. That his thought should subsequently
have been transformed into something called ‘orthodox Trotskyism’ is no less than
an obscenity. There was not an ‘orthodox’ fibre in Trotsky’s body.
The label ‘Trotskyist’ was first adopted in defiance of Stalinism, which in its day
was happy to murder Trotskyists. Generations of militants have been proud to bear
the label. Militants like André Fichaut, Jean-René Chauvin and many, many others
have not lived in vain. Whether the term ‘Trotskyism’ has any precise meaning now
that Stalinism has disappeared is another question. But, in building the future, it will
be more valuable to look to the constantly enquiring mind of Trotsky than to most
of the formulae of his successors. New alliances will have to be built, and it is highly
unlikely that they will fit neatly into drawers labelled ‘United Front’ and ‘Popular
Front’. If Trotskyism is to survive, its first enemy is its own conservatism.

References

Barcia, Robert alias Hardy 2003, _La véritable histoire de Lutte Ouvrière_, Paris: Denoël.
Birchall, Ian 1999, ‘Neither Washington nor Moscow? The Rise and Fall of the

50 For the murder of French Trotskyists during World War II see Broué and Vacheron 1997.
Arlette Laguiller recounts that when she was expelled from the CGT (Communist-dominated
union federation) in the 1960s she overheard a PCF member saying: ‘At one time we would
have shot her’ (Laguiller 1996, p. 89).
Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence, Revised Edition  
G. A. COHEN  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000  
Reviewed by Simon Kennedy

G. A. Cohen and the End of Traditional Historical Materialism

Gerry Cohen does not pull his punches. Once ‘pre-analytical Marxism encounters analytical Marxism’, he writes in the new edition of Karl Marx’s Theory of History, then it must either ‘become analytical or become bullshit’ (p. xxvi). The declaration is typically direct, but difficult to sustain given his retreat from nearly all of the book’s arguments. Few of its claims withstood the first wave of criticism following publication in 1978. This is not to understate the work’s brilliance, or its impact. Karl Marx’s Theory of History is a landmark in the history of Anglophone Marxist philosophy. Its fastidious attention to detail, intellectual fidelity and logical coherence made the theory a respected adversary in the Anglo-Saxon academic establishment. Nevertheless, as a reconstruction of Marxism, the book fails. The research project in historical materialism it initiated lasted less than a decade.1 It is a hugely rigorous and thoughtful work, but it does not provide an intellectually substantial Marxist theory of history. This review looks at some of the underlying problems of the project and, with reference to the post-publication debate, argues that they arise directly from the inadequacies of the analytical methods Cohen imports into Marxism. Furthermore, it suggests that Cohen’s reconstruction marked the effective end of attempts to formulate a defensible version of traditional historical materialism.

As well as the unchanged original, the expanded 2000 edition contains three articles taken unamended from Cohen’s 1988 follow-up, Labour, History, Freedom; a short piece written for the Journal of Ethics, ‘Marxism After the Collapse of the Soviet Union’; and a new introduction which discusses analytical Marxism and expands on the bibliographical impulse behind the book. This adds very little new material. Most academic libraries will already carry the contents elsewhere on their shelves.

The work contains more chapters than necessary for its central argument. Fetishism is introduced in Chapter 5 without any reference to the rest of the book. Chapter

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1 I follow Cohen, and the editors of this journal, in using historical materialism as a synonym for Marx’s theory of history. Although convenient, it is not quite accurate, as it can also refer to non-Marxist theories of history.
Analytical Marxism

In 1979, largely under the impulse of Cohen’s work, a circle of economists, philosophers, and social scientists convened the first of what became annual meetings. The two key documents to emerge after Karl Marx’s Theory of History were Elster’s Making Sense of Marx and Roemer’s Analytical Foundations of Marxist Economic Theory. Understandably, this analytical-Marxist school gained most support in the areas of the world influenced by analytical philosophy; precisely the places where Western Marxism was poorly implanted, the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon countries. Cohen lists three ‘sets of techniques’ that distinguish his method from other Marxisms: positivist philosophy, neoclassical economic analysis and game theory. These share an emphasis upon the atomic level of the object of study as the means to explain molar phenomena. So, for example, analytical Marxists seek to explain social formations by reference to the traits of the individuals of which they are comprised. Cohen’s new introduction argues that only analytical techniques can establish the good sense of Marxism, indeed, their use represents ‘a commitment to reason itself’ – a bombastic claim indeed (p. xxiv).

In its two decades of development, analytical Marxism has come to reject most of the substantive propositions generally understood as Marxist. There is, writes Elster, an unstated consensus among its followers that leaves ‘probably not a single tenet of classical Marxism’ intact (p. xiv); this is an interesting outcome, given that Karl Marx’s Theory of History is a defence of a very old-fashioned interpretation of Marxism with roots in the Soviet Union’s official dogma. Cohen explains this strange combination of Oxford philosophy and Russian Marxism in an account of his Jewish Communist upbringing and positive early contact with analytical techniques at university.
Traditional historical materialism

Cohen’s ‘orthodox’ Marx is the author of the 1859 Preface to Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy. Occasional mention is made of Marx’s early works, but (thanks to Althusser) he is convinced that ‘the abidingly important Marx is to be found in Capital and the writings preparatory to it’ (p. x). Nowhere does he defend this choice, nor the division of the oeuvre into early and late.

The Preface describes the gradual growth of productive forces as the fundamental determinant of historical change. When the relations of production fall behind this development, an ‘epoch of social revolution’ must begin in order to bring the relations of production and the political and economic superstructures back into correspondence. Cohen’s reconstruction rests on two pillars: the explanatory priority of forces of production over relations of production (the primacy thesis) and the growth of forces of production throughout history (the development thesis). They necessitate a new functionalist theory of economic determination, he argues, where economic forms prosper according to their ability to augment the forces of production. This same relationship exists between the relations of production and the superstructure, so that ‘economic structures are as they are because, being so, they enable human productive power to expand’. So too ‘superstructures are as they are because, being so, they consolidate economic structures’ (p. xi). The forces of production here constitute an external basis to relations of production, which nevertheless determines the character of the economic structure. History remains ‘fundamentally, the growth of human productive power’ (p. x).

It is striking how few mentions of twentieth-century Marxism there are in Karl Marx’s Theory of History. Most of the references are to non-Marxists. Against the current of Western Marxism, Cohen presents his arguments in a non-contemporary setting, unconnected to modern developments and innovations since Marx. The ‘old-fashioned’ orientation gives the work a very nineteenth-century flavour. It sits easily in the theoretical company of Labriola, Plekhanov and Kautsky, among ideas that were formed when notions of organic economic progress were foremost among the scientific intelligentsia. All these authors make the productive forces into the driving force of historical change, where the technological aspects of production determine the pattern of economic relations, which in turn form the basis of the superstructure. Such a position invites the construction of a causal hierarchy:

Forces of production → relations of production → legal/political superstructure → social consciousness

The forces predominate, and their development undoes the correspondence that they hold with the relations. The dynamic of history arises from the forces’ development. In Cohen, this is given a special twist by the assertion of rationality as the basic motivation for improvement, and by his new theory of functional determination.
Strictly speaking, then, the movement is caused by an exogenous cause, lying outside the mode of production. *Karl Marx’s Theory of History* stands for a technological historical materialism based on the tendency of human productive power to grow, and forms of society to adapt and transform according to how much they enable this growth. This linear process of increasingly higher stages of development obviously owes a great deal to nineteenth-century principles of innovation and improvement outside of, and independent from, any particular social form. In its dogmatic version, it dictates a productivist politics of necessary progress and provides a sort of communist comfort blanket assuring the inevitability of the socialist endpoint of history.

In the first chapter, Cohen argues that Marx replaced Hegel’s ‘world spirit’ with the materialist ‘human industry’. Instead of a cosmic journey of self-recognition, the historical dynamic is driven by an ascribed human rationality and the predictable range of behaviour that results in the context of material scarcity. Societies are described as embodiments of stages of productive development (p. 198). The procession of epochs, differentiated by the level of surplus, follows the path of a single essence and societies are fitted into the route. Hegel’s teleology has been subtly reorganised but retains its metaphysic, albeit without an obvious creator. The depiction of social forms by their level of productive development records this realisation of human destiny, where some social formations are posed as better representatives of progress than others. Capitalism, here, seems possessed of a mission to deliver economic growth. History is seen as an expression of a single principle where the same mechanisms repeat in various combinations in a dialectic of needs and their fulfilment. Like all technological accounts of historical materialism, Cohen’s theory becomes a description of a transhistorical pattern and purpose of a sort Marx explicitly repudiated.

### The social and relational nature of human activity

According to *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, historical materialism describes how certain forces of production have appropriate relations; they make up society’s material basis, have an explanatory priority over relations of production and are defined as what is ‘used by producing agents to make products’ (p. 32). The conceptual separation of productive forces from the social is a necessary precursor to the assertion of their primacy. They are ‘things’ that can be identified outside of the relations in which they exist. They have an essential nature unaffected by this relational context, which defines them without extrinsic reference. He explains that all sorts of procedures, entities, and

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4 Recently, Diakonoff 1999 has offered three more stages to the traditional rendering of Marx. He suggests primitive, primitive-communal, early or communal antiquity, late or imperial antiquity, middle ages, absolutist middle ages, capitalist, and postcapitalist. There is no reference to Cohen in his book.

beliefs may facilitate the process of production, but these cannot be admitted to the concept of productive forces unless they are themselves used. The sense of this use is pivotal. A guard standing over a plot of land being worked is, in a social sense, ‘useful’ in the farming process if his presence ensures its continuance, but he is not himself part of the ‘material’ procedure. He is not ‘materially’ necessary, only socially: he is not, then, used.

The breakdown of this definition typifies the weakness of Cohen’s approach. How can means of production be defined outside social and historical form? Is it not this social form that makes them into means of production, rather than inanimate material? To understand why means of production are worthy of the name is to make a statement about the nature of the society in which they are located. The context of labour-power’s use gives it the quality of being labour-power. Whatever Cohen’s rigour, the breakdown of statements to their composites falls short of adequacy because the relational aspect of what he calls ‘things’ is beyond its concern. Significantly, in a later fuller definition of productive forces, Cohen has to incorporate just this understanding: ‘To qualify as a productive force, a facility must be capable of use by a producing agent in such a way that production occurs (partly) as a result of its use, and it is someone’s purpose that the facility so contribute to production’ (p. 32). This more elaborate specification perhaps helps to distinguish productive forces from other objects, but, by making an intention an essential causal factor, Cohen undermines his previous definition of forces as material things. Adding science as a vital and predominant part of the forces multiplies the difficulties. The intentional ‘subjective side’ of productive forces cannot be called a natural material. At best it may be described as a natural capacity residing in human beings, but, without its social determination, it should not be attributed any explanatory power. Social science can only be productively useful in a social setting.6 Limiting Marxist method to the ahistorical abstraction of categories means ignoring the social context and construction of the processes in question.

Is it feasible to envisage Cohen’s human being outside social location? To begin the theory of history from differently endowed individuals, who strive to fulfil their needs through exchange and/or production, misses one of Marx’s fundamental points:

Private interest is itself already a socially determined interest, which can be achieved only within the conditions laid down by society and with the means provided by society . . . its content, as well as the form and means of its realisation, is given by social conditions independent of all.7

We are not reducible to a combination of liquids and solids. It is necessary to move beyond biological constitution and capability in order to understand people’s activities.

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6 As Bates 2003 concludes, p. 10.
7 Marx 1973, p. 156. It is therefore not so much that Cohen ignores the problem of subjectivity (Callinicos 2003, p. 4), but that he has the wrong ideas about it.
This requires reference to social attributes and beliefs. Humans are to be found always engaged in social relations given meaning by intention and shared definitions. People are more than the freely-choosing, instrumentally motivated monads of classical political economy. This is why Marx explains that he ‘does not proceed from man, but from a given economic period of society’. As Wood points out, the dynamics of capitalist accumulation cannot be derived from the optimising strategies of rational individuals endowed with capital assets. How did they get these assets in the first place? Indeed, this is one of Marx’s first questions to classical political economy. Cohen’s backwards move through analytical philosophy dehistoricises human activity and therefore restricts his understanding of the material world.

Behind Chapter One’s outline of an individual’s steady growth in awareness through interaction with nature lies a Feuerbachian notion of production as a humanly imposed geography, a rearrangement of natural things by the social, where the objective is that which is available to perception and manipulation by the human subject. Although some of Marx’s early work does tend to replicate Hegel’s conception of nature as an external datum, a passive object of work, he grew towards a more historical conception. This emphasis on the process of transformation, rather than on posited material objects, better addresses the ability of people to produce their own means of livelihood outside of animalistic instinct.

The architectural metaphor of Cohen’s Preface is particularly poorly suited to grasping relations that are in continuous motion, especially where the social and material combine. The labour process, so basic to Marxism, is one such example. Economic production always involves transformation. It is a means of reproducing physical being through the interaction of the social and material by redirective labour. For analytical philosophers like Cohen, this interplay of material and social cannot be described as an interaction. Like all analytical Marxists, Cohen’s explanations centre on the individual unit, rather than on wholes, and this tends to result in static models. Karl Marx’s Theory of History rejects all the contemporary concern in historical materialism for the concept of mode of production in favour of an analytic division of properties where causal action is an external feature. The things that comprise mechanisms are given a passive lifelessness. They await motion to be applied from outside. This way of thinking dictates a socio-neutral description of the material world that can only take place in a Humean framework of unconnected particulars from which it is not possible to infer anything more than what is already given. It rests upon a mechanistic materialism that ignores the necessary connection of parts to the whole. Centring explanation on the idea of mode of production would be more fruitful. It would allow a less restrictive definition of the social, expanding it to comprise all the structures, practices and conventions that, due to their persistence through time, together

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demonstrate what Bhaskar calls ‘systemness’. These regularities stand outside of any necessary comprehension by the individuals who reproduce and change them.10 Irreducibly biological individuals are placed in social structures that exist previous to occupancy. The mode of economic production can describe all social life as essentially practical.

Similarly, there is no requirement here to explain innate human rationality previous to social positioning. The reproduction of society continues outside of any particular awareness of the constant renewal made by everyday activity. Rights and powers, limited to ‘economic’ relations, no longer circumscribe the social. Rather than mediating between a posited rational individual and the unfriendly natural environment, labour transforms nature according to a planned and premeditated intervention. In this asymmetrical relation of interaction, nature has priority by virtue of its ontological non-depence upon the social, and practice depends to an extent on the given, having a material aspect as well as a socially interactive side. It provides constraining and conditioning determination, rather than being the all-encompassing substance Cohen suggests. This persistence outside human agency makes Marxism a social science of objects that are dependent modes of matter. Nature here is not ontologically opposed to an abstraction called ‘the social’, rearranged in different patterns over the earth, but a material aspect of practice that can have determining conditions of its own. This seems a more useful approach than the methodological-individualist premises of Cohen, Elster and Roemer.

Restricting historical materialism

As Cohen amended his arguments in response to criticism during the 1980s, his base and superstructure model became increasingly unwieldy. He was forced to undo its early attractive simplicity by multiplying the number of levels, bases and types of relations, crucially by asserting that only those non-economic phenomena that have effects on the social relations of production are explained by economic structures.11 This revision dramatically narrowed the explanatory scope of the theory. So restricted, historical materialism ceases to be a general theory of history. There is now only a generally observable tendency for functionally compatible social and economic relations

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10 Bhaskar 1979, p. 36.
11 Kennedy 1994, Chapters Two to Four contains an extensive review of the various terms and revisions. The debate over work relations is particularly notable. Their exclusion from the economic and designation as a substratum weakened the definition of the economy, which was originally described as the sum of all productive relations. It is also in flagrant disregard of blunt assertions to the contrary in The German Ideology. ‘Social [production] denotes the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation . . . and this mode of co-operation is itself a productive force’ (Marx 1975–2005, 5, p. 43). The changes in work relations and their parallel authority structures are very prominent in Capital. The history of their transformation seems a very social affair.
to persist, with no way to formulate hypotheses that evidence can then corroborate in favour of the theory.\textsuperscript{12} Cohen eventually withdrew from the logic of the development thesis, acknowledging that ‘there is no universal imperative of rationality to innovate’ and the theory was recast as a very general tendency for productive power to grow.\textsuperscript{15} The new ‘restricted historical materialism’ was

[p]rimarily a theory about the course of material development itself rather than about the relationship \textit{between} that development and other developments.\ldots Restricted historical materialism does not say that the principal features of spiritual existence are materially or economically explained.\textsuperscript{16}

This defensive stratagem hoped to keep some of the core of \textit{Karl Marx’s Theory of History} intact by jettisoning any claims to be a theory of determination, functional or otherwise.\textsuperscript{15} Cohen ruefully acknowledged that Marx was usually more offensive about his theory, invariably including the explanation of the non-economic domain by material factors. He noted that innovation will sometimes be rational, and, if useful, innovations tend to stay in place, so that over broad sweeps of history there is a tendency to productive growth even if it is not apparent in each period of every society’s history. The revised ‘weak development thesis’ now limits itself to a description of how innovations are rarely lost. The dynamic of utilitarian individual action features very little, no longer providing a drive to productive development. Whether it acts on relations of production or forces of production is of little consequence. The development thesis has been stripped down to an observation of a global tendency: ‘progress will occur somewhere and its fruits will be preserved’.\textsuperscript{16}

In this panoramic vision of history, there is no internal dynamic to society forcing innovation, rather a weak tendency, and historical materialism has become more a presentation of pervasive historical principles than a description of causal factors, no longer referring to human action and its structural determinations fashioned by relations of production and forces of production. The schematic of historical stages has disappeared, as has most of the claim to explain the superstructure. This appeal to the ‘facts of history’ no longer tries to account for much of social change, and historical materialism is reduced to an observation of an empirically observable tendency, the recognition of which became both the central claim of the theory and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Wright, Levine, Sober 1992, p. 94.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Cohen 1988, p. 27.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Cohen 1988, p. 368.
\item \textsuperscript{15} This redundancy of functional explanation is seldom noted. For a decade, many pages of learned proofs continued to be produced in universities all over Europe and North America seeking the most appropriate mathematical formulation of the relationships. Thankfully, for those of us who struggled to understand them, this endeavour has now ceased. For a relevant account of the general retreat from functional statements in historical theory see Roberts 1996, pp. 145–59.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Cohen 1988, p. 27.
\end{itemize}
its means of proof. By the end of the 1980s, there was little of Karl Marx’s *Theory of History*’s carefully built edifice left standing. No development or clarification has been forthcoming since.

Sympathetic discussions in the wake of Cohen by Wetherly and Mayer accept huge restrictions to productive-force determinism: ‘there is little theoretical or empirical reason to think the Primacy Thesis is true’ writes the latter. A number of more recent Anglophone defences try to restate a very weak development thesis, often using Darwinian ideas. So, for example, Paul Nolan suggests a society’s cultural reproductive fitness might provide a means of natural selection akin to the spread of adaptive traits in the animal world, with used productive power determining the features of this fitness. He even provides an account taken from modern anthropology of the natural selection of cultural traits within a community that enhance productive power. Emerging from a close reading and criticism of Cohen, Alan Carling tries to integrate the determining influences of forces and relations in terms of competition and evolutionary advantage. The idea of competitive primacy argues that superior productive power gives an advantage to a society’s productive relations, but ‘does not necessarily apply to all of history, and it may not even apply to very much of it’. It is a bias, he claims, rather than a tendency, that is general but undirected.

After all the conceptual clarification, rounds of discussion and hundreds of pages of debate, all that the most talented and sympathetic writers can offer of traditional historical materialism is an undirected bias of limited descriptive power, neither a theory nor an explanation. If the essence of Marxism is the intrinsic relation of theory with the strategies of emancipation, then this contribution is very marginal. The accounts of the state and the political level have disappeared. There is very little left in the theory that can inform political practice, even at a very general level. Carling’s and Nolan’s evolutionary historical materialism has a very tentative theory of determination, no reference to class and nothing to say about modern society. It bears far closer relation to Darwin than Marx. ‘The history of all hitherto existing populations’, writes Nolan in a deliberately distorted echo of *The Communist Manifesto*, ‘has been a history of competition (direct or indirect) and conflict between culturally distinct and productively discrete groups’. None of those keenest to keep the flame of traditional historical materialism alive makes any serious attempt to apply the remnants of the theory to the struggle against capitalism. The explanations in Jared Diamond’s much-praised *Guns, Germs and Steel* cease well before industrialisation. This is significant, as they were supposed to be directed at the huge productive lead of the contemporary West. As contributions to a sub-set of a theory of history, these ideas are of doubtless...
value, but in no way do they match the aspirations of traditional historical materialism. Even a supporter of classical Marxism as dedicated and perspicacious as Alex Callinicos can find nothing in *Karl Marx's Theory of History* to retain. Whatever the regret expressed at early dismissals of the work, he advocates none of its proposals. In place of productive-force determinism, he describes how ‘coexisting nodes of power change thanks to both internal contradictions and their mutual interactions’ – an exceedingly open-ended approach which, rightly or wrongly, is in stark contradiction to the classical-Marxist conceptual heritage.22

**Analytical Marxism’s last phase**

The late 1980s saw a high point in analytical-Marxist research that has been in decline since.23 Ryan’s prediction in 1987 that it would circle ‘in endless and repetitive debates over Rawls, Nozick and Dworkin’ seems pretty farsighted.24 With only the dimmest traces of historical materialism remaining, and no labour theory of value or tendency of the rate of profit to fall, along with the related accounts of crisis and class, the school had little of Marxism left. Elster, Przeworski and Roemer have accepted the consequences and made their peace with market capitalism, while the school’s founder is leftist leaning on a rhetorical criticism of capitalism from the point of view of society’s worst off.

Given the collapse of the theoretical project around *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, it is not surprising that Cohen was looking for an alternative foundation for socialism. *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*, published in the mid-1990s, suggested that socialism is one option amongst a wide range of futures and one the Western working class, now supposedly privileged and cosseted, will have to be persuaded of as a superior moral option. This focus on the basic injustice of capitalism led him to an engagement with Robert Nozick, whose libertarianism he considers a serious challenge to socialism, and a new set of conclusions even more distant from classical Marxism.25 The ethical view of justice as the basis of socialist criticism rests on the concepts of ownership and equality rather than class and political economy. The motivator of change here lies outside of historical determinants, in the reasonableness of a proposition rather than the material interest of a class. Maybe this is a logical result of a philosophy that limits itself to clarity of expression. Given Cohen’s description of the ‘modest abundance’ of contemporary Western society and the inculcation of its workers with

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22 Callinicos 2003.
23 Carling 1989 and Mayer 1994 provide remarkably clear, albeit overly sympathetic, accounts of progress to this point; see Gordon 1990 for a more critical one.
24 Ryan 1987, p. 10. He continues, “the project of showing Marx can be made to talk in ways that Oxford philosophers of thirty years ago would have thought sufficiently sanitary seems a mistake. It satisfies neither the desire to get inside the mind of the historical Marx nor the need for an intellectual apparatus adequate to the complexities and absurdities of the late 20th century.”
25 See Roberts 1997a and 1997b, for a critique.
non-socialist ideas, it is hard to see how any agent will choose the route of self-sacrifice. Roberts suggests that he ‘is nostalgic for a Marxism in which he no longer believes’.26

His more recent If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich? puts a number of arguments against Marx which are not difficult to deal with, not being of a particularly high calibre: that Marx had an inevitabilist notion of historical development (talk about the pot and the kettle . . .); that traditional Marxism is redundant given the disappearance of the working class; that Marx failed to distinguish the working class from the needy and is therefore blind to the possibilities of moral socialism; that Marx thought technological development would eradicate all postcapitalist problems of scarcity, compulsion and competition.27 As John Gray points out, the dangers of using philosophical tools especially designed to bury Marxism have been realised, and what remains of the theory looks very much like the bourgeois critique formulated by Marxism’s enemies.28 Choice of method is not innocent. If socialism is a moral choice, it ‘is not surprising, given the contingency and inconsequentiality of the choice between capitalism and socialism’, as Wood writes about analytical Marxism, that it ‘tends to be obsessed with mathematical formulae and narrowly formalistic questions which have little connection with the real and urgent moral-political problems confronting humanity’.29 Supporters’ pleas in the 1990s to correct the donnish isolation were unanswered.30 The school never emerged from the academe, despite early promises. Its target was always in the seminar room. ‘To the extent that Marxism is still alive’ writes Cohen recently, ‘it presents itself as a set of values and a set of designs for realizing those values’.31 It seems that the job of the ever-diminishing circle of Cohen’s co-thinkers is to promote moral principles which have very little to distinguish them from left liberalism.32 Presumably everything outside Cohen’s new dogmatic and exclusive definition is of the bullshit variety of Marxism.

Conclusion

Perhaps we can take instruction from the stuttering end of the project begun by Karl Marx’s Theory of History. Maybe it is time to close the book on grand schemes that ascribe history a single fundamental dynamic manifest in social forms that have essentially identical operative structures, and in doing so lay to rest nineteenth-century ideas of progress and their attendant productivist politics. This model, so central to traditional historical materialism, should be dispensed with. It denies the multiplicity

28 Gray 1993, p. 84.
29 Wood 1989, p. 76.
30 ‘Little has been written’, pines Mayer, ‘about the poor countries of the capitalist world’. Mayer 1994, p. 319. This hardly exhausts the list of such pleas.
31 Cohen 2001, p. 103.
32 Wood 1989, p. 84.
of directions that history can take and is therefore a radical constraint on future alternatives.33

The work was undoubtedly an impressive achievement. In 1978, it constituted a novel and stimulating research project, but, even within its own terms, it has not been able to sustain its arguments. The particular value of analysis as a method of examination has not been denied; indeed, it is has been assumed by critics as absolutely necessary and used to question Cohen’s explanations. The analytical Marxists hold no monopoly. Expanding their single direction of explanation to encompass the determining effects of the social does not preclude sensitivity to microfoundations, forgo reason or degrade social science – quite the opposite. Similarly, there is nothing necessarily wrong with models in themselves, but there are dangers in defending explanatory structures that impose stasis on dynamic historical forms. By way of an alternative, we have suggested that there should be a necessary connection between concepts of form and content in theories that try to explain the world. Breaking down statements into their component parts in order to provide proper explanation is insufficient, for Marxism aspires to account for an external reality that is in a state of change, and for relations that are neither contingent nor entirely ‘conceptually separate’ (p. 99). In this sense, the label analytical semi-Marxism is a good one for Cohen: it describes the limitations, restrictions and insufficiency of his methods.

A work that begun as a response to Marxism’s critics within the universities never succeeded in out-growing its conditions of production; indeed, it is even beginning to disappear there, as contemporary writing on both Marxism and history makes increasingly fewer references to Cohen’s work and his school. For those committed to a socialist practice shaped by Marxist theory, it is time to move on. The most current undergraduate primer on Marxism and history in the Bay Area college libraries, Perry’s *Marxism and History*, makes no mention of Cohen and analytical Marxism at all. To return to Cohen’s playground language, action talks, bullshit walks.

References


33 See McLennan 1989, p. 79 for this argument in greater length. We could add a less telling observation: it is difficult to envisage how humanity before the world market of capitalism was a single spatial and social entity amenable to this type of grand theory.


The Scandal of Theory: Fredric Jameson on Modernity

The reading of Jameson’s latest book calls forth at least three core questions:

(i) Why modernity? Or to say it in his terms, why an ontology of the present centred on modernity? Still another version of the same query: why is the foremost critic of postmodernism revisiting the minefield of theories of the modern? Why should one care about modernity at this late hour in the cultural debate?

(ii) How does he tackle modernity? By now, those of us who work within the field of cultural criticism are not only used to learning, with Jameson, of the ‘whats’ but also of the overdetermined nature of the ‘hows’. We have learnt to ask questions like, what are the conditions of possibility for the structuring of a determined position? What is the political intervention implicit in such discursive moves?

(iii) How does this new book fit or alter the new genre of theory and the Jamesonian oeuvre? Michael Denning reminds us that, rather than being one more thinker sprouting in this Age of Theory, Jameson constitutes an entire cultural field.1 This seems to take into account not only the variety of his production – which encompasses virtually all the modes of Western Marxism, except creative writing à la Brecht – but also that ‘Jameson’ is something like a code word to mark a site in which relevant cultural debate on the Left takes place in our time. Whether you like him or not, he is unavoidable. He provides the conceptual apparatus and the working example of the cultural task required by the current situation. How does the book in question fit in to this project?

Ideally, having posed the questions, one would proceed to answer them. That will be the task of the following remarks, which will have to bear in mind the proviso of keeping to what Jameson terms ‘the logic of the situation’:2 in other words, no matter how globalised some ideologues want us to believe the world is, each intellectual is still anchored in her specific national situation. My own position at the periphery of


capitalism inevitably frames my reading of Jameson and inflects my reactions to academic debates, lending them the urgency they acquire in countries still in the making, where the stakes are higher.

Take, for instance, the question ‘why modernity?’. Surely, for any reader of Historical Materialism, modernity must be understood as the ideological bonus of capitalism. We all know that, like all of its bonuses, it is distributed unequally and must be paid for dearly. But, for some readers, it might be a question of which academic position Jameson’s intervention displaces – something that is of interest particularly in places where modernity is, first and foremost, an academic topic. In places like Brazil, it is certainly a matter of intellectual debate, but it also names what we presumably have not yet achieved as a nation. And it harbours the price the country has to pay for yet another adaptation to outside injunctions: what we need to do in order not to be left behind again in this new guise of modernity, globalisation. Modernisation is the preferred slogan of politicians who have decided to bet our collective life on the unlikely possibility that, once countries like Brazil follow the draconian recipes of contemporary capital and pay the horrendous social costs of its strictures, the market will bless us with the dubious prize of inclusion in an unjust world order. Modernism, the way culture has responded to modernisation, offers a defining ground for discursive dispute amongst cultural critics at the periphery of capitalism where, obviously, it is far more complicated for art to call itself great in the same gesture whereby it declares itself autonomous from a social reality that, to quote Jameson again, gets ‘realer’ in some places of the globe.

The logic and dynamic of the content

The book starts from observation of a current phenomenon: the return of the modern within full postmodernity. Since Marx, we have been aware that modernity is the name for how capitalism likes to think of itself, so it should be no surprise that it resurfaces at the time of its uncontested victory all over the globe. That ‘modernity’ is a hot commodity in today’s ideological market can be attested to by the attention it has been granted by ideologues such as Anthony Giddens, who calls for a ‘radicalized modernity’. It is as though not only the so-called relativism and nihilism of postmodernity but also its systemic and economic overtones no longer served the purposes of a world economy based on the illusions of choice. It has to ‘remin and repackage the modern for renewed sales in the intellectual marketplace’ (p. 7).

In this sense, Jameson does not choose the topic of the book but reacts to an imposition. That the Left has to react to yet another renewal of the ideology of modernity is made clear in the long quote (p. 9) from Oskar Lafontaine’s memoirs. In the current situation, the referent of modernity has shifted away from industrialisation and technological progress to adaptation to the ‘laws’ of the global market. Those
who oppose the ‘free’ market can have no recourse to the language of modernisation: we are thrown into the dustbin of history as ‘un-modern’.

By a similar operation, those who not only oppose the reign of the commodity but are also socialists or, even worse, Marxists, are, in turn, accused of being outmoded in our ways of thinking as well. We are said to cling to a ‘old-fashioned’ modernist paradigm, one that is resolutely historicist and totalising. No one seems to remember that the postmodern critique of totalisation is suspiciously contemporaneous with the globalisation of productive processes: the moment when big corporations go total and spend lots of their time and attention on analyses of the conjuncture. It might not be too paranoid to conclude that there is a touch of a cover-up operation in this insistence that the ‘in thing’ to do in theory is to facilitate the free circulation of the aleatory and the celebration of difference.

On the plane of politics, the real differences that ‘actually existing’ modernity creates are patched up by an apology for modernity which acquires different adjectives to suit different situations: whereas, in core countries (or should we say, in the one core country and its main satellites?), ideologues call for a ‘radicalised modernity’, in the periphery we have to make do with ‘alternative’ modernities, not quite the latest, then – but aleatory also means chance, random and the periphery is the part of the globe that has missed ‘chances’.

On the plane of theory, the same undecidability is given a different spin: as there are many different versions of modernity in social life, so there are many different terms for it. I was going to write ‘concepts’, which is the word Jameson starts by using, but, since the ideology of capitalism structurally cannot ever be realised, it might be too much to grant it the dignity of a concept. And, in case one gets tired of the abstraction involved in discussing concepts, it might not be amiss to remind ourselves that, at a time whose very logic is cultural, the relevance of discussing notions and ideas becomes very evident indeed. If you add to this the necessities of contemporary academic life – a realm which Stuart Hall has aptly described as that of ‘discursive struggle’ – it is once again time for a Marxist intervention to try and secure the vanguard theoretical position within the current social struggle.

Do we need different bait to attract Jameson’s attention? No discussion of modernity can bypass one of its aesthetic manifestations, the different national modernisms. This a hot point of debate in the canon of Western Marxism, one that allows Jameson to revisit, in his own terms, the famous interventions of Brecht, Lukács, and Adorno – key figures in his own formation. This debate acquires a peculiar resonance now that the various modernisms are virtual synonyms for high art in a world immersed in mass culture.

How could the foremost Marxist cultural critic of our time resist the challenge posed by the resurgence of this same problematic in the fields of politics, thought and aesthetics, which calls for an analysis of how the present economic phase determines
all this and can, in turn, be read in all those manifestations? The stage is set for the quintessential Jamesonian move: beat the enemies within their own territory. Just as he had done with the linguistic turn (The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism, 1972), literary interpretation (The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act, 1981) and, most famously, postmodernism (Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, 1991), he proceeds to turn ‘their’ theorisation of a key topic into ‘ours’.

As usual with Jameson, form is the fundamental element. This, then, is the place to begin to try to deal with the ‘how’ question. On a first level, the book is constructed on the premise, already discussed in Postmodernism, that, in theorising modernity,

our old friends base and superstructure seem fatally to re-impose themselves:

if modernisation is something that happens to the base, and modernism the form the superstructure takes in reaction to that ambivalent development,

then perhaps modernity characterises the attempt to make something coherent out of their relationship’.3

Hence, in addition to a preface and conclusion, there are two substantive parts to the new book: the first dealing with how to theorise modernity and the second with the ideology of modernism. In addition, there is a didactic transitional section in which the structural necessity of both parts is set out.

**How to theorise our modernity**

Part I is boldly called ‘The Four Maxims of Modernity’. Reread it and you can begin to hear the gnashing of teeth in the postmodern camp. At a time when statements about being and truth are taboo, Jameson offers nothing less than ‘a general truth, a fundamental principle, a rule of conduct’, as the dictionary defines maxims; and, equally anathema to postmodernists, in a second sense of ‘maxim’, ‘a saying of proverbial nature’, which can therefore have a didactic effect. So it seems that rather than a polite optional discourse to join in the discussion at a now virtual British Museum Reading Room – where, in place of Virginia Woolf’s notorious writers in conversation, we have theorists offering their interpretative efforts as intellectual commodities you can choose from as the fashion dictates – this guy is proposing to offer the truth about modernity. Not only, he is also proposing to teach us something we need to know in order to intervene in the discussion and in the situation of which the discussion is a sign and a symptom. Is there no end to Marxist bad manners?

To make matters worse, the maxims themselves are the obverse of current theoretical doxa. Jameson had already drawn the map of postmodern theoretical discourse.

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Remember the ‘end of history’, the suspicion of temporality as ‘regressive historicism’, the ‘spatialisation of thought’? The maxims have the function of securing a way of thinking against this grain and of enabling the cognitive mapping of the current revival of modernity. Cognitive mapping is a term Jamesonians will easily recognise. It designates the theoretical model, aesthetics and cultural politics required by the times. If current thought basks in decentring and fragmentation, cognitive mapping entails location in time and space. It also clears a site in which thought can be set in motion by answering the two fundamental questions of dialectics: where are we and what time is it? It is no coincidence that these are the very questions ideologues try to avoid.

Since the discussion of the term is as old as modernity itself, much of that space has to be cleared of ideological litter. Take, for instance, the question of the temporality of the phenomenon, or, as Raymond Williams memorably phrased it, think of ‘When was modernism?’. At least since structuralism, periodisation has been under attack, most often as a homogenising operation that leaves aside the variety and co-existence of tendencies at any given time. Of course, the ban on periodisation is also designed to foster a perception of history, and particularly present history, as sheer heterogeneity, random difference and a coexistence of distinct forces whose effectiveness is undecidable.4

In such an ideological climate, creating the conditions for real thoughts must involve the demonstration of the shortcomings of previous attempts. This is one of the reasons why the first maxim can only be stated once it has been demonstrated that the history of the ‘concept’ of modernity has been told by the different disciplines as a dialectics – which can be neither arrested or solved – of the break and the period, or of rupture and continuity. What is at stake here is a twofold movement, in which the foregathering of continuities, the unwavering focus on the seamless passage from past to present, slowly turns into a consciousness of a radical break; while at the same time the enforced attention to a break gradually turns the latter into a period in its own right. (p. 24.)

It is, of course, the break that creates the period. An apt example in this text full of apt examples is the way in which a ‘modern break’, the Renaissance, seals off the previous period of the Middle Ages. Therefore, both glorified break and vilified period are forms of periodisation, and, in order to deal with a term that implies temporality at a time when that very notion is called into question, the first maxim has to take the form of a double negation: ‘We cannot not periodise’.

The notion of periodisation prepares the ground for the next maxim. As with the first, this maxim is derived from the failure of previous attempts, this time in terms

4 Jameson 1984, p. 56.
of producing a beginning for modernity. He lists fourteen such attempts, ranging from
the rise of nominalism to Foucault’s positing of historicity as a sign of emergence.
How can one totalise all these attempts? Jameson deftly proposes that modernity
always implies a rewriting operation that renders previous paradigms obsolete as it
highlights the trope of ‘for the first time’. In case all this talk about tropes and narrativity
is raising the always present suspicion among the most faithful comrades that Jameson,
with his voracious absorbing of all kinds of positions, has finally gone too far and
outflanked Marxism altogether, he opens a parenthesis to explain that:

We can take a further step and restore the social and historical meaning of
the rewriting operation by positing it as a trace and an abstraction from a
real historical event and trauma, one that can be said to amount to a rewriting
and a surcharging of the social itself in its most concrete form. This is the
overcoming of feudalism by capitalism, and of the aristocratic social order
of castes and blood by the new bourgeois order that at least promised social
and juridical equality and political democracy. This is to locate the referent
of modernity in a new way, via the ancient ghostly forms of the experience
itself rather than its one-to-one correspondence between the alleged concept
and its equally alleged object. (p. 39.)

If modernity is but an alleged concept, the ground is cleared for the key speculative
proposition in the book: the introduction of narrative as an explanatory feature. The
second maxim reads: ‘Modernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a
narrative category’. The next two maxims are specifications of this one. A narrative
presupposes a narrator, an object of the narrative and a ‘what happens next’ kind of
logic. The third maxim deals with the first necessity and it is the prize waiting after
an arid detour through philosophy. The historical opposition of the break and the
period, that is of structure and time, finds its philosophical correspondent in the
classical opposition formulated by the Cartesian cogito and the subject/object split
that inaugurates modernity. This not only allows the incorporation of a classical
account of modernity, but also the recourse to the favourite philosopher for nine out
of ten poststructuralists: Heidegger. The use of his ‘thrilling reinterpretation’ (p. 42)
of the subject/object split fends off the most predictable of contemporary objections:
how can you talk either of a ‘subject’, when the very notion has already been disposed
of by postmodern critique, or of an ‘object’, in a world of words?

It is Heidegger himself who rereads ‘Cogito ergo sum’ as a representation and then
goes on to theorise subject and object as mutually constitutive. It follows that the
subject in isolation, either as consciousness or as individual, cannot be represented.
This provides Jameson with the opportunity to dismantle three influential ideologies
of modernity, all of them based on the now banned notion of subjectivity: modernity
as the emergence of Western freedom, that is, bourgeois freedom; modernity as the
rise of the individual; and modernity as the emergence of self-consciousness. But this move also creates a problem for Jameson’s narrative of modernity: if there is no subject or object, who is narrating what? He solves this particular riddle by appealing to the break/period movement characteristic of accounts of modernity:

any theory of modernity must both affirm its absolute novelty as a break and at one and the same time its integration into a context from which it can be posited as breaking.

How can those opposites coexist? It is Hegel who shows the complicated way out, this time through the notion of Grund, the movement from a dialectics of oppositions to the emergence of a ‘ground’, a ‘cause’ or ‘reason for’, or what Sartre called ‘a situation’, ‘a narrative term to hold the contradictory features of belonging and innovation together within itself’ (p. 57). This philosophical tour de force may be hard to follow but it does clear the space for the third maxim, which brings together subject and object:

The narrative of modernity cannot be organized around categories of subjectivity; consciousness and subjectivity are unrepresentable, only situations of modernity can be narrated.

At this point in the book, Jameson has also succeeded in raising one question in his readers’ mind: why so much effort to secure the primacy of narrative as an explanatory category? Maybe the fourth maxim will elucidate that. But having presented the third, he embarks on another philosophical journey – which takes up the whole of Chapter 5 – in order to examine what I would like to call ‘philosophies of the break’: from Heidegger’s break or fall into the groundlessness of Western thought after Greek civilisation to Foucault’s coupures. One can see why Jameson has to dispose of Foucault’s The Order of Things, which can be read as a very influential genealogy of modernity. It is also fun to see Jameson subtly demonstrating how dialectics – anathema to any self-respecting French soixante-huitard – lurks behind the central problematics of Foucault’s account. But the fundamental element to retain from this reading stems from the figure of ‘separation’ that Foucault adopts to characterise the logic of the second modernity in the nineteenth century: the autonomisation of the realms of life, labour and language. With that in place, Jameson takes his reader through another detour, which – predictably – I want to call a detour around ‘philosophies of the period’, as represented by Étienne Balibar’s model of the succession of the modes of production. If, from the break, we should retain the notion of separation, from the period, we should take nothing less than the structural need for periodisation which

is not some optional narrative consideration one adds or subtracts according to one’s own tastes and inclinations, but rather an essential feature of the narrative process itself. (p. 81.)
Hence the final maxim incorporates the logic of periods:

No theory of modernity can make sense today, unless it is able to come to terms with the hypothesis of a postmodern break with the modern.

However, we only arrive at this maxim, which brings together break and period, after a brilliant and unusually clear rewriting of the main theories of modernity under the rubric of separation. Readers of Jameson will remember that, in the last chapter of *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he reminds us that:

[Separation is] Marx's fundamental figure for social development and dynamics (a figure that runs through the *Grundrisse*, connecting the 1844 Manuscripts in an unbroken line to *Capital* itself): . . . [T]here has not, I think, been a Marxism based on this particular figure, although it is the cognate of other figures such as alienation, reification, and commodification, which have all given rise to specific ideological tendencies (not to say schools) within Marxism itself. But the logic of separation may have become even more relevant in our own period, [whose characteristics] in one way or another exemplify the proteiform nature and effects of this particular disjunctive process.5

Today, any theory of modernity must find a way of counteracting this disjunction. This is a far from easy task, since ‘modernity’ is itself the name of a separation, which may be the underlying reason for its resurgence in full postmodernity. Separation is, of course, central to Marx’s characterization of capitalist modernity when the worker is

freed from his means of production, separated from land and tools and thrown upon the free market as a commodity (his henceforth saleable labour power). (p. 82.)

It is also present in other theories of modernity: we saw how it is central for Foucault but Jameson also registers its presence in Max Weber’s use of Taylor’s rationalisation of the labour process as indicator of modernity and in the Frankfurt school’s notion of ‘instrumental reason’, that is, reason as a separation of means and ends. Lukács, who learned from Weber, takes a great step forward in theorising the failure to grasp the totality of the process of production at the higher level of the mode of production: bourgeois consciousness is unable to grasp the ultimate reality of capitalism which, as Marx taught, can only be apprehended as a totality.

How can one apprehend the time of separation as a totality? It is here that I want to argue that narrative becomes a strategy, rather than merely an option. In *Ideologies*

of Theory, Jameson had already presented a theoretical defence of narrative, arguing that it is particularly suited to the difficult but necessary task of apprehending change in history, because it uniquely combines diachrony and synchrony. It already presupposes a fundamental feeling of change, which we are then called on to account for in synchronic and analytic terms.

Narrative analysis, in other words, requires us to explain the imaginative illusion of change, of time and of history itself, by reference to basic components of the narrative line that are bound to be static ones.6

Narrative can be described as time in structure or structure in time and it can thus be apprehended as the most suitable way of theoretically overcoming the problem of the succession of modernities. It uniquely combines diachrony and synchrony, the temporal and the structural. Capitalist modernity sets in motion a series of separations which are then reflected in attempts to describe and interpret their realities and theoretical schemes. We have already seen how Jameson groups those attempts:

Period/Break
Identity/Difference
Object/Subject
System/Experience
Philosophy/History

A Singular Modernity can be viewed as an effort to present a critique of separation by rewriting previous accounts of modernity in terms of a single narrative. It is an attempt to bring together precisely what was separated in modernity. Nor is narrative simply a rhetorical device. We all remember how poststructuralism thrived on the attack on master narratives. In the Foreword to the English translation of the most notorious of those attacks, Jean François Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition, Jameson calls the reader’s attention to the political possibilities of narrative:

the insistence on narrative analysis in a situation in which narratives themselves henceforth seem impossible is a declaration of intent to remain political and oppositional.7

This is so not only due to the fact that narratives put together in systematic and historical ways what ideology insists on presenting as separate and random. It also opens up the possibility of establishing relations between what appear as separate phenomena, on the one hand, and the totality, on the other. This was its main appeal to a thinker like Lukács. Jameson had shown that what unites Lukács’s work is a lifelong preoccupation with narrative, for

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[it] presupposes neither the transcendence of the object (as in science) nor that of the subject (as in ethics) but rather a neutralization of the two, their mutual reconciliation, which thus anticipates the life experience of a Utopian world in its very structure.\(^8\)

So narrative not only thwarts the capitalist drive for separation/alienation, thus opposing the spirit of the times, it also opens up a space for Utopia, for imagining an Other of this system that has spread across the globe like a virus. In this sense, the first ninety-five pages of *A Singular Modernity* do more than simply lay the methodological grounds for the discussion of modernism in the second half of the book. They demonstrate how Marxism is uniquely equipped to deal not only with history but also with the present. This might be the place to speculate on the significance of writing an ‘ontology’ of the present. The first impression, fuelled by the regressions that characterise our time, is that the idea of an ontology is a provocation: since everything is coming back, why not out-regress the regressors and present a branch of metaphysics! But, if one goes back to the essay on Lukács, one sees it ends with a reference to Heidegger, for whom Marxism was not merely (sic.) a political or economic theory but, above all, an ontology and an original mode of recovering the relationship to being itself. However, continues Jameson,

of such an opening onto being now conceived as a social and historical substance, it is narration which is both the formal sign and the concrete expression.\(^9\)

In this sense, the maxims for dealing with modernity go a long way towards presenting the methodological correctives that enable a thought of the present.

In order to recapture the meaning of modernity in the present, Jameson must turn to an examination of modernism. Such a ‘recapturing’ is understood as the mode of experience of an aesthetic product of modernity in our time, no matter what the historical origins of such a work of art may be. In other words, aesthetic experience is the privileged site for the meeting of diachrony and synchrony, where we can perceive, to state the obvious, the break that turned modernity into a period. As was to be expected, the various modernisms defy systematisation in the same way as the theories of modernity.

It is here that the maxims are put into concrete use and acquire functionality as ways of mapping modernism. The forty-two pages that make up the section on ‘Transitional Modes’ forge the link between principles and reality, or between ways of thinking and their determining ground, thus providing one more example of the relentless case made by Jameson for totalisation as the precondition for all attempts

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\(^8\) Jameson 1981, p. 190.

at explanation. The first move is to juxtapose two rival accounts of modernism: a historicist one, Hugo Friedrich’s 1956 *The Structure of Modern Lyric*, and Paul de Man’s critique of this work in his *Blindness and Insight* (1997), which is usually read as a defence of ahistoricism. But a Jamesonian reading of one of the pillars of American poststructuralist literary theory ends up revealing, just as he had with Foucault, that de Man is really another dialectician in disguise. For he repudiates historicism not as a fatal error but as a necessary one that, once properly overcome and subsumed [*Aufheben*], leads us to a truth that is inscribed in the very structure of the literary text itself. Hey presto! His next move is to use de Man’s critique of historicism and periodisation to justify the applicability of the first maxim – ‘You cannot not periodise’ – and to show that modernism itself is a periodising category that cannot be accounted for, so that every modern text means something other than itself and is exemplary of modernism as a whole. For his next trick, Jameson shows how the two moments of a de Manian reading – the diachronic approach to the text as an example of modernism *qua* generic-periodising concept followed by a textual close reading – subtly echo the dialectics of break and period with which he started out. But our author is never satisfied with simple tricks: he must go on and subsume de Man’s opposition. This is done in a so-called digression which ends up by demonstrating that allegory (de Man’s central category) can be another name for narrative, another way of totalising. In a series of moves that defy summary, he enlists de Man as providing further proof of the Marxist claim of encompassing everything expressed or excluded by other systems (p. 118). The fact that modernism replicates the dynamics of modernity is, of course, one more piece of evidence for the narrative that totalises the time of separations.

Having secured the necessity of historicising, the second step in this narrative is to look at what comes before modernism. The textbook answer is ‘realism’ and this is the opportunity for Jameson to give his own contribution to the realism debate that famously involved all the heavyweights of Western Marxism in the 1920s and 1930s.10 Instead of positing the well-known opposition of realism and modernism on the basis of the latter’s novelty, Jameson shows that the model of innovation underwrites both. This displaces the conventional narrative of most literary histories – that is, modernism cancelling realism – and opens the possibility of telling another, more dialectical, story to explain the enduring fascination and ‘novelty’ of modernist texts. Ever since its inaugural theorisation, modernism has exemplified the mysterious co-existence of what Baudelaire calls the transitory and the eternal. Jameson suggests that the novelty of modernism lies in the structure of the works that preserve the older content or technique, which is then overwritten, overcome or negated, thus allowing us to feel in the present the force of what was once an innovation. If we are to consider this argument in the light of the maxims, we can go one step further and say that modernism

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freezes change and captures the diachronic. In other words, just as the second maxim had forewarned, modernism is not a form of the aesthetic but of narrative!

We can see how this would put our fellow literary critics on their guard: it is alright to consider modernism as a narrative, we can even go as far as accepting that its ‘timeless’ works could be periodised; however, having followed the argument up to here, we know that the next step must be to confirm the third maxim and this is to go too far; frankly, to depersonalise the great modernists, precisely those whose individuality it has been the lifework of most of us to study, is really too much. But that is precisely Jameson’s next convincing move. How does he manage it?

The so-called inward turn of modernism is more than a simple reaction to the alienating forces of modernity. When considered in situation, it reveals itself as part of the dawning awareness of impending radical change that characterises the late nineteenth century in many spheres of life: industrialisation in the core countries promises a new dynamic of social life, exemplified in the new social movements of political suffrage and trade unions, in socialism and anarchism. The new situation determines a dissatisfaction with the older forms of the self which finds expression in the modernists’ longing for liberation from their previous selves. The examples from Rilke (‘break you out of your mould’) or Lawrence (‘Not I, not I but the wind that blows through me’) enable our author to arrive at the conclusion that:

It is on the face of it rather perverse not to hear the great modernist evocations of subjectivity as so much longing for depersonalization, and very precisely for some new existence outside the self, in a world radically transformed and worthy of ecstasy. What so often has been described as a new and deeper, richer ‘subjectivity’ is in fact this call to change which always resonates through it: not subjectivity as such, but its transfiguration. This is then the sense in which I propose to consider modernist ‘subjectivity’ as allegorical of the transformation of the world itself, and therefore of what is called revolution. (p. 136.)

This has the theoretical advantage of forcing everyone – from right-wingers to their liberal counterparts – to rethink the great auteurs. If only they would listen, so many bytes wasted on discussing the personality of the modernists would be turned to worthier purposes. As for us comrades, it puts an end to the silly discussions about the modernists’ embarrassing political leanings. It was Lawrence himself – among the least ideologically embarrassing in the Anglo team – who told us to ‘trust the tale, not the teller’. The utopian possibilities of a new social organisation structures the political unconscious of the modernists and propels their search for another way of being and of doing things. This has the additional advantage of giving literary critics such as myself, who enjoy the poetry of the hoariest of conservatives such as Eliot or late Yeats, a new excuse for indulgence. Maybe, given time, Jameson would be able
to present the latter’s aristocratism as a displaced desire for utopia, or Eliot’s élitism as an inverted figure for a longed-for community . . .

In terms of Jameson’s strategy in the book, those transitional modes constitute a master-stroke: the great majority of theoreticians of modernism have all secured modernism for the conservatives (this includes the great theoretical attacks of Lukács but not Adorno’s defences). Of course, some of its great artists – from Baudelaire to Picasso – have been leftists or, as Perry Anderson puts it, against the market. But ideologues of modernism have all been quick to subsume the movement to their own tenets and objectives. In the textbooks, modernism is associated with a certain conception of aesthetics (the great works and autonomy spring to mind); with the so-called timelessness of their production (the canonisation of their formal revolutions would testify to that); and the high point of subjectivity (the great auteurs’ dive into interiority). We can then begin to see that in order to turn their modernism into ours, Jameson has to show that the main gist of the movement was really social, historical and depersonalised, that is, not subjective and therefore – dare one continue the reasoning? – collective.

Now the final move. The third part is, again brazenly, called ‘The Ideology of Modernism’. It necessarily begins in situation: historically, modernism (which cannot resist the urge to adjectivise itself) corresponds to the moment of a still incomplete modernisation where the feudal and the modern co-exist. It is a moment where people can be aware, by contrast, of the process of autonomisation, which is one of the forms our old friend separation can take. For it is certain that, in this first period, not only do

we observe the separation of the machine from the tool – in such a way as to constitute an autonomy of the technological – we can also observe the same process at work in language itself and in representation. (p. 146.)

This process of autonomisation then propels the narrative of perpetual change and gives rise to the familiar notion of modernism as a series of innovative techniques. This other narrative draws plausibility from the ideology of technology, which then works as a blind behind which ‘the more embarrassing logic of the market and the commodity can operate’ (p. 154).

But that is not the main historical task of the ideology of modernism. The principal aim of Jameson’s transcoding of previous theories is to mount a head-on attack on one of the most cherished tenets of modernism: the autonomy of the work of art or, in the terms we have been using here, the culmination of the process of separation he has been depicting as the central drive of modernity. For it turns out that the objective of this section of the book is to spell out the dynamics and requirements of the ideology of the autonomy of the work of art. Jameson sees it as a quintessentially American ideology. Like most ideologies, it takes flight at dusk and emerges after
World War II, that is, in a period he is forced to call ‘late modernism’, long after the heyday of high modernism. It functions as a strategy of containment, diverting the most political and utopian claims of classical modernism. Those scandalous remarks – hey, autonomy of the work of art only after modernism proper (not to mention after Kant)? An American ideology? – provide the framework for the whole discussion.

The ideology of modernism takes flight with the Cold War: no more glorification of breaks, careful monitoring of politics, disciplining of social impulses. What does one do with the revolutionary drive of the classical modernists in this new situation? Clement Greenberg is credited as presenting the way out, thus giving America the dubious honour of being the birthplace of yet another counter-revolution. The fact that he had been a Marxist helps give plausibility to his position, allowing him to appear to be instigating an anti-bourgeois revolution! How? Looking for a sanctuary from capitalism, the artists (or so his story goes) take refuge in form, excising first ideas and then content, asserting art as a separate vocation and struggle as ‘struggle with matter itself’ – the New is an innovation in the use of materials, as American abstract expressionism, Greenberg’s main exhibit, testifies. The move is so successful that it gets transferred to literature and to that other American cultural export, new criticism, with its celebration of poetry as a matter of pure language. The road is open for the ideology of the autonomy of the work of art. The general acceptance of such distorted reasoning attests to its efficacy – this is not ‘loyal opposition’, it is outright adherence.

In case you are still wondering about Kant, the ideology of modernism does not merely posit the autonomy of the aesthetic in his sense – art as separated from non-art – but as the separation of literature and art from culture! This is precisely because culture is the space of mediation between art and society where those dimensions interact: art ennobling everyday life or, conversely, social life trivialising and degrading art. Culture is the social context in which art ‘could redeem and transform a fallen society’ (p. 178). Now, we begin to see one of the prizes coveted by the ideology of modernism: not only the separation of the arts from the ideological struggles of society but also the cooption of the achievements of modern art as innocuously artistic in this new sense. The space is open for that sanitising operation called ‘canon formation’, the turning of modern art into a museum item or a list of books with which to bore university students in campuses across the world.

As a project rather than an organic development, the ideology of modernism has to perform specific tasks in different traditions. For Jameson, the fact that the various national Western traditions present different, non-synchronous modernisms suggests the unsuitability of explanations in terms of cultural imperialism. He is therefore obliged to take up the well-nigh impossible task of assessing the uneven development of national modernisms. He selects, not so randomly, France and Germany, literature
and theory. The French exemplar is Maurice Blanchot. Almost as an aside, our author tells us after describing Blanchot’s many turns that

he can be seen as the quintessential literary theorist (or ideologist) of a certain poststructuralist textuality or textualization, the productivity of his eclectic groundwork acknowledged from their very different perspectives by Foucault and Derrida alike. (p. 183.)

On a careful reading, this ‘groundwork’ is none other than the ideology of modernism itself, which is shown to have made possible, among other things, certain strands in poststructuralism. We can then begin to see another use for the fourth maxim. Our theory of modernity must take into account how those impulses turn out in the future, thus revealing their potentialities and their marks in what comes afterwards. What was Blanchot actually making possible? On the one hand, the progressive thrust: he was reconstructing the literary canon in his country, which had been almost exclusively French up to World War II, to include foreigners. (Any similarity between this and the enlargement of the literary canon in, say, the United States, is not a coincidence.) In his hands, the operation of enlargement was also one of corresponding reduction: each writer is celebrated as a participant in the ritual of literary writing itself. On the other hand, Blanchot was reinventing literature by purging it of any significance that could sully it as a ‘disinterested act’. Form wins over content, producing nothing less than the autonomy of the literary work. That such a task could be fulfilled in France is an implicit comment on the smothering of revolutionary imagination for which such an ideology is devised. That it continues to mesmerise under the guise of textuality, the poststructuralist rewriting of the ideology of modernism, attests that the enemy is still winning.

In Germany, the example is taken form Karl-Heinz Boher’s 1981 Plötzlichkeit (translated into English as Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance), in which the autonomy of art is constructed along a temporal axis: the moment of the aesthetic understood in terms of an ahistorical present of pure form. The reader may be left wondering why Jameson restricts his examples to only Germany and France, but it should be noted that different national traditions present non-synchronous modernisms and equally non-synchronous codifications of the ideology of modernism. Nevertheless, these are the countries of origin of two powerful contemporary recodings of modernity – Deleuze’s and Habermas’s – who also end up getting asides in the chapter. Deleuze is discussed alongside Boer’s insistence on the moment and thus as party to the latter’s ahistoricism, while Habermas, in another of Jameson’s delightful parentheses is, to put it crudely, seen as even worse than the conservative Boer for transforming ‘still powerful dialectical positions into an undialectical, essentially socio-democratic and reformist, theory of modernity’ (p. 189). Pow!
Restoration

So much for ‘their’ modernism as the aesthetics of ‘their’ modernity. Where does ‘ours’ come in? Readers of Jameson know that he has learned from Bloch that, in the analysis of every cultural phenomenon, there are two moments: the moment of demystification – what Jameson calls, following Paul Ricoeur’s distinctions, the hermeneutics of suspicion – and a second related moment, the positive moment of the disentangling of the utopian vision, the glimpsing of the figure of Hope in every cultural production, even from the most degraded of cultural phenomena. The bulk of my review has centred on Jameson’s first move, the unmasking of the ideology of modernity. But part of Jameson’s interest in modernity is that it continues to fascinate, as its multiple returns testify. The positive aspect of the excitement of modernity is the social energy it mobilises. It is energy that can be used for progressive and regressive ends. The book closes with two opposed examples of what to emulate, taken from the great powerhouse of modernity. The first is from the fascist, Pound: from him, we can learn to scrutinise the present for signs of the emergent (which is one of the theoretical tasks of cognitive mapping). The second example is Benjamin: he describes the critic’s capacity to gauge the energies of social movements, particularly when he is no longer ‘standing at the head of the stream’.

Both this book and the 1991 volume on postmodernism open with an author’s note, locating the books in a larger project. Thus Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism is presented in its 1990 Introduction as ‘the third and last section of the penultimate subdivision of a larger project entitled The Poetics of Social Forms’. A Singular Modernity is ‘the theoretical section of the anti-penultimate volume’ of the same project. When asked about the project, he says it is ‘an experiment in combining the analysis of literary genre with historical perspectives on social and cultural change’ (my italics). The etymology of the term ‘poetics’ is ‘to make’, and Jameson’s breathtakingly varied intellectual project could be summed up in this effort to make visible social forms at times of general opacity. Capitalism is the opacity. A fifth maxim could be added to this intellectual tour de force: a singular modernity means not only that it is just one thing – plural manifestations of a single process, capitalism unfolding in time – but that it is also a unique theorisation of the theme. As usual when reading Jameson, a question lingers: why can’t he tell us all this in the first place? Why the agony of the process, the endless arguments and sub-arguments, rotating the prism so as to show all of its sides? The answer could well be that it is the dialectics and the necessary labour of the concept. How else are we to truly learn?
References


Phases of Capitalist Development: Booms, Crises and Globalizations
Edited by Robert Albritton, Makoto Itoh, Richard Westra and Alan Zuege
Houndmills and New York: Palgrave, 2001
Reviewed by Tony Smith

Anyone seeking proof of the continuing vitality of Marxian theory need look no further than this superb collection. Taken together, these eighteen essays provide conclusive proof of the theoretical and practical superiority of historical materialism over competing positions in globalisation debates.¹

For our purposes, four main competing accounts of our so-called ‘age of globalisation’ can be distinguished. We may term the first recalcitrant social democracy.² On this view, the project of constructing a humane and just form of capitalism through piecemeal state legislation remains as relevant today as in the decades following World War Two. Of course, the balance of political forces has changed in recent years. Faced with resurgent conservative movements, social-democratic parties have abandoned much of their heritage. Nonetheless, the political agenda could be reversed again, if the political will to do so were sufficiently strong. Demolishing myths about globalisation is a necessary condition for the formation of this will. Despite prevailing opinion, global markets have not eroded the fundamental capacities of the state. The rules constituting the global economy have been created by states and they are enforced by states. These rules can be changed by states as well. It is thus not inevitable that global markets will punish states pursuing a social-democratic agenda severely and instantaneously. With sufficient political will, the social-democratic project of creating ‘capitalism with a human face’ on the national level can recommence.

For neoliberals, the fatal flaws of social democracy were obvious long ago.³ Excessive state regulations constrict entrepreneurial initiative. Inflexible labour markets enable wages to increase faster than productivity, causing inflation. The erosion of the value of money discourages investment, undermining future productivity advances. Corporations and individual investors thus have ample motivation to invest in regions

¹ David Kotz, ‘The State, Globalization and Phases of Capitalist Development’ provides a very useful overview of the main trends making up ‘globalisation’ (pp. 93–109). A great number of other issues discussed in this collection cannot be addressed here, including the theory of value, the relationship between the general theory of capital and theories of the particular stages of capitalist development, and the class dimension of monetary union in Europe.
² Palley 1998 is a representative work.
³ Friedman 2000 provides a non-technical survey of the major neoliberal arguments.
where social-democratic policies do not hold sway, and advances in communications and transportation technologies make it increasingly feasible for them to act on these motives. Corporations can now manage cross-border production and distribution chains with ease, while participants in global capital markets are able to shift portfolio investments from one continent to another with a few keystrokes. In short, the ‘exit options’ have increased precisely the groups that benefit least from the redistributive programs of social democracy, and that have most reason to oppose its excessive regulations, inflexible labour markets, and erosion of the value of money.

This is not a politically sustainable situation. And so, neoliberals insist, states that attempt to maintain – let alone expand – the characteristic public policies of social democracy are bound to lose the private investment responsible for economic dynamism. This certainly does not imply the ‘death of the state’. But it does imply that states are forced to put on a ‘golden straightjacket’, and implement neoliberal policies of privatisation, deregulation, and capital liberalisation. By happy coincidence, these policies turn out to be the ones that neoliberals believe ought to be pursued in any case. Foreign direct investment is the most effective way of transferring technologies and new skills across borders. Trade brings mutual benefits to the trading partners, and free trade maximises these benefits. Global capital markets necessarily tend to allocate funds to sectors and regions with the greatest productive potential more efficiently than any feasible alternative. It should thus come as no surprise that globalisation has enabled more people to be lifted out of poverty at a faster rate than ever before in human history. Neoliberals conclude that they, and not their critics, have the stronger claim to serve the cause of global justice.

Another group of theorists seeks a ‘third way’ between social democracy and neoliberalism. They agree with neoliberals that the increasing power of global markets condemns social democracy to historical irrelevance. But they also hold that neoliberals fail to perceive how this makes the state more, rather than less, important. In a world of increased international competition, regions can only flourish if they have states capable of implementing effective technology policies; only then will their enterprises operate at (or close to) the technological frontier. States must also ensure that workforces receive the training and retraining required in a world of rapid technological change and global competition.

Defenders of the ‘catalytic state’ also point out that neoliberal policies have not in fact had the positive social consequences proclaimed by neoliberals. As Polanyi noted regarding earlier attempts to free markets from effective social regulation, markets left to themselves necessarily tend to impose immense social costs. The material foundations of entire communities rapidly erode; extensive social pathologies accompany growing and generalised economic anxiety. Free capital markets, in particular, lead

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4 This term ‘catalytic state’ is taken from Weiss 1998.
to a ‘casino economy’ in which a bloated financial sector regularly breaks down in severe financial crises. Social movements inevitably arise in response to these social costs, demanding effective state regulations to protect individuals and communities from these harms. The catalytic state, for example, must regulate the financial sector to prevent speculative bubbles from arising due to stampedes of capital inflows. Such bubbles always burst, inflicting horrific damages on individuals and communities.

From the standpoint of a fourth position, cosmopolitan democracy, advocates of the catalytic state do not break from neoliberalism thoroughly enough. While the state they advocate might fund more public goods than the neoliberal state, the sorts of public goods that will be provided will disproportionately subsidise private capital either directly (R&D, infrastructure) or indirectly (training and retraining of the labour force). The exit options retained by private capitals and the continuing lack of economic democracy ensure this. It is also unclear how effective even the most powerful individual states can be at controlling cross-border capital flows in the global economy by themselves. Financial innovations are likely to enable sophisticated investors to evade national controls with relative ease. Further, the catalytic state is a competitive state, and not all states are equally capable of fostering victory in this competition. People with the misfortune to have been born in the wrong regions will continue to lack access to the material preconditions for autonomy and human flourishing. Finally, a world of catalytic states is still a world where decisions profoundly affecting people’s lives are made beyond national borders by individuals and groups who are not accountable to those over whom their power is exercised.

For advocates of cosmopolitan democracy, the nation-state lacks the capacity to resolve these sorts of difficulties even in principle. New international institutions must be established, including democratically elected global assemblies, more extensive and effective international courts, and international economic agencies charged with ensuring full employment, worker and community participation in economic decision making, substantial social investment funds on the global level, and so on.

The authors collected in the anthology under review accept many of the central claims defended by advocates of these four positions. Along with other Marxists, these authors agree with contemporary social democrats that there is nothing historically inevitable about the rise of neoliberalism. They also hold, however, that neoliberal policies have not inaugurated an epoch of rapid economic growth. Instead, they insist, neoliberal policies have created a financial crisis that requires effective state regulation to protect individuals and communities from the harms caused by speculative bubbles.

5 Held 1995 remains the most important defence of cosmopolitanism.
growth and improved living standards. They have been associated, instead, with massive financial speculation, stagnant wages, increased economic anxiety, and lower rates of growth. A number of authors in this collection also explicitly affirm that, whatever the anti-state rhetoric of neoliberal élites might be, capital accumulation is furthered when the state effectively addresses market failures. Their arguments parallel those formulated by defenders of the catalytic state. But the writers in this volume also agree with cosmopolitan democrats that the catalytic-state model is liable to exacerbate global inequality. They also share with cosmopolitan democrats an outrage regarding the indifference and obfuscation with which mainstream social theory responds to the inequality and lack of democracy in the global order. But they agree with mainstream critics of cosmopolitanism that few trends point towards the institutionalisation of cosmopolitan ethics in the present global order.

This list of agreements and disagreements could easily be extended. It should suffice to establish that one does not need to be a Marxist to agree with a great many of the arguments presented in this set of papers. This leads to the following question: What distinguishes a Marxian approach to ‘booms, crises and globalisations’? I certainly do not want to give the impression that there is a single correct Marxian position on all relevant issues, especially not in the course of reviewing a collection revealing so much diversity among Marxian theorists. Nonetheless, most of the authors here defend some version of the following five propositions. Taken together, they provide a clear alternative to calls to institute social democracy, neoliberalism, the catalytic state, or cosmopolitan democracy.

(i) The process of capital accumulation ultimately occurs at the level of the world market. Capitalism has never consisted of an aggregate of independent national economies externally related through trade and money flows. The world market is a distinct level of determinations with its own emergent properties. National economies – and the states attempting to regulate them – have always been incorporated as moments within the world market and interstate system:

The world dynamic of capitalist development is something more and different than the ‘sum’ of national dynamics. It is something that can be perceived only if we take, as the unit of analysis, not individual states but the system of states in which world capitalism has been embedded.8

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7 The empirical case against neoliberalism is exhaustively documented in Alain Lipietz, ‘The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Post-Fordism’ (pp. 17–36), and John Weeks, ‘Globalize, Globalize, Global Lies: Myths of the World Economy in the 1990’s’ (pp. 263–82), two essays that should be assigned without delay to all students susceptible to neoliberal rhetoric.

8 Giovanni Arrighi and Jason Moore, ‘Capitalist Development in World Historical Perspective’ (pp. 56–75), p. 56. In ‘International Relations and Capitalist Discipline’ (pp. 1–16), Kees van der Pijl distinguishes three different stages in the evolution of the capitalist world market. A period characterised by the internationalisation of commodity capital was followed by epochs in which first money capital and then productive capital were internationalised (p. 3).
Advocates of social democracy do not grasp this; defenders of the catalytic state do not appreciate its implications, and most neoliberals and cosmopolitan democrats believe that the subsumption of national economies under the world market is a recent development, rather than a feature of capitalism from its inception.9

(ii) **Capitalist development is characterised by a recurrent pattern of material expansion and stagnation.**

The main theme of Arrighi and Moore’s article is the recurrence of ‘systematic cycles of accumulation’ in which extended periods of rapid material expansion alternate with eras of slower growth. Genoa/Iberia, Venice, The Netherlands, England, and the United States have each taken a turn as centres of world accumulation for a complete systematic cycle.

From this perspective, the relative success of the social-democratic agenda after World War Two does not show that the state stands above the national economy as a neutral and autonomous force, capable of ensuring efficiency and social justice if only the proper political will is present. The state is a moment of the system of social relations defining capitalism, not some external power standing apart from these relations. The successes of the social state were conditioned by the fact that the capitalist world economy was then in a period of rapid material expansion. When this expansion came to its inevitable end, the material preconditions of social democracy dissipated.11

This point is made most forcefully by Simon Clarke:

> Although the state cannot resolve the contradictions inherent in capital accumulation, it can contain the political impact of those contradictions to the extent that it is able to secure the integration of the accumulation of domestic productive capitalist into the accumulation of capital on a world scale. The limits on the ability of the state to achieve this are partly set by the particular conditions of domestic accumulation and by the national form of the state, but are more fundamentally defined by the form of the international state system and the dynamics of global accumulation of which it is a part.12
When postwar internationalisation reached its limits, profits eroded. States first responded with an inflation-generating expansion of credit, in the hope of maintaining the class compromise embodied in the Keynesian welfare state. The rise of neoliberalism represented a shift in the balance of class forces, with dominant factions of capital now happy to abandon this corporatist agenda and reverse social-democratic reforms.\textsuperscript{13}

Familiar objections to neoliberalism also need to be rethought in this light. Yes, the triumph of neoliberalism has been associated with the cancer-like growth of the financial sector at the cost of the ‘real’ economy. As Arrighi and Moore argue, however, this is nothing new. When periods of material expansion give way to periods in which almost every industrial sector suffers from overcapacity, relatively few prospects for high rates of return can be discerned from investments in production. Money capital, being inherently mobile, then necessarily tends to flow from industrial circuits to circuits of financial capital. As money flows into the financial sector, the prices of financial assets goes up, enabling holders of those assets to appropriate high returns. This attracts yet higher inflows, increasing the prices of financial assets even more, and encouraging further financial speculation. The hegemonic power in the interstate system, hoping to enjoy a ‘golden autumn’ from accumulation in the financial sector, will do all in its power to extend international circuits of financial capital. In periods of economic slowdown, most states face declining revenues, leading them to turn to capital markets to make up the difference. Interstate competition for capital further encourages the expansion of financial markets. From this standpoint, outbreaks of financial madness are neither contingent nor adequately explained by the psychological dispositions of individual investors. The parasitic growth of the financial sector for extended historical periods is an essential feature of the systematic cycles of accumulation defining capitalism’s historical development.\textsuperscript{14}

(iii) The process of capital accumulation is simultaneously the reproduction of the capital/wage-labour relation.

No theorist in this collection remotely suggests that class is the only morally or politically significant social relation. But the capital/wage-labour relation must be reproduced if capitalism is to persist over time, and so any attempt to comprehend capitalist development must place class relations at the centre of the story. I have already noted how the turn to neoliberalism must be understood first and foremost as a frontal assault on gains made by labour after World War Two. Marxian theories of class relations also ground critical assessments of the social-state, catalytic-state,
and cosmopolitan-democratic projects. From a Marxian standpoint, all three positions are beset by the same sort of internal contradiction: they all accept capitalist production relations while calling for a social order incompatible with those relations. This conclusion, which follows directly from Marx’s theory of exploitation, can be established indirectly as well.

Investors and top managers are the ones making the ‘contributions’ and bearing the ‘risks’ that capitalist ideology, law and practice proclaim merit the greatest reward. Further, the generalised insecurity of capitalism implies that no amount of capital is ever sufficient; funds must be on hand to expand in good times, withstand downturns in particular markets, and shift to new markets as opportunities arise. It follows that what counts as a ‘fair’ distribution of social wealth from the standpoint of capital will tend to be far different from what is ‘fair’ from the standpoint of wage-labourers. And this is but one area of irresolvable conflict; issues regarding the length and intensity of the working day, the appropriate level of skill and creativity for every job, and so on, necessarily tend to generate systematic antagonisms as well. Now the full employment economy that social democrats hope to install on the level of national economies (and cosmopolitan democrats hope to institute throughout the global economy) would necessarily tend to shift the balance of power in favour of labour in ways that those who own and control capital would find unacceptable. Assuming capitalist property and production relations remain in place, an extended period of capital strikes and capital flight would begin that would cease only when unemployment rates were sufficiently high to establish a new balance of social forces in capital’s favour. Any gains made by labour in the meantime are thus precarious and likely to fall far short of what social democrats and cosmopolitan democrats hold necessary for social justice.15

Advocates of the catalytic state call for the institutionalisation of the ‘high performance workplace’, in which highly-skilled workers using advanced technology create so much ‘added value’ that both high wage rates and high rates of capital accumulation can be enjoyed simultaneously. Such a pleasant state of affairs may persist for a certain period of time in certain sectors of certain regions. But there are two main reasons why it cannot be generalised as long as capitalist social relations remain in place. One has been mentioned already: no ‘fair’ distribution, or length, intensity, or skill level of the work process is pregiven. These matters are resolved through social struggles. The generalisation of the high-performance workplace would necessarily tend to result in resolutions that those who own and control capital would regard as ‘unfair’. The capital strikes and capital flight that would predictably result would soon make the high-performance workplace far less general. The second reason can be introduced in the course of considering the next essential thesis of a Marxian account of globalisation.

15 Itoh, p. 121.
A tendency to uneven development is inherent in the capitalist world market.

Unbiased readers should come away from this collection convinced that orthodox international economics is thoroughly bankrupt, far inferior to Marxian accounts of the dominant tendencies in the world market. John Weeks reveals how the theoretical case for mainstream international economics rests on implausible if not incoherent assumptions that have next to nothing to do with the actual operation of global markets. As noted previously, he also provides devastating evidence that the major empirical predictions of orthodox theory have been conclusively disconfirmed.

Regarding the alternative Marxian framework, a crucial feature of the capitalist world market is the manner in which advances in productivity and successful product innovations enable certain regions to enjoy surplus profits. This enables a virtuous circle to be established; surplus profits can fund a high level of future R&D funding, providing important preconditions for future advances in productivity and product innovation. In other regions, however, the lack of surplus profits makes it impossible to fund a comparably high level of R&D, condemning these regions to fewer future opportunities to improve productivity and introduce product innovations:

Different sellers of the same product are obliged to accept a single world price, and appropriate different amount of world value depending on their productivity. A technically superior producer makes an above-average profit, yielding an investment fund which amplifies the original advantage that led to the excess profit rate. Sources of consistently high profit rates are therefore self-reinforcing; the process of innovation itself polarizes the world into technical haves and have-nots; one small group possesses, maintains and single-mindedly cultivates a near monopoly of the means of technical innovation, harnessing the labour of the remainder to fuel this dominance.

The tendency to uneven development is thus a systematic feature of the capitalist world market.

This tendency obviously demolishes the normative claims of neoliberalism. It also undermines the project of generalising the ‘high performance workplace’ so central to arguments for the catalytic state. Social democrats fare no better; states in poor regions necessarily tend to lack the revenues required for the social programmes that they believe justice demands. Finally, the systematic tendency towards uneven development is also incompatible with the project of instituting cosmopolitan-democratic

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16 One example can be mentioned here. Orthodox theories assume that we have a measure of the supplies of labour and capital independent of the composition of trade. In all but very special cases, however, no such measure is available (Weeks, p. 265).

17 Alan Freeman, ‘Has the Empire Struck Back?’ (pp. 195–214), p. 209. See also Smith 2002. Freeman notes that only ‘0.16% of world patents are currently owned by Third-World residents’ (p. 211). He also discusses other mechanisms leading to uneven development, including policies liberalising trade in financial services, the extension of intellectual property rights, and the large-scale protectionism of advanced countries that masquerades behind ‘anti-dumping’ legislation.
values in the capitalist world market. As long as uneven development persists, it will be impossible to provide the material preconditions for the effective exercise of autonomy and human flourishing to all individuals and groups in the global order.  

The fifth and final thesis distinguishing a Marxian framework from competing positions follows at once from the above considerations.

(v) There is a practical imperative to move towards a global order beyond capitalism. 
Reversing the tendency to uneven development requires that scientific-technological advance be seen as a creation of social collective labour whose benefits belong to all members of the human community. Creating a true full employment economy that grants workers’ rights to participate in decisions affecting their lives requires elimination of the structural coercion at the heart of the capital/wage-labour relation. Overcoming the horrible social costs inflicted by overaccumulation and financial crises requires a refusal to accept the idea that capitalism is the culmination of world history.

Numerous other arguments scattered throughout the collection reinforce the fifth assertion as well. Robert Albritton reminds us of the immense environmental costs that must be paid each day an economic system based on growth as an end in itself continues. In essays written well before the insane bellicosity of the Bush administration became impossible to overlook, van der Pijl, Clarke, and Alex Callinicos remind readers that appeals to nationalism and war have been crucial to the maintenance of capitalism’s production and social relations for centuries. The fact that these appeals are now formulated in the rhetoric of ‘humanitarian interventions’ changes nothing essential.

The prospects for the sort of radical social change that could free us from these horrors may not be as bleak as is generally assumed. Albritton, in the most optimistic statement in the book, writes that ‘if we place ourselves imaginatively in the year 2100, we will look back on the twenty-first century as the century of transition away from capitalism’ (p. 125). He reasons as follows:

As productivity advances and fewer and fewer produce more and more, radical changes will be required including a 30-hour work week, a guaranteed annual income and improved safety nets, an increase in paid community service work, and improved access to education and training. All of these changes will tend to support the decommodification of labour-power. For example, as people work less hours they will have more time for self-organization and participatory democracy. (p. 132.)

Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy reach a similar conclusion from a quite different angle, the long-term shift of power from active capitalists to managers: ‘Overall, the
managerial revolution must be seen as the major counter-tendency to the falling profit rate in the entire twentieth century. Functions previously performed by capitalists have been transferred to salaried workers, including state officials and financial agents engaged in credit creation and allocation, two processes at the very heart of the economy. From this perspective, ‘neoliberalism can be interpreted as an attempt by the owners of the means of production to divert the alliance between managers and other salaried classes in the Keynesian compromise toward a new alliance between themselves and managers (in particular, the upper fraction of management)’ (p. 157).

In this alliance, the maximisation of profit rates is granted priority over all other considerations. But, when neoliberalism collapses under the weight of its internal incoherence, as it inevitably will, the possibility of a new alliance with quite different sorts of priorities may arise: ‘Managerial capitalism is a hybrid social formation combining specifically capitalist traits and a new managerial logic which foreshadows a new mode of production’ based on ‘cooperation and coordination beyond the large antagonistic features of the [capitalist] system’ (p. 154).

What might such an alternative order look like? Only one article in this collection addresses this question at any length. Readers looking for discussions of the strategies and tactics that would best move us towards a new epoch in world history are also advised to look elsewhere. But readers willing to at least consider the possibility that there may be compelling arguments for engaging in social struggles directed towards this end should rush out to purchase this book immediately.

References


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23 A number of models of socialism are compared in Richard Westra’s ‘Phases of Capitalism and Post-Capitalist Social Change’ (pp. 301–17).
Let the mob speak!

In 1748, Chesterfield described guttural laughter as the following: ‘It is the mirth of the mob, who are very pleased with silly things; for true wit or good sense never excited a laugh’.1 Perhaps good old Chesterfield just hadn’t heard a decent joke during his own life. Maybe this is why he thought that laughing loudly at a vulgar story was, at the same time, to descend to the depths of mind numbing stupidity. ‘True wit’, Chesterfield’s preferred drollness, was a lofty, as opposed to earthly, form of humour. It was, thus, a form of humour that sought to wrench itself away from the ‘mob’ so that only those lucky few who had obtained an elite education could actually understand what was ‘witty’ about the remark in the first place.

Possibly I am overstating the case here against Chesterfield. Perhaps he was right to criticise base and improper use of humour for corrupting the mind. But even if Chesterfield was justified, we are equally justified in asking why he believed that what he considered to be ‘witty’ comments were premised upon a considered and rational reflection upon the world. Could it be the case that ‘true wit or good sense’ was just as unconsidered and irrational? Let us, as an example, momentarily consider Chesterfield’s use of the term ‘mob’. First entering the English language to denote rioters in London during the Exclusion Crisis (1678–81), ‘mob’ was originally taken from the Latin expression mobile vulgus (the ‘movable’ or ‘excitable’ crowd). More specifically ‘mob’ was frequently used by an emerging patrician class to describe plebeian disorder in London and, in the process, to help to create its own distinctive patrician ideological boundaries.2

More generally, these sentiments took effect in particular places. Public parks, for example, began to be imbued with the characteristics associated with ‘public civility’. These were spaces where diverse members of ‘the middling sort’ could assert a shared identity. Strangers they may have been, but enemies they were not. Social bonds were

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1 Cited in Brewer 1997, p. 103.
2 Shoemaker 1987, p. 273. See also Shoemaker’s more extended and recent discussion in Shoemaker 2004. For a discussion of the differences between plebeian and patrician culture see Thompson 1974.
forged through difference and unity constructed through styles of dress and modes of speech. Those who did not match the necessary civil requirements were often excluded both symbolically and physically from participating in the new public culture. Respectability became a key word to guarantee access. A person lacking the right credentials could expect to be denied entrance.

Theatre managers, proprietors of pleasure gardens, organisers of public assemblies and members of exhibiting societies took measures . . . to exclude people they found undesirable.

An ambience of ‘social taste’ and ‘social distance’ came to prominence that shunned the common traits of plebeian culture.

I think that the example of Chesterfield is, therefore, a useful starting point in exploring the peculiarities of the capitalist public sphere for at least four reasons. First, it highlights that access to what might be termed as the bourgeois public sphere is often defined by an abstract ideal of ‘rational’ reflection. This ideal is abstract in the sense that an important element of bourgeois ideology elevates the realm of mind as being of prime importance. Here, we discover the pure and cultivated faculty of human experience untouched by the ‘great unwashed’. The mind is transformed into an abstract realm of transcendental thinking, a pure void by which a thousand concrete particulars of bourgeois society can be pieced back together again through the most fantastic of abstract theories. The works of the great bourgeois thinkers such as Locke, Kant, J.S. Mill and Habermas testify to this type of thinking. Thus, perhaps most importantly, bourgeois theory suggests that ‘rational’ reflection is a self-enclosed realm compared to that of other realms such as the economy and politics.

Second, the example of Chesterfield demonstrates quite well the point that the bourgeois public sphere does not exist primarily to open up debate and discussion between people on various issues of public importance. Rather, the bourgeois public sphere exists to close down debate and discussion among those it deems as ‘lawless’, ‘uncultivated’ and ‘incompetent’. One of the main avenues open for the bourgeois public sphere to achieve this is to exactly construct a ‘cultural aesthetic’ of what it means to engage in ‘lawful’, ‘cultivated’ and ‘competent’ discussion. This aesthetic can then be used to denigrate and humiliate those utterances that the bourgeois public sphere wishes to exclude. But, more sinisterly, by constructing an abstract aesthetic of what is deemed to be good debate and discussion, liberal thinkers also defend an ideological form of the capitalist state as a means of regulating those utterances it deems as being ‘unlawful’, ‘uncultivated’, ‘incompetent’, etc.

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3 Sennett 1992, p. 16 ff.
4 Brewer 1997, p. 94.
5 For critical accounts of this type of bourgeois disinterested reflection see Bourdieu 1986; Eagleton 1990; Lloyd and Thomas 1998; McNally 2001; Roberts 2003; Sprinker 1987; Schott 1988.
Third, Chesterfield was writing in an age – the mid-eighteenth century – when capitalist social relations were becoming hegemonic in Britain. During this period, the commodity-form was assuming an abstract dominance as a means of circulating goods. As Marx notes, the commodity-form under capitalism is based upon the internal opposition between use-value and value that is hidden within the commodity itself. This internal opposition appears as an external opposition through a relation between two commodities. It is within the commodity-form that it is possible to note an aesthetic division. On the one hand, we witness the emergence of an objectified, static and universal desire to accumulate commodities. On the other hand, we witness the emergence of the concrete individualised rational bodily desire to ensure that one’s own labour changes its social form so that it acquires the status of a commodity or ‘thing’. As I have already indicated, opposition to this peculiar aesthetic is made through a more ‘earthly’ aesthetic associated with the proletarian public sphere, a public sphere that seeks talks about how it is possible to overcome the fetishism of the commodity-form.

Finally, Chesterfield’s ‘witty’ observation was a recognition that other voices did in fact exist in the public sphere. According to Chesterfield, it was some entity called the ‘mob’ which came back to haunt bourgeois sensibilities. But there is a truth to Chesterfield’s observation. The bourgeois public sphere is always defined through a dialectical relationship with its other. This other is the proletarian public sphere, a public sphere which is more ‘earthly’ and ‘everyday’ than the bourgeois public sphere because it seeks to connect ‘rational’ public debate and discussion with different social spheres. And so, for example, those involved in the immense British socialist movement of the nineteenth century, Chartism, would often demand equality in both political and economic spheres. Chartists saw both spheres as being complementary. But these sorts of movements are ‘earthly’ for another reason. By viewing society as an interconnected ‘whole’, popular, everyday culture assumes a significance that is often lacking in the bourgeois public sphere. By bringing ‘critical rational reflection’ down to the level of the complex interconnections and just plain messiness of society, proletarian public spheres are frequently marked by a populist idiom that mocks and laughs at the pretensions and distance of bourgeois rationality. Hence the reason why people like Chesterfield sigh in dismay when they hear proletarian laughter.

Now, all I have said so far might itself seem somewhat abstract, irrelevant and redundant to be of use for everyday socialist politics. However, I am only indicating at a high level of analysis what I consider to be the main characteristics of the capitalist public sphere. It should be left to subsequent analyses to develop these characteristics at the level of more concrete and complex social forms. Obviously, this would entail not only empirical investigation of ‘actually existing’ public spheres, but also the

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development of ‘public sphere’ concepts that can account for the more abstract characteristics of the capitalist public sphere and which capture specific empirical manifestations of an ‘actually existing’ public sphere. *Masses, Classes and the Public Sphere*, edited by Mike Hill and Warren Montag, aims to develop both empirical and theoretical issues around the capitalist public sphere. It thereby opens up exciting opportunities for a Marxist theory of the public sphere. However, it also exposes some of the weaknesses of current Marxist thinking on the public sphere. In what follows I outline what I consider to be some of the strengths and weaknesses of *Masses, Classes and the Public Sphere*. I carry out this task through the four points outlined above concerning the form that the public sphere assumes under capitalism.

**Rational reflection**

One of the main purposes of *Masses, Classes and the Public Sphere*, it seems to me, is to critically engage with what it means to debate and discuss issues of public importance through ‘rational reflection’. Indeed, in their introduction to the collection, Hill and Montag rightly take to task the leading theorist of public sphere theory in the West, Jürgen Habermas, on these grounds. Habermas argues that individuals have an inherent and spontaneous tendency to communicate freely with one another. But Habermas qualifies this statement by also suggesting that this spontaneous communicative realm can only remain intact if it is not colonised by the systemic imperatives of organisations such as the economy and state. These systemic imperatives can limit reason and critical reflection upon the world by shifting communicative reason to means-ends calculations. Thus, Habermas provides a normative base from which he can say when the state can intervene within civil society in order to restore ‘rational’ discussion. This is a point I return to below.

In Chapter 6, Étienne Balibar dissects liberal theory to a greater extent. Balibar focuses upon some of the ideas of Rousseau and Kant in order to understand the complex linkages between the individual and the state. In Rousseau, Balibar finds a continuous oscillation between constitution and insurrection (p. 109). What Balibar means by this is that Rousseau’s social theory is, in many respects, highly subversive. This can be seen, for example, in Rousseau’s idea that the general interest is superior to particular interests and it is up to the government of the day to preserve the general interest against particular interests. But to rule over particular interests a government must ensure that these interests are compatible with one another. Hence the reason that Rousseau also thinks that individuals should form a collective body with rights. And hence the reason that Rousseau’s theory is highly subversive (individuals should have political rights) at the point at which it develops liberal theory (a defence of the unity of the state to govern a defined nation). Balibar goes on to demonstrate how Kant reformulates Rousseau’s insights. Instead of seeing ‘the people’ as empirical
subjects, as had been the case with Rousseau, Kant suggests that the ‘people’ should be seen in a juridical sense that is embodied in the institutions of an Idea. Thus to be an active citizen, it is not sufficient to be a party to a contract. It is also necessary to have the inherent ‘properties’, to embody a transcendental idea that enables free critical reflection to take place. Corresponding to this inherent idea is the notion that an ideal state is one that educates ‘men’ in the rules of their own ‘collective freedom’.

Balibar’s discussion is interesting and illuminating. However, it is not entirely clear how it relates to the public sphere. Certainly, Balibar hints at how the public sphere figures in his analysis. For example, he notes that, for Kant, ‘active citizens’ are those who make good use of their inherent reason. Those who are ‘passive’, and who do not make good use of their reason, are those who work in the service of others – minors, women, dependents, and so on. These passive citizens rely on others and therefore cannot become autonomous subjects. But it would have been useful if Balibar had linked this frankly reactionary standpoint in Kant’s thinking with how liberal thinkers subtly regulate debate and discussion in the public sphere. To give one illustration, Kant argued that, to make judgements about how to participate in civil society, it is important to assess the impact of those judgements upon the moral autonomy of others. It is in this respect that Kant advocated the use of public reason via public discussion by each person. In the *Critique of Judgement* Kant develops three maxims to guide said discussion: ‘(1) to think for oneself... (2) to think from the standpoint of everyone else... (3) always think consistently’.8 From these three maxims, Kant develops a transcendental moral law: ‘Act always according to that maxim which you can at the same time consistently will as universal law’.9 It was Kant’s belief that, through public reason and discussion, individuals would institutionalise the universal law of freedom based upon respect for autonomy. At the same time, however, Kant also made it clear that those who did not follow his theoretical guidance when exercising their right to free public discussion would descend into a ‘lawless use of reason’.10 Kant’s use of the word ‘lawless’ is interesting in this context. It echoes our earlier discussion about the relationship between ‘civil’ and ‘polite’ debate, on the one hand, and the regulation through state and law of ‘vulgar’ debate by the ‘mob’, on the other. Indeed, Kant went as far as to say that those who engage in the lawless use of reason will forfeit their freedom of thought. It is only a small leap of the imagination to suggest that lawless reason should be rendered lawful through some form of discipline and punishment.11 Other chapters, however, are devoted to exploring how the public sphere is regulated. It is to these chapters that I turn.

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8 Cited in Owen 1999, p. 23.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 See also Smith 1991.
Regulating the public sphere

In their introduction, Hill and Montag rightly note that, for Habermas, when communicative rationality becomes deformed by systemic imperatives, then the constitutional order based upon reason must be defended, even if this is achieved through legitimate force. Thus Hill and Montag effectively demonstrate that, for Habermas and, we could add, for liberal theorists more generally, the state is seen as a means of ensuring that an abstract form of reason is maintained and regulated at the point when it is liable to spiral into crisis. For example, in a very useful discussion in Chapter 8, Ted Stolze shows how, in his later work, Habermas constructs a novel means of regulating the utterances emanating from ‘counterpublics’. In *Between Fact and Norms*, Habermas argues that contemporary modern societies encompass two broad groups: ‘customers’ and ‘suppliers’. These groups are themselves part of a ‘centre-periphery axis’. The ‘centre’ consists of the familiar institutional complexes of administration (including the incumbent Government), judicial system, and democratic opinion- and will-formation (which includes parliamentary bodies, political elections, and party competition).

From within the centre emerge peripheral institutions ‘equipped with rights of self-governance’ with a lawmaker role granted by the state. These institutions of self-governance are those of the aforementioned ‘customers’ and ‘suppliers’.

According to Habermas, ‘customers’ represent a combination of public and private organisations that ‘fulfil certain coordination functions in more or less opaque social sectors’.12 Examples here would include private business organisations, trade unions, voluntary bodies, and so on. ‘Suppliers’ differ from ‘customers’ to the extent that they incorporate ‘counterpublics’ that can articulate popular public interests. As Stolze indicates, this model of democracy sees public opinions as being filtered from the periphery to the centre. These public spheres are ‘suppliers’ because they detect problems in society, apply pressure on locating solutions to these problems, and help to augment solutions. According to Habermas, these counterpublics are thereby ‘weak’ because they form opinions but make no decisions. To ‘speak competently’ is therefore to speak as a ‘supplier’ through the communicative power of the state and law. Thus, for Habermas, ultimate decision-making power resides in the communicative power of law and state.

Chapters 2 to 5 put some empirical flesh on these theoretical bones by discussing specific case studies in which the ‘masses’ have been constrained by the discursive boundaries of the bourgeois public sphere. Crystal Bartolovich, for example, explores John Stowe’s *Survey of London* of 1603. Bartolovich convincingly demonstrates how

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13 Habermas 1996, p. 335.
Stowe attempts to provide a neat cartographic description of London during this period, denying the complex flows of difference within the capital. Stowe achieves this by describing London ‘vertically’, by mapping out London as a unique and unified space that disembeds London from the world. As a result, Stowe’s Survey is based upon a fantastical rewriting of the city as spontaneously self-generating in ways that would later be criticized by post-colonial critics in their reassessment of cultural studies. (p. 23.)

Such a rewriting seeks order by integrating the vast complex dynamics of London during this period through networks of similarity. Thus, differences between competing publics are denied and a unified liberal vision is preserved.

In Chapter 3, Raúl H. Villa, by way of contrast, shows how the Mexican population in Los Angeles has historically developed public spheres of opposition. For example, Villa documents how Mexican cultural identity had etched itself in specific places within the city of Los Angeles. Of particular significance was the Main Street commercial and entertainment corridor that ran through the Plaza district. This space was home to festive celebrations of Mexican culture and opened up opportunities for an expressive identity-formation for Mexican men and women of different ages. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, the Plaza could also be politically appropriated by the Mexican population and be invested with different meanings.

In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, Jamie Owen Daniel and Stanley Aronowitz utilise the work of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their respective studies of public housing in Chicago and the US trade-union movement. In *Public Sphere and Experience*, Negt and Kluge argued that popular public spheres often have to operate outside of the legitimate boundaries of official institutions. Popular public spheres have no choice in this matter, for they are often ‘blocked’ from gaining access in official institutions by, for example, having first to organise themselves through bourgeois forms of expression. Daniel illustrates this in regards to urban housing in Chicago. She focuses upon Katie Sistrunk, a forty-five year-old mother of thirteen and grandmother to twenty-eight. Katie Sistrunk actively campaigned for better housing for herself and for some of her relatives. However, the authorities and press immediately positioned Katie Sistrunk in a ‘deviant’ category, as a person coming from a ‘criminal’ family, ensuring that the displacement of people like her can be justified. Aronowitz similarly notes how US trade unions have adopted the forms of expression of bourgeois bureaucratic institutions, as there has been a marked shift from industrial labour to a more bureaucratic-service model of union administration. Aronowitz notes how this shift has alienated rank-and-file members from union activism. At the same time, Aronowitz also notes that some trade unions have maintained a participatory climate for their members by resisting the service model of unionism.
These chapters are rich in empirical detail and serve to show how counterpublics are often regulated by complex forms of governance. However, such approaches expose some weaknesses within a Marxist account of the public sphere. By detailing how a dominant discourse seeks to exclude counterpublic utterances, the authors discussed rely on a dualist account of the public sphere which would seem to be implicitly based around a ‘philosophy of praxis’ standpoint. From this standpoint, the visible and historically specific tactics and strategies used by groups to gain hegemony are analysed in conjunction with the underlying structures that facilitate or inhibit movements towards winning hegemony.\(^{14}\) The difficulty here is that a praxis standpoint often perpetuates a dualist position (conscious hegemonic strategies operate upon underlying hegemonic structures) that opens up the kind of problems associated with more liberal perspectives such as the one contained in Habermas’s account. In both instances, the complex mediations of everyday dialogue at different levels of abstraction – mediations that bestow upon everyday dialogue a particular social form – are neglected.

A better starting point, I think, would be to examine how an empirical public sphere changes its ideological identity through interaction with other social forms. Any exploration of a social form must therefore ‘preserve all the qualitative differences between interacting domains and must trace all the various stages through which change travels’.\(^{15}\) In other words, it is important to understand how a public sphere not only reflects a mode of production, but also how it refracts a mode of production in its own unique manner at different levels of abstraction.\(^{16}\) There are four principal reasons why this is a more satisfactory methodological route to take.

In the first instance, by tracing the complex mediations that have given a public sphere a unique social form, we have a much more solid foundation for making normative comments upon the dialogue we are investigating. This is because we have situated the public sphere in question within the determining ideological elements that inform a particular set of social relations, such as capitalist social relations. We are therefore far better positioned to see how the public sphere in question internalises that determining ideology in its own way. Thus, to put it simply, we have a basis to discriminate between utterances that justify, in their own way, the mediated form of the determining ideology and utterances that do not. Many of the chapters that deal with empirical public spheres in *Masses, Classes and the Public Sphere* simply do not pay enough attention to constructing such a basis. As a result, they seem to assume that just because the counterpublics in question articulate dialogue in opposition to the state then they are inherently emancipatory, and vice versa. But this standpoint is highly questionable, as it suggests a clear-cut dialogic opposition between official

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\(^{15}\) Voloshinov 1973, p. 18.

\(^{16}\) See also Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978.
public spheres and counterpublics rather than carefully analysing the dialogic contradictions within and between both. After all, dominant discursive agendas are rarely unified and often represent an unholy alliance between different dominant fractions.

Second, by tracing how the most abstract determinations become refracted within a particular public sphere, we will also be sensitive to how dialogue refracts any contradictions and tensions evident at different levels of abstraction. More often than not, dialogue is composed of distinctive utterances that contain ‘accents’ which bestow upon words different ideological evaluations. These different accents are not only evident between a dominant public sphere and counterpublics, they are also evident within a dominant public sphere and within the counterpublics themselves. Debate and discussion about how best to regulate counterpublics is made within a dominant public sphere between, for example, hegemonic fractions, different state bureaucratic representatives and other more localised modes of governance. Debate and discussion about how best to circumvent a dominant public sphere is made within a counterpublic between, for example, different trade unions or different factions within a radical political movement.

Third, a materialist refraction theory is often better equipped at analysing the regulation of counterpublics. By insisting that regulatory mechanisms are more frequently than not established through debate and discussion, a refraction theory is interested in how forms of regulation actively respond to the demands of counterpublics by displacing these demands into dialogue that is less oppositional in tone. For example, throughout the nineteenth century, the British state introduced piecemeal reforms in order to incorporate different sections of the working class into the political apparatus. This ‘divide and rule’ strategy was itself based upon constant dialogue between sections of the ruling order about how they should go about this process. This is not to deny that some of the authors in Masses are not attuned to these different forms of discussion. Aronowitz, for example, documents such debate and discussion within the trade-union movement in the US. However, many of these chapters assume that dominant agendas are homogeneous, static and ‘uni-accentual’. They thus invest these agendas with too much power and fail fully to bring out their tensions, conflicts, contradictions and different ‘accents’.

Finally, a materialist refraction theory is useful because it shows that any public sphere is overdetermined by a number of interlinked mediating moments. As such, it is important for empirical analysis to develop new concepts and categories to explain and understand each new level of analysis. Having said all this, it is also true that many chapters in Masses are more attuned to tracing how the abstract forms of capitalist

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social relations are reproduced within more concrete public spheres. It is to these
authors that I now turn.

The reproduction of the capitalist public sphere

In Chapter 9, Michael Hardt documents how capitalism has altered its form in
contemporary societies. Today, according to Hardt, the real subsumption of labour by
capital, based upon the socialisation of capital through technological and scientific
innovation, has enabled capital to displace labour as the source of capitalist production.
This implies that the state need no longer ‘educate’ and ‘discipline’ labour. Nowadays,
so Hardt suggests, the state is more interested in control. But because labour is no
longer the centre of production, the state seeks control beyond the neat boundaries
of civil society. The state wishes to control not fixed identities but ‘flexible identities’.
‘Mobility, speed, and flexibility are the qualities that characterize this separate plane
of rule’ (p. 173). There is much truth in what Hardt has to say here. However, it is
again unclear how Hardt’s discussion relates to the public sphere. He hints that new
forms of socialised labour create innovative forms of co-operation based upon, for
example, ‘intellectual creativity, caring, labour, kin work, and so forth’. But many
liberal theorists also stress these new forms of co-operation as a basis for regenerating
communities. Robert Putnam’s theory of social capital, based upon the establishment
of networks of trust and reciprocity, is just one highly debated example. How exactly
Hardt’s description of contemporary relations of co-operation is different from
contemporary liberalism is unclear. It could also be added that these strains of
contemporary liberalism are frequently concerned with fostering a rich and inclusive
civil society. Again, it is difficult to see how Hardt differs from these theorists, which
therefore begs the question of whether his rejection of civil society as an analytical
concept can be so easily made.

This problem is especially apparent in Hardt’s suggestion that some of the original
thinkers of civil society can be brushed aside because their ideas belong to a time
when the state sought to discipline civil society. Hardt, for example, focuses upon
Hegel as a thinker whose time is up. The paradigm of civil society has collapsed and
with it the ideas of people such as Hegel who once sought to understand it. But the
extent to which this is the case is highly debatable. Indeed it is plausible, I think, to
argue that Hegel constructs a path to isolating the starting point for an analysis of
the capitalist public sphere. This can be seen in Hegel’s use of the concept of Recht.
In *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that the concept of Recht can be used to analyse
how with the arrival of capitalist social relations each person is treated as an individual
bearer of rights. Indeed, as Hegel clearly states in *The Philosophy of Right*, capitalism

translates each person into a free legal personality. After all, commodity capitalism is constituted and reproduced at the most abstract level through individuals who privately own their own labour. People are, therefore, individual legal entities under capitalism. However, Recht also alerts us to a specific contradiction with this relationship. Individuals are forced to publicly recognise the individual rights of another if they wish to exchange information about the exchange of commodities. At the same time, an individual must attempt to subvert the rights of another if she wishes to gain competitive advantage. From this starting point, we could add that this recognition and denial of rights by one person against another produces a dialogic struggle between individuals about how to ‘accent’ and ‘intonation’ of Recht. Thus, Hegel can alert us to the point that the public sphere within capitalism is firstly defined at an abstract level as dialogue that is not so much predicated upon the interaction between two individuals but, rather, as one that seeks to gain control over the way that Recht is defined. In other words, the capitalist public sphere is first and foremost a struggle over the abstract ‘accentuation’ and ‘intonation’ of Recht.

Hegel also makes it clear that Recht is an all-encompassing, all-pervading and compulsive right – a claim that, at a high level of abstraction, is not based upon a separation of the state from civil society. Rather, Hegel suggests that Recht is found first of all within the abstract properties of the commodity-form. Hardt thereby misreads Hegel as being primarily concerned with the relationship between civil society and the state. For this is to situate Hegel within the theoretical boundaries of more bourgeois thinkers of the public sphere. According to bourgeois thinkers, the modern public sphere is based upon a separation of the state from civil society. Spaces are, therefore, conceptualised as emerging within civil society that encourage public dialogue unhindered from the coercive body of the state. But, problematically, this is to start one’s analysis from a historically developed form of capitalism. Indeed, it ideologically justifies the separation of the state from civil society, rather than seeing that this separation is a moment of the advanced form of capitalism. By providing the rudiments of an alternative account that seeks to understand the most abstract form of the public sphere within capitalist commodity relations, Hegel shows that the capitalist public sphere is not, in the first instance, predicated upon the separation of the state from civil society. This opens the way for one to argue that the public sphere is truly emancipatory when the coercive public power of the state is dissolved into organised public bodies within civil society.

All of this is not to say that Recht is the determining principle of the capitalist public sphere. Recht is certainly the starting point of an enquiry into the contradictory form of the capitalist public sphere but not its end result. Just as Marx chose the commodity as the starting point for his investigation of capitalist production because the simplest appearance of capitalism was ‘an immense collection of commodities’, so is it the case that Recht is chosen as the starting point for an investigation of the capitalist public
sphere because the simplest appearance of the capitalist public sphere is, to paraphrase Marx, ‘an immense collection of rights that are subject to public dialogue’. And, yet, we must also recognise that capitalism is predicated upon a specific class relationship. To be consistent with our analysis, we must derive this class relationship from our initial starting point. Only when we achieve this have we then isolated the most abstract determining contradiction of our object of investigation. This contradiction is the determining one because it is based within the most abstract form of the relationship between underlying class forces. As I have already indicated, Marx claims to have isolated the determining contradiction of capitalism as that obtaining between free wage-labourers who are dispossessed of owning and controlling the means of production and those that do own and control the means of production. If we follow this line of thought, then we must derive from Recht the contradictory class relationship between proletarian and bourgeois public spheres. Subsequently, what we can say is that Hegel was certainly interested in the relationship between civil society and the state. But Hegel was only interested in this relationship as it emerged from a more basic contradictory relationship that existed above and beyond civil society and the state. Therefore, it is Hardt who begins his analysis with the liberal problematic of the relationship between civil society and the state, not Hegel.

It is in this regard that David McInerney in Chapter 10 provides a useful corrective to Hardt. This is because McInerney utilises historical materialism in order to understand the social form and origins of print capitalism. McInerney begins by taking Benedict Anderson to task for arguing that printing originated with the emergence of capitalism. According to McInerney, there is no inherent relationship between printing and capitalism. Evidence suggests somewhat the opposite. Confined largely within household and independent labour, capital was concerned with printing only in a financial and mercantilist capacity. Thus even with the onset of the nineteenth century, print production was still restricted to technical relations of production characteristic of precapitalist forms of printing. Capitalist print-production was therefore mostly confined to larger markets secured through monopolies, and thus relied upon the expansion of these markets, such as the Latin market in Catholic countries. Small printers worked within precapitalist production and produced books for riskier markets, such as vernacular printing of religious books. McInerney thereby demonstrates the usefulness of historical materialism in going beyond surface appearances in order to comprehend the social form of the public sphere. But McInerney’s chapter is also helpful in highlighting how public spheres different from the bourgeois public sphere also exist within capitalism. It is to some of these public spheres that I now turn.
The return of the other

In Chapter 7, Warren Montag usefully exposes Habermas’s ‘fear’ of street politics. According to Montag, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Habermas dreads the ‘unreason’ that emanates from the ‘masses’ taking to the street. Montag carefully documents how Habermas implicitly argues that ‘to speak from the street is to speak from outside the public sphere . . .’ (p. 141). What Montag could have added here was that Habermas’s fear of the masses is also linked to his fear of the welfare state. It is surely no coincidence that the so-called decline of the public sphere, or ‘refeudalization of the public sphere’, that Habermas laments emerges during the twentieth century and reaches its zenith at the point that the welfare state is brought into being. I have always thought this was a strange standpoint for Habermas to take. After all, the welfare state opened up opportunities for the labour movement and other social movements to assert particular rights in civil rights. If one reads Habermas, however, it would seem that this is a rather depressing period in Western history and one which stunts public debate and discussion.

Interestingly, in Chapter 11, Mike Hill also focuses upon a key liberal thinker, Adam Smith. In a similar vein to Balibar, Hill attempts to pull out the subversive potential of liberal theory and does this by discussing Smith’s account of a ‘sympathetic spectator’. According to Hill, Smith consciously tried to elaborate a reading of the public sphere that revolved around the belief that

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\text{society and conversation . . . are the most powerful remedies for restoring the mind to . . . that equal and happy temper, which is so necessary to self-satisfaction. (p. 210.)}
\]

Hill notes that Smith’s preoccupation with the public sphere is similar to Habermas’s, in the sense that Smith’s spectator may be traced to the polite conversation of presumed equals of the eighteenth-century coffee houses so beloved by Habermas. But, in place of Habermas’s disinterested rational-critical debate, Smith offers room for the more affective and potentially conflict-ridden dimensions of feeling. This was an account that preoccupied E.P. Thompson’s work on the moral economy of the crowd. At what point does a ‘mob’ become transformed into ‘the people’ with a moral agenda? It is in this respect that Hill argues that Smith has much in common with E.P. Thompson. According to Thompson, a ‘mob’ is transformed into a ‘people’ at the point at which it becomes a body of knowledge and a public sphere in its own right. Hill’s argument is complemented by Tou-me Park and Gayle Wald’s chapter, examining how the bourgeois public sphere is contested by African-American and Asian women’s writing.

Hill presents an interesting argument, though one he could have expanded upon. Liberal thinkers like Smith often do seem to have progressive aspects to their ideas. But this is always linked with reactionary and regressive aspects. John Stuart Mill, for example, is credited with developing a theory of free speech that is distinctively
‘modern’ in its aspirations. This is the case insofar as Mill is attuned to the modern preoccupation with accounting for individual pleasures derived from thought and discussion. Those that do manage to derive pleasure in line with their ability to engage in thought and discussion can be said to develop ‘higher pleasures’. However, because Mill focuses upon the ‘concrete’ activity of individuals he fails acknowledge how abstract capitalist social relations mediate the pleasures of thought and discussion. What is more, Mill constructs a subtle theory for the regulation of thought and discussion. He suggests that, when people do not make connections between their individual ability to gain pleasure from thought and discussion, they engage in what he terms as ‘lower pleasures’. And, unsurprisingly, for Mill, those that do engage in these lower pleasures, at least during his own day, were those involved in the labour movement. This leads Mill to argue that individuals who entertain lower pleasures should expect their utterances to be regulated by a liberal form of the capitalist state. This being the case, Mill advocates a minimalist form of state invention and one that is to be achieved through educating people to be ‘cultivated’. Thus what appears at first glance as a progressive tendency in Mill is dialectically entwined with a reactionary tendency.20

The question of education and its use in radicalising the public sphere is explored at length in Henry A. Giroux’s chapter. Giroux draws upon Paulo Freire’s theory of schooling. According to Freire, political struggles are won and lost in specific spaces that link narratives of everyday experience with narratives of institutional power. Teaching and learning should reflect the contingencies and specificities of historical contexts. Teachers, in this light, have the role of informing students about a social context and teach them how to think critically about it. At the same time, educators need to stress the social and not merely individualistic nature of social struggle. Thus learners become subjects in their own education by critically engaging, through dialogue and debate, the historical, social and economic conditions that both limit and enable their own understanding as power. Thus, Giroux provides an important discussion and remedy to liberal theories of education and its relationship to the public sphere. In particular, Giroux demonstrates that education can be usefully applied to socialist politics.

Conclusion

Masses, Classes and the Public Sphere is an extremely important book presenting new Marxist perspectives on the public sphere. It thereby opens up many exciting avenues of research in this area. In saying this, a Marxist account of the public sphere is still

20 I discuss this dialectic at greater length in Mill’s work in Roberts 2003 and 2004.
in its infancy and, in numerous respects, has still to advance beyond many liberal accounts. Therefore the task for Marxism is to produce new concepts that capture the peculiarities of the capitalist public sphere and the specific contradictions that both transcribe and open up oppositional utterances. Masses, Classes and the Public Sphere signposts some of these peculiarities and contradictions but it also demonstrates that Marxist theory has still much theoretical and empirical work to undertake in this area.

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Grammar

Before the ‘linguistic turn’ that marked many fields of study in the twentieth century, Gramsci understood that grammar as the underlying structure that makes languages possible is an important political issue, both as a regulative social institution and a key element in philosophical questions of thought and knowledge. Indeed, Gramsci dedicated his last prison notebook (Q 29) to grammar. There his discussion of the politics of grammar can also be seen as a grammar of politics, as a metaphorical examination of the dynamics of hegemony.

Of the many meanings and dimensions of ‘grammar’, the most important for Marxists is whether it is seen as the structure or set of rules defining a language that is ‘objective’, politically neutral and even transcends history and culture in such ideas as a ‘universal grammar’. The other alternative is that the very description of a grammar is a political act that has social and cultural consequences. Gramsci develops ‘grammar’ in the latter sense, showing how it inherently involves operations of power and how it relates to ideology, authority, regulation and hegemony. The former understanding of ‘grammar’ as, at least initially, a technical and objective structure or set of rules that can be described in a value-neutral way has had much greater purchase in contemporary linguistics as well as in everyday language.

Noam Chomsky’s theory of ‘generative grammar’ and his corollary search for a ‘universal grammar’ that is ‘hard-wired’ in the human brain is the culmination of a long history of supposedly apolitical notions of grammar.

1. Grammar comes from the Greek, grámma (tēchnē) – Latin: (ars) grammatica – the word gramma means ‘letter, written, recorded’. In its earliest usage in Greco-Roman education, it was connected with writing and covered a broad spectrum including the appreciation of literature. The grammateús of the New Testament were the ‘scribes’ (Mat 2, 4). In the Middle Ages, it became synonymous with knowledge or study of Latin, and often learning in general, especially the type of knowledge of the learned classes. With the rise of the nation-state and the vernacular languages, ‘grammar’ lost its particular connection to Latin and became associated with ‘modern’ languages.

One of the basic distinctions in grammar is between descriptive grammar and normative (or prescriptive) grammar. What is known as the Port-Royal Grammar (published in Paris in 1660) is an important historical foundation of normative grammar. It used the idea of a ‘universal grammar’ shared by all languages to further its aim of teaching people not necessarily how language is used, but how it should be used. The authors, Antoine Arnauld (1612–94) and Claude Lancelot (1628–95), were Jansenists of the Abbey of Port-Royal des Champs near Paris. As with an earlier work by Lancelot (1644) explaining in French how to speak Latin, the Port-Royal Grammar was primarily a pedagogical tool aimed at making it easier to learn a language by explaining its structure. Its philosophical position is closely tied to the Port-Royal Logic (Arnaud/Nicole 1662) in presenting language structure as the product of rational thought processes.

In the tradition of René Descartes’s rationalism, the Port-Royal Grammar defines grammar as the method by which one turns thoughts into verbal signs, or the art of speaking. As Michel Foucault notes, it would be too narrow to see this simply as a prescription of a legislator on how to speak. Rather, the correct use of speech for Arnauld and Lancelot is a way to reduce the discrepancy between one’s thoughts (and one’s mother tongue) and the language being learned (Foucault III–XVIII). This set a precedent whereby grammar had some important role in turning our inner thoughts
into their outer expression in language, which is at the heart of the connection between thinking and language, logic and grammar. The Port-Royal ‘normative grammar’ was also important in viewing language as a synchronic system where the histories of the words constituting it are irrelevant. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Ferdinand de Saussure took from the Port-Royal Grammar this insistence that linguistics should not be concerned with ‘reconstructing’ previous linguistic states, as was the method of the historical or comparative grammarians of the nineteenth century. Instead of diachronic analysis, linguistics must focus on languages as synchronic systems in order to define its subject in a ‘scientifically manageable’ way.

In the eighteenth century, German romanticism offered a much more historical and cultural approach to language, inspired by a fascination with the origins of language, the primacy of poetry and expression not solely rational but emotional, and the diversity of languages throughout the world. Johann Gottfried Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt and others, in the context of their Enlightenment critique, provided important contributions to the study of language. Both the concept of grammar and the emphasis on the structure of languages were eclipsed by romanticism’s aesthetic and expressive considerations. Though Humboldt’s object was the Diversity of Human Language Construction (1836), he subordinated it to the expressive and ‘active’ power of what he called ‘mèrgeixai’.

In the nineteenth century, the term ‘grammar’ re-emerged in connection not to normative or synchronic structures of language, but to the historical investigation of language change and the relations among Indo-European languages especially rooted in comparisons between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, August Schleicher and Franz Bopp developed this approach labelled ‘comparative grammar’, comparative philology or historical linguistics. Working from the assumption that languages evolved like living organisms and that all Indo-European languages sprang from one original language or Ursprache, comparative grammarians tried to explain historical changes in languages through ‘sound laws’. They focussed on how individual sounds and word forms changed historically within a language and across languages. The emphasis was phonetic and lexical rather than either semantic or syntactic.

The affinities between comparative grammar and German romanticism waned at the end of the nineteenth century. With the rise of the ‘neogrammarians [Jung-grammiker]’, comparative grammar took a decidedly positivistic turn. Where Humboldt believed in a ‘universal grammar’ and the early comparativists had comparable ideas about an ‘Ursprache’, the neogrammarians rejected all such ideas as unscientific. They were also disparaging of the value judgements that normative conceptions of grammar contained. Even if such value-judgements were supposedly based on logic and incontestable reason, the neogrammarians method excluded any notion of grammar as normative of how people should speak. Rather, grammar, for them, was a descriptive pursuit of how people actually used language. They took the earlier comparative grammarians’ idea of ‘sound laws’ to its extremes, arguing that all language change could be attributed to such laws, without exception. According to this view, linguistic change has nothing to do with cultural, political or social context. Rather, linguistic phenomena could be explained scientifically solely by laws internal to language.

2. In 1911, the neogrammarians still held sway when the young student, Antonio Gramsci, began studying linguistics at the University of Turin. In the same year, the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, completed his last of four years of lectures in Geneva, lectures that would give birth to structuralism. Gramsci’s linguistics professor, Matteo Bartoli, hoped that Gramsci would become the linguist to refute successfully the neogrammarians. But it was Saussure whose legacy was, if not to destroy the neogrammarians, at least to render them a closed chapter in the history of linguistics. In his posthumously published lectures (1916), which became the famous Course in General Linguistics, he rejected historical
approaches to the study of language: language functions as a 'system' wherein expression and meaning are constituted through reference to and differentiation from each other.

There is no evidence that Gramsci knew anything about Saussure's lectures. However, his studies with Bartoli led to a similar rejection of the neogrammarians. Like Saussure, Gramsci returned to Port-Royal's notion of normative grammar as a synchronic structure of language. Also like Saussure, Gramsci criticised the Port-Royal connection between 'normative grammar' and 'universal grammar', or a direct relation to some ahistorical notion of logic and reason. Unlike Saussure, Gramsci's critique was fundamentally based on the notion that grammar is 'history' or an 'historical document': 'it is the "photograph" of a given phase of a national (collective) language that has been formed historically and is continuously developing.... The practical question might be: what is the purpose of such a photograph? To represent the history of an aspect of civilisation, or to change an aspect of civilisation?' (Gramsci 1985, 179–80; Q 29, 1).

We must ask, what is the purpose of freezing the continually changing process of language? As Jacques Derrida argued years later, inaugurating 'poststructuralism', if the synchronic dimension is totally disconnected from its diachronic roots, meaning could not appear (Derrida 1974, 62). Where Saussure would answer that it is only in the name of 'science' and there are no political or non-scientific motives at stake, Gramsci argues otherwise. This is evident in how Gramsci refers the concept of 'normative grammar' back to social situations: 'The reciprocal monitoring, reciprocal teaching and reciprocal "censorship" expressed in such questions as "What did you mean to say?", "What do you mean?", "Make yourself clearer", etc., and in mimicry and teasing. This whole complex of actions and reactions come together to create a grammatical conformism, to establish "norms" or judgements of correctness and incorrectness' (Q 29, 2).

As Gramsci often does with terms that later became 'Gramscian' concepts, after expanding the traditional meaning, he then subverts the original meaning by emphasising its unavoidably political nature: 'It is obvious that someone who writes a normative grammar cannot ignore the history of the language of which he wishes to propose an "exemplary phase" as the "only" one worthy to become, in an "organic" and "totalitarian" way, the "common" language of a nation in competition and conflict with other "phases" and types or schemes that already exist' (Gramsci 1985, 180; Q 29, 2).

One of Gramsci's important points is that normative grammar is always comparative, in that it is based on the exclusion of other grammars that he calls interchangeably 'immanent' or 'spontaneous grammar'. This is 'the grammar "immanent" in language itself, by which one speaks "according to grammar" without knowing it. . . . The number of "immanent or spontaneous grammars" is incalculable and, theoretically, one can say that each person has a grammar of his own’ (Q 29, 2). While such grammars seem to operate spontaneously, the historical perspective illustrates how spontaneous grammars are always tied to some phase of a normative grammar. As he explains elsewhere, ‘pure’ spontaneity does not exist in history; rather, ‘in the “most spontaneous” movement the elements of “conscious leadership” are simply uncontrollable, they have not left behind a verifiable document’ (Q 3, 48).

Thus, for Gramsci, there is no simple or strict line between spontaneous and normative grammars. Normative grammars are created by codification (often written), standardisation and imposition through 'reciprocal' censorship of grammars that had previously been spontaneous. And spontaneous grammars are the result of the fragmentation, sedimentation, habituation and forgetting of previous normative grammars. In this way, Gramsci connected the debates in Italian linguistics around standardisation with his more general cultural theory of hegemony. As Franco Lo Piparo has shown persuasively, it was in the milieu of European linguistics, especially the alternatives to the neogrammarian approach, that Gramsci came into contact with the
concept of ‘hegemony’. ‘Hegemony’ was deployed there synonymously with concepts including fascination [fascino] and prestige [prestigio] in order to explain the adoption and adaptation of linguistic forms throughout different social groups and communities of speakers.

Gramsci did not oppose the creation of ‘normative grammars’. On the contrary, he argued that the fascists’ success was in part due to their ability to exploit the non-existence of a normative Italian grammar, permitting Mussolini to pit the northern proletariat against the southern peasantry. As he experienced with fascist educational policies, it is precisely the renunciation of a normative grammar which can be eminently oppressive, because it deprives the oppressed of a possible competence. The type of normative grammar that Gramsci advocated for the Communist Party of Italy (PCd’I) was not the imposition of one grammar as the only possible one. Rather, Gramsci advocated the creation of a normative grammar through the various spontaneous grammars provided by the dialects.

Gramsci argued for the formation of a normative grammar that is self-consciously comparative. Thus, normative grammar and its relationship to spontaneous grammars move beyond linguistics and become metaphors for political organisation. The politics of grammar becomes the grammar of politics. The process of forming a progressive normative grammar is the same as his description of the development of the philosophy of the organisation and co-ordination of the contradictory and inchoate elements of ‘common sense’. The metaphor of grammar is also valuable in Gramsci’s explorations of how freedom and consent can be shaped by bourgeois hegemony in such a way that the majority can support their own subordination (cf. Ives 1997, 1998).

The reference of grammar to the field of cultural hegemony is, however, always more than metaphorical. ‘Every time that the question of language appears, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems impose themselves: the formation and expansion of the ruling [dirigente] class, the necessity of stabilising more intimate and secure relations between the ruling groups and the national-popular mass, that is, of reorganising cultural hegemony’ (Q 29, 3).

3. ‘Grammar’ played a significant role in the debate between Stalin and the linguist N.Y. Marr. Marr’s approach dominated Soviet linguistics until Stalin’s repudiation of it in 1950. Marr criticised the neogrammarians for isolating language as an object of study from society, and saw in it, instead, a phenomenon of the ‘superstructure’. Marr and his followers were concerned to show how, since 1917, Russian and other Soviet languages, including their grammars, had changed considerably with the transformation in the relations of production. Well after Marr’s death, Stalin published an article in Pravda rejecting Marr’s approach, specifically criticising the idea that language was part of the superstructure. According to Stalin, language is like tools of production and machinery; it was developed under previous historical epochs and any particular language and grammar is equally as useful for capitalism as for communism. Much of his argument relied on the rejection of any class nature of language. Grammar was critical in distinguishing language proper from mere dialects and jargons of particular classes or social groups that, according to Stalin, do not have their own grammar but borrow them from the national language (Stalin 1951). While such a distinction between language and dialect is not unique to Stalin, it remains almost impossible to make based on linguistic evidence. Gramsci’s critique of such static notions of grammar also undermines Stalin’s position.

The Russian psychologist, Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896–1934), concurred with Gramsci’s emphasis on the primacy of the ‘historical’ in the relation between language and thinking. He criticised other schools, specifically the psychology of Piaget, for not understanding that language and meaning develop together historically, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically (1934, 62ff.). A new aspect in Vygotsky’s work, in comparison to Gramsci’s, is the question concerning the mental correlate of grammatical
structures. Vygotsky spoke of a ‘non-correspondence of grammatical and psychological subject and predicate’, because ‘the development of the semantic and of the phonetic side of the word in the mastery of complicated syntactical structures does not coincide’ (304). Vygotsky distinguished between the grammar of thought (‘grammar of the inner language’), which operates semantically, and the grammar of the form of language or syntax (‘grammar of the external language’). This has some similarities with Gramsci’s distinctions between ‘spontaneous’ grammar, which tends to be more individualistic, and ‘normative grammar’. However, whereas Vygotsky delved into the movement from ‘inner language’ to ‘external language’, Gramsci, as we saw above, insisted that ‘spontaneous grammar’ has a history in previous normative grammars.

The Russian linguist and member of the Bakhtin Circle, Valentin Voloshinov makes two important points with respect to Marxist uses of ‘grammar’. The first concerns the relationship between grammar and style. Voloshinov takes heed of Karl Vossler’s argument that grammar is the solidification or crystallisation of individual creative acts of style. While Vossler is an idealist who places too much emphasis on the individualistic and creative aspect of language to the detriment of language as a ready-made system inherited by every speaker, his notion that style and grammar cannot be strictly separated is essential to Marxist linguistics. He agrees with Gramsci’s point of clarifying what is ‘ordinary language’ and ‘internal language’. Nevertheless, whereas Vygotsky’s ‘deep structures’ are social tools that humans use. Perhaps the most important commonality between Gramsci and Wittgenstein’s views of language is that both are critical of elitist or purely philosophical approaches to language, in favour of a focus on what in Wittgenstein’s case became known as the ‘ordinary language’ approach. Nevertheless, as Wolfgang Fritz Haug has noted, Wittgenstein’s approach, in comparison to Gramsci’s, has less purchase (Haug 1996, Chapter 4). It neither offers adequate explanations of why language can be bewildering nor accounts for the social and historical contexts in which language confusions arise, which Wittgenstein nevertheless wishes to eliminate, because this approach ultimately tends to the ‘ahistorical’: ‘If the problems of the ancient Greeks still engage us and there therefore appears to be no progress in philosophy, then the reason for that consists in the fact, Wittgenstein noted in 1931, “that our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions”’ (Haug 1996, 72). And the ‘notions of common sense’ (W 8.512), which Wittgenstein wants to address in his critique of philosophy, are, for Gramsci, precisely the point of departure of critical philosophy which sublates the ‘nozioni del senso comune’ (cf. Haug 1996, 71).

Noam Chomsky’s ‘generative grammar’ has held a dominant position within linguistics since the 1960s. Even though Chomsky is one of the most important critics of US capitalism, his linguistic theory, which he strictly separates from his political activism, runs in direct contrast to Marxist concepts of grammar in a number of points. Chomsky uses the term ‘grammar’ ambiguously to mean either the mental representation of a speaker’s knowledge of a language or the linguist’s codification of the structure of a language (cf. Wasow 1989). His theory of ‘generative grammar’ defines grammar as a finite set of rules that can generate an infinite number of sentences each of which can be distinguished from nonsensical strings of words. Chomsky distinguishes base grammar, which generates ‘deep structures’ of language, from ‘transformational grammar’, which is the set of rules that turns these ‘deep structures’ into
the sentences of actual language that we use. Despite the vast differences in the syntactical structure of different languages, there must be a ‘universal grammar’ shared by all natural languages, that is ‘hard wired’ into human biology. According to Chomsky, ‘we do not really learn language; rather, grammar grows in the mind’ (1980, 134). While Gramsci, with Marx (in the sixth of the Theses on Feuerbach), sees the ‘human essence’ realised in the ensemble of historically determined social relations, Chomsky identifies it with the human brain. Chomsky explicitly criticizes Gramsci’s Marxist conception of human nature. Chomsky falsely assumes that the question of “human nature” must be confined to the human brain which exhibits “a system of a sort familiar in the biological world . . . of ‘mental organs’ based on physical mechanisms . . . that provide a unique form of intelligence that manifests itself in human language . . .” (Chomsky 1987:196–7, see also Chomsky 1976: 128–43). Chomsky’s approach to grammar is an obstacle to any understanding of language as a social institution integral to the formation of ideology and social reproduction as found in Gramsci and the semiotic Marxist approaches of Volosinov, Vygotsky, Schaff, Rossi-Landi, Ponzio, Kristeva, Williams and others.

In a very different realm, Jacques Derrida takes the term ‘grammar’ back to its etymological roots. With Of Grammatology (1967), he conceived a science of letters and syllables, of reading and writing, which promised a liberation from ‘logocentrism’ and ‘ethnocentrism’. According to Derrida, the ‘metaphysics of presence’ that has dominated Western philosophy subordinates written language to spoken language; thus would arise the fiction that thought contents are readily available instead of recognising that they sedimented in innumerable structures.

Gramsci shows some awareness of such differences between spoken and written language, but evaluates them differently. He notes that one of the major obstacles to literary Italian becoming a national language was that the literary language (together with its normative grammars), like the Latin it replaced, was inaccessible to the non-literate masses (Gramsci 1985, 169; Q 29, 2).

‘Language has not yet acquired an extensive “historicity”, it has not yet become a national fact. . . . In reality, in Italy there are many “popular” languages, and it is the regional dialects which are usually spoken in intimate conversation, in which the most common and diffuse feelings and affects are expressed; literary language is still, in many respects, a cosmopolitan language, a type of “Esperanto”, that is, limited to the expression of partial feelings and notions’ (Q 23, 39).

In these cases, it is writing that yields ethnocentrism over speech.

The role of writing versus speech raises some questions in interpreting Gramsci (cf. Ives 1998, 47–8 and Lo Piparo 1979, 252). It remains an open question whether Derrida’s attempt to shift the pursuit of science away from the ‘form of logic’ towards that of ‘grammatics’ can be utilised for Marxist projects. This presumably depends on the more general debate over the relationship between Marxism and deconstruction.

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Peter Ives

Consciousness, discourse analysis, discourse theory, 
Enlightenment, expression, history, hegemony, 
historicism, ideology, language, language game, 
meaning, philosophy of language, philosophy of 
praxis, rationalism, semiotics, sign, Spirit, translation

Aufklärung, Ausdruck, Bedeutung, Bewusstsein, 
Diskursanalyse, Diskurstheorie, Gest, Geschichte, 
Hegemonie, Historismus, Ideologie, Philosophie der 
Praxis, Rationalismus, Semiotik, Sprache, Sprach- 
philosophie, Sprachspiel, Übersetzung, Zeichen
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