Utopia Pre-Empted: Kett’s Rebellion, Commoning, and the Hysterical Sublime

Jim Holstun
State University of New York, Buffalo
jamesholstun@hotmail.com

Abstract
In 1549, on Mousehold Heath, outside Norwich, the campmen of Kett’s Rebellion created the greatest practical utopian project of Tudor England. Using a commoning rhetoric and practice, they tried to restore the moral economy of the county community, ally themselves with the reforming regime of Protector Somerset, and create a Protestant monarchical republic of small producers. In opposition, Tudor gentlemen and their chroniclers used ‘the hysterical sublime’, a rhetoric and practice of pre-emptive decisionist violence, to crush the Norwich commune, overthrow Somerset, and accelerate capitalist primitive accumulation. These two visions of culture and society continued to clash in Tudor England, but the gentlemen had gained the upper hand.

Keywords
campmen, commoning, Kett’s Rebellion, peasant rebellions, primitive accumulation, Tudor England, utopia

He who rises up to kill us, we will pre-empt it and kill him first.
Ariel Sharon

Mid-Tudor Mark v. Tacitus

In ‘Fortunata’, the second chapter of Mimesis, Erich Auerbach contrasts two forms of narration in late antiquity: one from patrician Rome, the other from

2. Thanks to Joanna Tinker, Suchetana Chattopadhyay, Joe Hartney, Chris Kendrick, Ed White, and my students at SUNY Buffalo for comments; to Sharon Achinstein, David Norbrook, Joel Reed, and Modhumita Roy for opportunities to present; and to Andy Wood for sharing a typescript of The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England (2007) – a superb work, particularly on the languages of popular resistance in Tudor England. I drafted this essay before reading it, and we disagree on the radicalism of the campmen’s manifesto and on the dynamics of the rebellion itself, but I am indebted to Andy’s work and his advice.
plebeian Judea. In his *Satyricon*, Petronius presents Trimalcho’s aristocratic dinner guests buffeted about by a fate that ‘strikes from without and affects only a limited area’, not one that ‘results from the inner processes of the real, historical world’. Similarly, in his *Annals*, Tacitus gives his aristocratic readers a superficial portrait from without of the impoverished soldiers in the Germanic legions. In a seditious oration, legionnaire Percennius sounds persuasive at first, as he pleads for his fellow-soldiers suffering from wounds, inclement weather, and lack of pay. But Tacitus remains indifferent to the development of deeper social forces and to plebeian speakers. He introduces Percennius with contempt as ‘formerly a busy leader of theatrical factions, after that a common soldier, of a petulant tongue, and from his experience in theatrical party zeal, well qualified to stir up the bad passions of a crowd’. Tacitus lets him speak only in ‘Tacitean’, with a stylised indifference to the actual language of soldiers:

'Tacitus not only lacks understanding, he actually has no interest whatever in the facts underlying the soldiers’ demands. He does not argue against their demands in objective terms; he will not take the trouble to prove that they are not justified; a few purely ethical considerations... are quite enough to reject them in advance.'

Auerbach contrasts this form of narration with Mark’s account of Peter denying Christ, which shows the highest feeling emerging from the lowest social stratum:

Why does it arouse in us the most serious and most significant sympathy? Because it portrays something which neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity ever set out to portray: the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people, from within the everyday occurrences of contemporary life, which thus assumes an importance it could never have assumed in antique literature. What we witness is the awakening of ‘a new heart and a new spirit’. All this applies not only to Peter’s denial but also to every other occurrence which is related in the New Testament.

Mark’s gospel reveals

a world which on the one hand is entirely real, average, identifiable as to place, time, and circumstances, but which on the other hand is shaken in its very foundations, is transforming and renewing itself before our very eyes.

---

We see ‘the beginning of a deep subsurface movement, the unfolding of historical forces’. Though New-Testament writers do not theorise this movement explicitly,

yet there is to be observed a spontaneous generation of categories which apply to epochs as well as to states of the inner life and which are much more pliable and dynamic than the categories of Greco-Roman historians…. [T]he essential point is this: the deep subsurface layers, which were static for the observers of classical antiquity, began to move.5

These two forms of narration reappeared in the summer of 1549 during the East-Anglian risings, as neo-Roman gentlemen, chronicled by their Tacitean historians, squared off against neo-Judean plebeians, with their gospelling petitioners.6 Kett’s Rebellion, the best known rising, occurred in Norwich, the second city of the nation, and on nearby Moushold Heath, as thousands of campmen – peasants, tradesmen, and artisans fired by Reformation theology and commonwealth ideology – conducted an orderly mass strike against local agrarian capitalists and the Norwich city fathers.7 In these risings, the moral economy of anticapitalist English agriculture assembled in arms and allied itself – partly in fantasy, partly in truth – with the most powerful man in the nation: Lord Protector Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, who was the de facto leader of England during the first two and one-half years of Edward’s minority. The result was not so much a rebellion as the greatest practical utopian project of Tudor England and the greatest anticapitalist rising in English history.8

5. Auerbach 1953, pp. 42–5. Thanks to Kent Cartwright for guiding me to Auerbach. His place in the history of Marxist literary criticism still tends to be overlooked, but see Barck 1992 on his personal and intellectual ties to Walter Benjamin, and Eagleton 2003 on his affinity for populist realism.

6. The ‘chroniclers’ include John Cheke, The Hurt of Sedicion (1549); Alexander Neville, De Furoris Burolfciensium (1575), translated by Richard Woods as Norfolkes Furies (1615); Raphael Holinshed, Holinshed’s Chronicles, in two editions (1577, and the 1586 edition, which I will quote from, Holinshed 1965); Sir John Hayward, The Life, and Raigne of King Edward the Sixt (1631); and Nicholas Sotherton’s undated manuscript, ‘Th e Commoyson in Norfolk, 1549’ (1976).


8. The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 aimed at feudalism, not capitalism, while the English Revolution of 1642–60 was largely capitalist. Cromwell and his successors easily crushed its militant anticapitalist moments: the 1647 revolt of the Agitators (Holstun 2000, pp. 192–256), Corporal William Thompson’s radical army revolt in 1649, and Thomas Venner’s Fifth
In this essay, I will consider the social and symbolic dimensions of the resulting conflict. In the first two sections, which emphasise cultural and political analysis, I contrast the two sides. In ‘Fiestas of Justice’, I focus on the post-feudal but anticapitalist monarcho-populist bloc, which included Somerset, the campmen, and commonwealth writers like John Hales. Imagining a new utopia of smallholders secured by a benevolent, gospelling monarch, they tried to use the resources of a newly centralised Tudor state to preserve and extend the independence enjoyed by English small producers during the fifteenth century. I refer to the monarcho-populist structure of feeling simply as commoning to suggest both the agrarian institution and the mid-Tudor sense of ‘communicate (verbally), tell, declare, publish, report’. Deeply conservative and profoundly radical, commoning tried to make the old smallholding community the basis for a populist transformation of economy, religion, and state. I focus on the few surviving texts in which the campmen speak directly, on Somerset’s responses to their petitions, and on the picture of the campmen rendered by their conquerors. In ‘Killing Conspecifics’, I consider the aristo-capitalist bloc of the ‘gentlemen’, as the campmen called their enemies – a group including most of nation’s nobility along with gentry and yeoman tenant farmers eager to expand and improve their holdings by converting social property (church lands, commons, wastes, and forests) into private property and free peasants into landless wage-labourers. Their structure of feeling, the hysterical sublime, combined vituperation, histrionic pardoning, and pre-emptive violence. I base my arguments here primarily on the chroniclers who celebrated the campmen’s destruction. The third and fourth sections emphasise narrative. In ‘Petitions, Pardons, and Slaughter’, I examine the conflict of these blocs in Norfolk, during which the gentlemen’s practice of pre-emptive assault enabled them to gain the upper hand. In ‘Serial Yearning for Fusion’, I consider the conflict’s social and literary aftermath.

**Fiestas of justice**

Kett’s Rebellion grew out of long-term economic changes in agrarian relations, medium-term political precipitants, and a short-term cultural trigger. The long-
term cause was capitalist primitive accumulation, specifically the ‘seigneurial offensive’ in Norfolk, as lords intruded on copyholds and on communal grazing rights, ending the fifteenth-century ‘golden age of the English labourer’. The medium-term political precipitants included local conflicts born of Reformation property transfers and the breakdown of local ruling-class solidarity after the 1547 imprisonment of Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, and the execution of his son Henry, the Earl of Surrey. Most important was the extraordinary division in the government itself between Protector Somerset, ‘an agrarian reformer by conviction’, and his fellow landlords, who ‘built up their fortunes out of the spoils of the monasteries, and whom no authority is strong enough to check’. These landlords included John Dudley, Earl of Warwick, who would lead the second expedition against the campmen. They were particularly galled by Somerset’s 1548 and 1549 commissions under John Hales, which investigated oppressive enclosures.

The short-term trigger was a festive celebration of local traditions against national authority, which occasioned a popular gathering that would eventually claim national authority against local class rule. The chapel in Wymondham Abbey, near Norwich, had been dedicated to Thomas à Beckett before Henry’s Erastian campaign against the Beckett cult confiscated its funds and turned it into a school. But locals continued to use the school for a yearly festival and a play called ‘Windham Game’ commemorating the ‘translation’ of Beckett’s body to Canterbury. On 9 July, several playgoers left for nearby Morley, where they levelled some enclosures, then returned to Wymondham and levelled some more, including John Flowerdew’s. Flowerdew then paid them to level those of his neighbour, Robert Kett. Kett (c. 1492–1549) was a substantial tradesman and landowner. He and his brother William were members of the chapel guild and tenants of Loye Ferrers, last Abbott of Wymondham

---

13. Neville 1615, B2v–B3r; Holinshed 1965, pp. 963–64. Noting this and similar episodes, Mervyn James argues that Tudor England moved toward commercial drama with professional actors partly to control the civic tumult occasioned by the Corpus Christi cycle (James 1983, p. 29).
Abbey. Robert named a son after Ferrers, and the Kett brothers struggled unsuccessfully to preserve the Abbey from Flowerdew’s depredations. Robert held property of Warwick, and he was related by marriage to Flowerdew and to John and Philip Robsart, cousins to Amy Robsart, whom Warwick’s son Robert would marry.16 This network of relations might easily have bred a capitalist yeomen scrabbling toward gentry status. It bred something else.

When the rioters arrived at Kett’s enclosures, he greeted them ‘as one burning with the same flames of furie’. He promised to help them ‘subdue the power of Great men’ and ‘revenge the hurts done unto the Weale publike, and common Pasture by the importunate Lords thereof’. He promised to act as ‘not only a companion, but a Captaine’ in their assault on enclosures, beginning with his own. With authentic equestrian horror, Neville says they proceeded ‘as unbridled horses lusting after liberty’. In Holinshed’s words, ‘Hereupon was Ket chosen to be their capteine and ringleader, who being resolved to set all on six and seven, willed them to be of good comfort, and to follow him in defense of their common libertie’. By levelling Kett’s enclosures, then Flowerdew’s, they also destroyed their own identities as day labourers purpose-hired for a yeomen’s feud in which they had no class stake.17

Kett’s motives are harder to figure. Combining psychohistory with economism, Beer suggests he acted out of class resentment because he hailed from just below the Norfolk gentry. But this ignores the suicidal strangeness of his action, nicely evoked by Louisa Marion Kett’s family-proud history: ‘he had a certain faculty for accumulating possessions. Like the young man in the Gospel he was suddenly asked to leave all, and for purely unselfish reasons he did so’. We can guess that Kett acted out of local rivalries aggravated by the Reformation, that he felt neighbourly shame at being linked to Flowerdew as an encloser, or that he had been inspired by commonwealth ideology, which we can hear even in Neville’s reiterated linkage of ‘common people’, ‘common fields’, ‘common pasture’, ‘common lands’, ‘common-welth’, ‘common ayre’, ‘common profit’ and ‘Weale publike’.18 Perhaps he emulated the commonwealth asceticism of Somerset, who had violated all the habits of his class by converting his demesne lands to copyhold, dispossessing his own heirs and giving security of tenure to his new tenants.19 But none of this diminishes Kett’s act of sheer, revolutionary will, which established his solidarity- unto-death with his neighbours.20 As the yeomanry split between

---

16. Russell 1859, pp. 130. n. 1; Kett 1921, pp. 26, 55.
20. The anticapitalist moralism of commonwealth rhetoric, frequently viewed with brisk,
wage-paying farmers and wage-earning labourers, Yeoman Kett stepped back into the undivided precapitalist county community and fought to preserve and transform it inside a new Edwardian settlement.

Still, the very name ‘Kett’s Rebellion’ underestimates the other East-Anglian rebellions and the orderly role of collective plebeian initiative, perennially overlooked by the modern chroniclers. The campmen, ‘an angry but ill-directed local mob’ required the charismatic leadership of Kett, suggests Barrett Beer, though even Neville says the influence was mutual. The panting campmen attacked Flowerdew’s fences, ‘possibly fortified with ale’, while Kett craftily redirected them, using ‘possibly more ale’, ventures David Loades, possibly flustered with sherry. Sodden or sober, the campmen began creating a highly-structured open-air commune. This group of labourers, husbandmen, butchers, cooperers, thatchers, lime-burners, tailors, masons, millers, weavers, fishermen, surgeons, tanners, and shoemakers gathered on Mousehold Heath beneath a tree that came to be called the Oak of Reformation. They governed themselves through a court and a body of representatives and practised military drill with the assistance of an expert gunner named Myles. They conducted services using Cranmer’s new prayer book, taking instruction from the Mayor’s appointed chaplain to the camp, Thomas Conyers; from Matthew Parker, later Archbishop of Canterbury; and from two ‘prophets’, Rugg and Wilse. They petitioned King Edward and Somerset, hoping they would broaden and deepen their programme of reform. They supported themselves through writs of requisition from local gentlemen and through community contributions: the churchwardens of Carlton Colville collected a debt owed to the parish and took it off to aid the camp, while North Elmham provided relief for the wives of poor campmen and for Thomas Wakefield, wounded at ‘the ffyrst skyrmyses’, sending twelve representatives to the camp, along with fish, bread, mustard, beer, garlic, onions, arrows, and psalters. Norfolk women were actively involved, judging from Parliament’s threat to hang wives or servants provisioning the camps.

modernising condescension, was not so much a substitute for structural analysis as an effort to totalise it and put it to work. On the importance of ‘subjectivism’ in revolutionary struggle, see Lukács 2000.

22. For names and professions of some campmen, see Anon 1970a, pp. 328–31.
The campmen imprisoned and tried many of their gentlemen opponents. When Robert Raynbald, the Norwich chamberlain, cast lead shot for attacks on Mousehold Heath, a delegation of campmen carried him to the guildhall and confiscated the munitions. The next day, eighty campmen came to his house and carried him away with them to Mousehold to have him to the tree for making of the said gunshot, and by the way he intreated them so that they carried him to Norwiche both where he gave them for remission from going to the tree iii s iii d.25

Blomefield says they intended ‘To try him at the oak of reformation, on which he was likely to swing’, while Land sees ‘petty theft and the acceptance of bribes’.26 But the evidence suggests something less dastardly: a methodical inventory of Raynbald’s formidable household arsenal, a careful receipt, regular juridical proceedings, a modest bond in lieu of a court appearance. The campmen typically stopped short at rough humour, despite the chroniclers’ recurrent suggestion of murderous intent: after imprisoning Norwich Mayor Thomas Codd, one ‘varlet’ cried, ‘As many as would come to the Campe to morrow, should buy a Cods head for a penny’.27 Codd survived the joke, but the varlet’s focus on prices was deadly serious. R.H. Tawney compares Kett’s Rebellion to an Irish fair rent campaign: ‘Nothing could have been more unlike the popular idea of a jacquerie’. MacCulloch says the East-Anglian risings were ‘fiestas of justice’ like the camp meetings of Primitive Methodists. The campmen thus resemble the ethically-charged eighteenth-century bread rioters analysed by E.P. Thompson, but here, two centuries earlier, we see them combining the moral economy of local restoration with a revolutionary vision of nationwide transformation.28

The campmen attacked the traditional rituals of hierarchy. On 11 July, Sir Roger Woodhouse drove to Mousehold Heath, taking three carts laden with beer, dry provisions, and fond memories of happy, paternalist church-ales. His clownish neighbours responded not with a hey-nonny-nonny, but by stripping him, beating him, taking him prisoner, and seizing the provisions. The campmen forced Norwich gentlemen to doff their finery and hide in the woods, stripped the mayor’s deputy, and mocked the attire of Warwick’s

27. Neville 1615, F1v.
herald as ‘but some peeces of Popish Coapes sewed together’ – a subtle sumptuary critique of the incomplete Edwardian Reformation. During the first royal assault, Neville says, the campmen captured an Italian mercenary named Cheavers, and seeing ‘all his garments and furniture which were upon him (very costly and cunningly wrought), they stripped him naked, and so hung him upon an Oke’. Sotherton wonders why they failed to seek ransom, ‘allthough there would have been given a c li for his life’. Holinshed says

they might have had no small portion of monie to have satisfied their greedie minds. But it seemed that their beastlie cruelty had bereft them the remembrance of all honest consideration and dutifull humanitie.29

They also captured Edmund Lord Sheffield, who tried to save his life ‘by all meanes possible, as by promising great rewards, by signifying his Nobilitie, and the account of his name’. Unmoved, a butcher named Fulkes ‘gave him his deadly wound with his Clubbe’.30 The chroniclers never consider that the campmen might have squandered the potential ransom as a bit of levelling peasant potlatch, understanding that no captured campman could have expected any courtesy beyond ‘Hangum tuum’ and ‘Hangum meum’, in the sardonic Anglo-Latin of Hugh Latimer and Hob Carter.31

In mid-July, the campmen authored the Mousehold Articles, one of the most astonishing products of the early-modern political imagination. Because it proposes what academic historicism feels it could not have – a smallholders’ constitutional revolution that would have substantially democratised the mid-Tudor locality, parish, and state – the modern chroniclers have struggled to tame it.32 Cornwall says its ‘stated desire to revert to the conditions of the happier times of the first year of Henry VII (which of course no one could remember) was unmistakably conservative’, while Land says it represents ‘the interests of men who already have a place in society and who would like a somewhat larger one’. McCulloch hears a reactionary yearning for ‘an

30. Neville 1615, G3v. See also Sotherton 1976, p. 91; Holinshed 1965, p. 974. In 1563, Barnabe Googe, Neville’s cousin, lauded Sheffield and damned Kett and Fulkes, that ‘bluddy Butcher byg and blunt’ (E1r–v). Neville contributed several poems to the volume.
32. I follow Andy Wood (2007, p. 97) in this title for the manuscript. A seventeenth-century hand titled it *Keats Demaundes beinge in Rebellyon*. I will quote Russell’s version (1859, pp. 48–56). On Tudor petitions, see Hoyle 2002. ‘Democratise’ may sound troubling to rigorous lexical historicists, but we do not really need another word to characterise a proposal to limit capital accumulation and enfranchise the ‘pore commons’ in church and state.
imaginary past in which society had consisted of watertight compartments’, one ‘heavy with disapproval of social mobility in any direction’. But ‘social mobility’ is a structural necessity only for the capitalist mode of production, not a universal human goal that the campmen cannily embraced or doltishly spurned. Only a one-track capitalist-modernisation narrative could see their systematic efforts to preserve small property as metaphysically doomed.

The Mousehold Articles, a classic early modern combination of submission and assertion, suggest considerable negotiation and agreement, for Mayor Codd and Alderman Thomas Aldritch signed as well as Kett. The manuscript lists representatives for twenty-two of the thirty-three Norfolk civil jurisdictions called ‘hundreds’, two for Norwich, and two more for Suffolk – an important indication of inter-camp organisation. The campmen mention enclosures only once, when they ask that ongoing reforms not threaten enclosures around ‘saffren grounds’ – whatever they may be – thus emphasising John Hales’ distinction between depopulating and genuinely improving enclosures. Diarmaid MacCulloch has plausibly suggested that the absence of attacks on enclosures as such derives from the peculiarities of East-Anglian land tenure: smallholders in the wood-pasture region indeed resisted landlordly enclosure of open-field lands, but in the sheep-corn lands, they were more likely to support the enclosure of their own lands as a holdfast against lords of manors invoking ‘foldcourse’ rights to graze livestock on their tenants’ lands. But the entire manifesto coheres around an effort to preserve small property and shape a new society on its basis. At its centre lies a proposal to roll back rents to ‘suche price as they wer in the first yere of Kyng henry the viith’. Given the intervening years of inflation, this would have radically transformed property relations. Modern chroniclers who overlook this staggering demand and Somerset’s accommodating response to it lack the horrified insight of the landlords on Edward’s Privy Council, who deposed Somerset from office as a class traitor in 1549 and executed him in 1552. The campmen also attacked the feudal vestiges being incorporated in a regime of capitalism-from-above:lordly tenants passing on feudal duties to their subtenants, lordly jurisdiction

34. §1; Russell 1859, p. 48.
35. Hales 1924, p. 41.
37. §5; Russell 1859, p.49. See also §§4, 6, 14; Russell 1859, pp. 48, 49, 51.
38. Fletcher and MacCulloch 1997, p. 76.
40. §§2, 9; Russell 1859, pp. 48, 50.
in court leets, lordly interlocking directorships allowing feudal clients to become civic officials and lords to become bailiffs to other lords, lords purchasing freehold land and turning it into copyhold, with the accompanying feudal privileges, lordly monopolies on the rivers and on certain sorts of fishing, and lords electing the feodary. Two articles attack capitalism-from-below by prohibiting yeomen from impinging on commoning rights with dovecots and coney warrens. One protects persons earning less than ten pounds a year from being designated as shire officers and forced to pay the attendant expenses, while another boldly attempts to turn capitalist entrepreneurs into small producers by prohibiting persons earning more than forty pounds from raising more bullocks or sheep than their own households need.

Unlike the participants in the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536–7), the Western Rebellion (1549), and the Northern Rebellion (1569), and despite their aesthetically Catholic liking for plays honouring Becket, the campmen reveal no nostalgia for the old religion. But they do demand that church property be retained as a public trust, not plundered by a new Protestant gentry. They limit tithing, detach parsons from lordly household service, integrate the clergy in pastoral care at the level of the parish, and institute something like Congregationalism:

> We pray that [prests] or vicars that be [not able] to preche and sett forth the woorde of god to hys parisheners may be thereby putt from hys benyfice, and the parisheners there to chose an other or else the pateron or lord of the towne.

Parsons would foster literacy by teaching ‘pore mens chyldren of ther paryshe the boke called the cathakysme and the prymer’ — part of the larger commonwealth push for public education.

41. §13; Russell 1859, p. 51.
42. §12; Russell 1859, p. 51.
43. §25; Russell 1859, p. 55.
44. §21; Russell 1859, p. 53.
45. §§17, 19; Russell 1859, p. 52.
46. §18; Russell 1859, p. 52.
47. §§10, 23; Russell 1859, pp. 50, 54.
48. §§18, 29; Russell 1859, pp. 52, 56.
49. §22; Russell 1859, pp. 53–4.
50. §15; Russell 1859, p. 51.
51. §8; Russell 1859, p. 49.
52. §20; Russell 1859, p. 53.
53. On proto-Congregationalism, see Fletcher and MacCulloch 1997, p. 78. On plebeian education, see Jordan 1968, pp. 162–3. John Hales proposed making the parish itself an institution to protect small producers by updating traditionalist rogation perambulations: each
After democratising the parish, the campmen turn to the state, for the Mousehold Articles are not so much a localist petition (the word ‘Norfolk’ is conspicuously absent from them) as a national one. The campmen take the Protector’s radical but strictly delimited instructions to Hales’s enclosure commissions of June 1548 and July 1549 as a model for a sweeping constitutional revolution:

We pray your grace to gyve lycens and aucthorite by your gracious comyssion under your grett seall to suche comyssioners as your pore commons hath chosyn, or to as many of them as your majestie and your counsell shall apoynt and thynke mete, for to redresse and reforme all suche good lawes, statutes, proclamacions, and all other your procedyngs, whiche hath byn hydden by your Justices of your peace, Shreves, Escheatores, and other your officers, from your pore comons, synes the first yere of the reigne of your noble grandfather King henry the seventh.

And the offending officers will provide the ‘pore men’ assembled as commissioners a stipend of four pence a day. It remains unclear whether or not these two articles would have replaced the gentlemen’s parliament, which this manifesto does not mention, but in any case, as Frederick Russell argued in 1859, they would have instituted a ‘people’s parliament’. The modern chroniclers have tended to overlook these articles’ importance. David Loades insists the campmen simply could not have been saying what they seem to be saying: Kett could not have demanded the dismissal of the entire commission of the peace, even if his mind had been capable of grasping anything so radical, because there was no alternative to the local gentry as the agents of government.

Loades’s frantic revisionist ‘there was no alternative’ conjures up Thatcher’s frantic, present tense and Tory ‘TINA!’ But the campmen were indeed grasping for a radical alternative: chosen by the people and confirmed by the Protector, these new commissioners would review all laws since 1485 – uncovering them, yes, but also redressing and reforming them, which is to say, writing new laws.

And in the most famous article, the campmen propose removing the vestiges of servile tenure: ‘We pray thatt all bonde men may be made ffre for god made year, with ‘two honest men’, the priest or curate would survey each pasture and note who had overstocked it with sheep, to the detriment of common sustenance (Hales 1929, p. lxiv).

---

54. §§27, 28; Russell 1859, pp. 55–6.
all ffre w’ his precious blode sheddyng’. In this striking prose poem, Bindoff hears an echo of the German peasant risings, with perhaps some hints of Lutheranism but none of levelling ‘religious fervour’. MacCulloch hears a jab at the Duke of Norfolk, who had maintained hereditary bondage with unusual rigour on his estates, but given his disfavour and imprisonment, such an indirect attack is perplexing. Land hears a quibble directed against insignificant feudal survivals, not a radical assertion of Christian egalitarianism – an argument that would fail to account for the article’s existence in the first place. Christobel Hoare’s overlooked, ninety-year-old study of Norfolk bond families provides the most plausible explanation for the article’s practical intent. She shows that Elizabeth farmed out to her courtiers the right to set the financial terms of compulsory manumission. A pious attack on vestigial feudal bondage thus served as a new form of expropriation, as it would again in 1861, when Russian serfs struggled to make their redemption payments. The article’s tense is all: Christ has already made us free, pre-empting any benevolent extortion. Moreover, the article’s suggestive, gnomic power is not simply a problem of reference to be solved. Russell notes the tonal shift, which enables us to account for much that otherwise would be inexplicable. Taking this as the foundation on which they rested their hopes and claims, we are not surprised at finding indications of deeper seriousness and of a higher tone of feeling than usually accompany popular outbreaks.

This clause suggests a movement out of specific grievances into the articulation of more fundamental principles, an ongoing process of reformation that will restore the egalitarian Christian commonwealth.

The Mousehold Articles have the temporally mixed quality of most political manifestos and revolutionary projects, including that of their enemies: just as radical sixteenth-century capitalists incorporated lordly feudal traditions in an acquisitive, market-oriented project aimed at enclosure, engrossment, improvement, and profit, radical sixteenth-century populists preserved feudal commoning traditions inside a subsistence-oriented project aimed at preserving small property as the basis for a new, relatively democratic church and state. When lords producing wool and other commodities for a market invoke traditional East-Anglian foldcourse rights to overstock the common with

---

56. §16; Russell 1859, p. 51.
sheep and cattle, and the campmen propose new legislation that would preserve commoning rights for the community by denying them to the lords, who is the traditionalist, who the innovator? The campmen follow the commoning logic of the Narodniki and Karl Marx, who thought the Russian peasant commune might anchor an advanced democratic communism, or the Zapatistas, whose defence of their traditional, inalienable land holdings grounded an entire revolutionary programme. They sought a smallholders’ utopia securely based in post-feudal but precapitalist agriculture: a radically traditionalist and innovative return to an England that had never really existed.

Like More’s *Utopia*, the Mousehold Articles force us to expand our estimate of what Tudor England could imagine. Engels criticised utopian socialists for failing to ground their visions in actual social conditions and tendencies, but More did just that in *Utopia* by moving from diagnostic Book 1 to therapeutic Book 2. Similarly, the campmen drew out the egalitarian potential of Tudor absolutism, gospelling religion, enclosure riots, and even inflation, creating a utopian programme to protect small producers and reduce rents, limit capitalist accumulation, institute congregational religion, and call a people’s parliament. More’s King Utopus, with absolute power over newly-conquered barbarian Abraxa, turns it into Utopia by legislating himself and his dynasty out of existence. Imperious Protector Somerset and his enclosure commissions spark the dream of a smallholders’ republic with no clear need for monarchs, bishops, or a parliament of gentlemen. More’s Amaurot resembles but also reproaches Tudor London. Kett’s Camp uncannily doubles Tudor Norwich, functioning as a full civil society created from below, reminding the gentlemen that they are ‘a true leisure class – that they play no significant role in organising or directing production’.

But unlike More’s conquered Abraxans, the campmen are the subjects, not just the objects, of their utopian transformation – indeed, they are, for a moment, something like the identical subject-object of history. But unlike More’s conquered Abraxans, the campmen are the subjects, not just the objects, of their utopian transformation – indeed, they are, for a moment, something like the identical subject-object of history.

---

58. §§3, 11; Russell 1859, pp. 48, 50.
59. The campmen may be responding to Somerset’s sheep tax from March 1549. See Jordan 1968, pp. 434–5.
60. On Marx and the mir, see Shanin 1983. On the Zapatistas, see Marcos 1995.
63. Lukács 1971, p. xxiii. Only ‘something like’ because the campmen still relied on a legislating force outside themselves. In this regard, they remained a serial collective. Because early-modern utopia had not yet fully conceptualised mass agency, it frequently retained the necessary transitional figure of a legislating and abdicating utopian rex absconditus (Holstun 1987, pp. 91–101).
was not a nostalgic *used-to-be* but a Blochean *not-yet*: no doubt, the campmen longed to break camp and return to their families, fields, and shops, but only after transforming all England into a permanent, monarcho-populist camp. By combining the reform of coney warrens and bushel measures with a proposal for radical social transformation, and grounding everything on Christ’s manumission from the Cross, the gospelling campmen revealed the ‘movement of deep, subsurface layers’ beneath the passage of daily life, opening up the hierarchical moral economy of the past to the social revolution of the future.\(^{64}\)

**Killing conspecifics**

Neil Davidson has recently reasserted the progressive force of bourgeois revolutions in developing the forces of production and creating an international proletariat, criticizing suggestions, including my own, that early-modern small production might have provided a stable and long-lasting alternative to capitalism.\(^{65}\) Davidson’s charge is telling, and an elegiac attention to the campmen and a greater appreciation for their importance in the history of anticapitalist struggle should not lead us to overlook the fact that their enemies were able to crush them. But I would emphasize relations over forces of production in the East-Anglian transition to capitalism, or rather, relations-as-forces: the campmen failed not because they refused to accept some inevitable capitalist transformation, but because the gentlemen excelled them in organizing *force* itself, that ‘midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one’, which ‘is itself an economic power’. In August 1549, the determining force of production was Warwick’s cavalry.\(^{66}\)

Like the campmen, most Tudor gentlemen were radical, not nostalgic, but they imagined quite a different sort of revolution. For them, the turbulence of the present must not be traced to any historical cause. It must be rendered monstrous, then crushed, while accumulation proceeds apace. In the process,

---

64. Auerbach 1953, p. 45.
65. Davidson 2005, pp. 47–8. Davidson is surer than I am that capitalism alone could have led to genuine economic development.
66. Marx 1996 p. 739. In seeing military force as a force of production, Marx suggests an intersection between ‘forces-first’ orthodox Marxism and ‘relations-first’ political Marxism. Cavalry troops – usually a monopoly of the ruling class – deserve a larger place in the history of capitalism, and so does John Dudley. In October, Dudley used his mercenary cavalry to strengthen his coup against Somerset (MacCulloch 1996, p. 444), and in December, his Privy Council created a standing cavalry, partly to restrain the tumultuous crowds angered by Somerset’s imprisonment (Hoak 1976, p. 199–201).
they sound one of the defining notes of early-modern ruling-class culture: an alloy of comic raillery, loathing, and pre-emptive violence that rings out whenever landlords and their clerks catch sight of small producers organised in large groups for something other than work, play, or prayer. I will begin with four examples: from Martin Luther, an anonymous Tudor playwright, Edmund Spenser, and Sir John Cheke.

In Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants (1525), Luther says,

Anyone who can be proved to be a seditious person is an outlaw before God and the emperor; and whoever is the first to put him to death does right and well. For if a man is in open rebellion, everyone is both his judge and his executioner. . . . I will not oppose a ruler who, even though he does not tolerate the gospel, will smite and punish these peasants without first offering to submit the case to judgment.67

Luther begins with jurisprudence but moves quickly to plain old prudence. Collapsing judge and executioner, he exchanges juridical proof for rapidity of execution as a standard of what is right and well. In a pinch, he even prefers a Catholic prince to a Protestant peasant in arms – there is nothing like the sight of a rustic army to help a magisterial reformer consider a temporary truce with Antichrist. In An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants (1525), Luther redefines rebels:

A rebel is a man who runs at his head and lord with a naked sword. No one should wait, then, until his lord commands him to defend him, but the first person who can, ought to take the initiative and run in and stab the rascal, and not worry about committing murder; for he is warding off an arch-murderer, who wants to murder the whole land.68

Luther is not wasting time telling us that someone running at his lord with a naked sword is a rebel. Everyone knows that. Rather, he tells us that any ‘rebel’ – say, someone assembling in a group with unclear intentions in a time of turmoil – is bearing a metaphorical sword and may be summarily executed by a real one. His innovative rationale for pre-emptive attack muddles ‘stabbed because a rebel’ and ‘a rebel because stabbed’. With breathtaking speed, a recalcitrant peasant becomes a rebel, a regicide, a Cain-like arch-murderer, and a monster who would murder the whole land. The lack of logical rigour is precisely the point: Luther sublimely strains the imagination, training it to commit innovative enormities.69

67. Luther 1967, pp. 50, 52.
68. Luther 1967, p. 81.
69. In ‘Murdering Peasants’, Greenblatt analyses brilliantly the training in class violence provided by Luther, Spenser, and others, and the iconography of comically-backstabbed peasants (Greenblatt 1990, pp. 99–130).
The Life and Death of Iacke Strawe, an anonymous play of the 1590s about the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, dramatises Luther’s argument from a critical perspective. When the assembled peasant rebels parley with young King Richard, their leader Jack Straw demands the king’s sword. William Walworth, Mayor of London, is appalled at this symbolic affront. He reflects silently on the opportunities for career advancement, then modulates into vocal denunciation, a low blow, and obsequious self-promotion:

**Maior**

Old Rome I can remember I have read,  
When thou didst flourish for vertue, and for armes,  
What magnanimitie did abide in thee:  
Then Walworth as it may become thee well,  
Deserve some honour at thy Princes hand,  
And beutifie this dignitie of thine,  
With some or other Act of consequence:  
Villaine I say whence comes this rage of thine,  
How darest thou a dungell bastard borne,  
To brave thy Soveraigne and his Nobles thus.  
Villaine I doe arrest thee in my Princes name,  
Proud Rebel as thou art take that withall;  
Learne thou and all posteritie after thee,  
What tis a servile slave, to brave a King.  
Pardon my Gratious Lord for this my fact,  
Is service done to God, and to your selfe.

Here he stabs him

**King.** Lord Maior for thy valiant Act in this,  
And Noble courage in the Kings behalfe,  
Thou shalt perceave us not to be ungratefull.

Collapsing arrest, trial, and execution in two lines, Walworth addresses a living rebel as if already dead on the dunghill, then a dead rebel and his interrupted posterity as if still living and learning. Next to Straw’s no-longer-pardonable body, his ‘Pardon my Gratious Lord’ is a decorous courtly joke that helps him burrow into the patronage system. The playwright underlines Walworth’s self-serving violence, for his Jack Straw, unlike the armed and charging peasant in Holinshed, is stationary and unarmed.

Spenser begins Book 5, Canto 2 of The Faerie Queene with a populist assault by Sir Artegall and his squire Talus on the bridge-guarding baron, Pollente, who has ‘great Lordships got and goodly farmes’. Artegall beheads him,

---

punningly sticks his head on a pole as a ‘mirrour to all mighty men’, and the ‘wicked customes of that bridge reformed’. By ‘customes’, Spenser means both Pollente’s extortionate tolls and the Catholic arch-enemy of Reformation iconoclasts. But Artegall rapidly morphs into a version of Pollente when he encounters a populist giant promising a multitude that he will reform custom by weighing the world with the scales he holds, restoring it to egalitarian first principles. Artegall tries to reason him into submission with a series of self-contradictory arguments. Weighing the world is a sort of sinful presumption, though he himself has done this with Pollente, as has Spenser, in his proem to Book 5. Weighing the world is imprudent, for it might destabilise the universe; the world has already been weighed and found absolutely steady. We can never know the original state of things so we cannot use it as a norm to criticise present-day hierarchy; the original state of things is the present hierarchy. Right and truth cannot be weighed against wrong and falsehood; right is the temperate mean between two wrongs, and truth the temperate mean between two falsehoods. When the giant is unmoved, or perhaps just confused, Talus, like Walworth, takes the decisionist, sub-chivalric initiative and shoulders him over a cliff into the sea.\(^7\) Just as the giant turns out not to have been much of a giant, so the debate, with its foreordained conclusion, turns out not to have been much of a debate. Like the Tudor ruling class, Artegall and Talus strike one blow toward their popish right, another toward their populist left, and proceed down an imperial, proto-Anglican, and capitalist via media.

In August 1549, tainted by association with the treacherous, impulsive, and recently-executed Thomas Seymour, Sir John Cheke was temporarily alienated from Somerset. In Cambridge, between the first and second assaults on the campmen, he wrote *The Hurt of Sedicion*, which became a touchstone of Tudor-Stuart order rhetoric. First, Cheke chastises his Pollente, the Catholic Western Rebels, who say ‘the newe is differente from the olde, and therefore ye wyl have the olde. . . . Ye seke no religion, ye be deceyved, ye seek traditions’. Then he turns to his populist giant, the Protestant campmen of Norfolk, who rebel out of sheer yearning ‘to have no Gentylmen, bycause ye be none youre selves’. Cheke feigns a direct address to the campmen that temporarily registers their grievances, but like Tacitus, he moves quickly into excremental calumny, alliterative denunciation, and abusive rhetorical questions: ‘What death can be devised cruell enough for those rebelles, who wyth trouble seketh death?’ His actual audience is Warwick, also in Cambridge, preparing the final assault on the campmen. Cheke’s frontispiece, which depicts a mounted knighthood Joab lancing rebellious Absalom in the back, would not have reassured Kett.

\(^7\) Spenser 2001, 5. 2. 5, pp. 19, 28, 49. On Spenser’s giant, see Holstun 2007.
King David had ordered his forces to ‘Deal gently for my sake with the young man, even with Absalom’, but when Joab found him caught fast in an oak tree, hanging ‘between the heaven and the earth’, he stabbed him in the heart. As we will see, Warwick followed Joab’s example, despite Somerset’s instructions to deal gently with the campmen.

The hyperventilated incitement of Luther and Cheke, the abrupt lunges of Walworth and Talus – these logical and temporal hiccupps blot out the moment of dialogue and law with a murderous thrust delivered like a punch line, opening up an authoritarian, post-populist future. They reveal a functional psychopathology that I will call the *hysterical sublime*: these gentlemen approach a complex social knowledge (the causes and cures of peasant rebellion) that would sublimely tax their cognitive capacity, then hysterically spurn this knowledge and redound into laughter and decisionist violence. Through pre-emptive attacks, they retroactively turn their enemies’ willingness to negotiate into a horrifying existential threat. They embody Carl Schmitt’s famous aphorism, ‘Sovereign is he who decides on the exception’: Warwick’s aristo-capitalist assault on Somerset and the campmen is to monarcho-populist commoning as Schmitt’s yearned-for dictatorship is to parliamentary democracy. Given Somerset’s own highhanded impatience with conciliar rule, the analogy is imperfect, but it does illuminate Warwick’s aching hatred of those like Somerset who blur the vital line between class ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’, his abhorrence of commonwealth loquacity (gospelling prophets, enclosure commissions, petitions and responses), and his impulse to create an authoritarian future through neo-feudal deeds and declarations, not dialogue. If we acknowledge the enemy’s full humanity and explain to him that we plan to kill him tonight because we fear he will kill us tomorrow, then we should anticipate his impeccably logical retort: ‘Then I should kill you this morning – so let’s talk instead’. Through vituperative attacks on the subhuman enemy, we can pre-empt any such universalist dialogue by firmly grounding a particularist perspective in the existential anxieties of friends: ‘Against this kind of enemy… it makes sense to get our retaliation in first’.

---


75. Ignatieff 2004. For a 350-year-old critique of Ignatieff’s pre-emptive solecism, see *The Gorgon’s Head, or The Monster of Munster Choaked with a Lamb’s Skinn*, a Baptist pamphlet written against the Presbyterian frenzies that hastened the Restoration: our Presbyterian ministers have declared it openly in their Sermons, that the Monster was come into England: and that the Anabaptists of England would have cut All our English Throats… And many of us have been put into grievous frights by it: so that we felt on our Throats to find whether it were not done already: but we found them yet very sound and whole, which is a certain and infallible demonstration...
The hysterical sublime combines anxious displacement, fearful memory, and the traumatic recoil from class violence. First, displacement: for Sartre, the hysteria of unproductive surplus-appropriating groups derives from ‘interiorised scarcity’. These groups, perpetually in danger of liquidation because they are the absolute Other (living off the labour of Others), interiorise this ambivalent alterity and behave toward individuals either as if they were Other than man (positively, as gods), or as if they alone were men in the midst of a different, sub-human species.76

In peacetime, they displace their anxiety about their own superfluity into humorous raillery against the rank and mutable many, with their chuckle-headed gluttony and laziness. This collection of shop-worn proverbs, sexual and excremental abuse, and bestial imagery has strong formal affinities with the misogynous humour of Joseph Swetnam and many others, for both derive from an imperfectly repressed fear of dependence on those who reproduce real, material existence. But in times of crisis, when the sub-human group begins trying to abolish its own ambivalent alterity, the gentle joke grows frantic: Cheke reminds the campmen, somewhat vaguely, of the ‘daily benefites from the gentlemen to you’, and that ‘living in a comune wealth to gether, one kind hath need of an other and yet a great sort of you more nede of one gentleman, then one gentleman of a greate sort of you’. It is difficult to find similar sentiments from commoners paying fees, fines, tithes, payments-in-kind, rents, and labour services, while being crowded off the commons. In 1536, John Walker of Griston proposed to cull gentlemen and their children in the cradle, ‘for yt were a good thinge yf ther be whyt bulles’.77

Second, the hysterical sublime incorporates a fearful memory of the English Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, the German Peasants’ War of 1525–7, the Münster Anabaptist commune of 1534–5, and the Pilgrimage of Grace of 1536–7. All...
had important social-revolutionary dimensions in addition to religious ones, and they would send shivers down gentle spines for centuries. The Matter of Britain inspired Tudor and Stuart ideologists to fabricate nationalist myths of England’s Celtic and Trojan roots, but alongside it sat the terrifying Matter of Münster, Mousehold Heath, and Blackheath, where Wat Tyler, Jack Cade, the Cornish rebels of 1497, and the New Model Army all camped. These risings prompted a chronic aristocratic Great Fear, with virulent outbreaks during the Mid-Tudor Crisis, the turbulent 1590s, the beginning of the English Revolution in the early 1640s, the sectarian scare that preceded the Restoration, and the French Revolution, when the Abbé Grégoire and the National Guard reminded Edmund Burke of ‘The Abbé John Ball’ and of ‘Cade, Ket, and Straw, at the head of their national guards, and fomented by certain traitors of high rank’.

Third, this hysteria derives from internalised class violence. In any exploiting mode of production, the systematic extraction of surplus ultimately depends on potential or actual violence, with the limit case of killing, whether of a thief, a foreign soldier, or a rebel (slave, serf, free peasant, or proletarian). This killing has consequences for the killers as well as the killed, and ruling-class consciousness incorporates, to one degree or another, a normalised post-traumatic stress disorder. Faris Kirkland analyses the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) of US soldiers, who have violated what Marx called their ‘species being’, or what Kirkland – no young Hegelian, but a retired US Army lieutenant colonel – calls ‘the aversion most mammals have to killing “conspecífics”’. To kill more efficiently, they may learn to practice ‘pseudospeciation’ by classifying their enemies as other than human, as Sartre suggests. But some ‘psychological afterburn’ remains.

Similarly, Tudor gentlemen pseudospeciate rebellious peasants as the beast with many heads, or distance themselves from conspecific corpses with hired hangmen and a vast repertoire of hemp-and-gallows humour, or employ foreign mercenaries already psychically damaged by removal from their own homes and more inclined to hew Norfolk peasants than would be, say, a group of Suffolk peasants. But some aversive afterburn remains, particularly when the extraordinary killing that creates a new mode of production joins the ordinary killing that maintains customary forms of surplus extraction.

At such moments, normal ruling-class PTSD becomes a pre-emptive PretSD, which turns a plan for slaughter into its own justification by attributing it to the intended victims, creating ‘the outcome of a phantasmic event, an

imaginary episode set in the future’. Every suspicion becomes an existential threat, prompting a lynching, a white terror, the crushing of a peasant encampment, or a pre-emptive war. And a sleepless ruling class perpetually at war can view its unprovoked attacks as pre-emptive: Tudor civil servant Richard Morison asks, ‘In time of peace, be not all men almost at war with them that be rich?’

The Tudor gentleman in the era of primitive accumulation and the Protestant Reformation fashions himself by his humanist schooling, his dynastic and erotic obsessions, his clashing bonds of blood and affection, and the religious practices that torment, catechise, and absolve him. He is tautly disciplined, exquisitely self-conscious about courtly codes of conduct, and trained to hold taut the bridle of the self while stepping boldly forth with calculating sprezzatura. But he is also hysterically formed and deformed by learning how to kill, by planning to kill, and by killing.

Three episodes of gentle hysteria from the tumultuous summer of 1549. First, on 7 July, the day Kett’s Rebellion broke out, Sir William Paget chastised his friend Somerset for his lenient response to peasant unrest: ‘The foot taketh upon the part of the head, and commyns is become a king’. He recalls the tumults in Germany, where ‘some spiced consciences’ pitied the poor and shunned the moderate bloodshed that could have prevented full-scale conflict. Impatient with mid-Tudor wets whining about enclosures and dearth (like Tacitus, he voices plebeian grievances, then ignores them), he proposes to send an army consisting of several chief justices, an English cavalry troop, and four thousand German mercenaries from shire to turbulent shire. In each, they would summon ‘twenty or thirty, of the rankest knaves’, and ‘If they come peaceably to justice, let six be hanged of the ripest of them without redemption, in sundry places of the shire; the rest remain in prison’.

Meanwhile, Sir Thomas Smith, Somerset’s secretary of state, was temporarily out of favour and rusticated to Berkshire, which had seen some peasant risings. He too fretted about the Protector’s tepid response. On 18 July, after several nights in a panicky, sleepless sweat, he wrote William Cecil with a vision of pre-emptive attacks by a nationwide force of night-riders. Each shire should set up a cavalry troop led by gentlemen with ‘grave yeomen’ attending.

---

80. Atzmon 2006. The two greatest nuclear panics in recent years occurred in major nuclear powers, directed against non-nuclear powers: the US against Iraq in 2002–3 and Israel and the United States against Iran in 2006–8.


82. Philip Sidney offers a classic example: anyone teaching the magnificently overwrought prose of The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia should briefly entertain students’ frequent first impression that Sidney was crazier than a shithouse rat.

83. Strype 1822, pp. 431, 435, 436; condensed in Knighton 1992, pp. 121–2. For similar sentiments and an oblique threat against Somerset, see Cheke 1549, D8v, F2v.
And where they hear tell of any evil rule, or beginning of stir to be, there suddenly in the night to come with a sixty or a hundred horse, and take and lead away the stirrers before any company be come unto them.... And if a great number of the boisterous were despatched, the realm had no loss.84

With their rigorous hempen posses, Paget and Smith violently parody Somerset’s circuit-riding enclosure commissions. Michael Perelman has shown that even doctrinaire eighteenth-century advocates of laissez-faire capitalism admitted the need for systematic, extra-market compulsion. Thomas Smith, whose fantasies of lynched peasants complement his eminently rational Discourse of the Commonweal, the founding work of capitalist political economy, backdates this combination to mid-Tudor England.85

As we will see, Warwick acted out these fantasies on 27 August, when he crushed the campmen. But, two days earlier, during a low point in the battle, when some frightened Norwich citizens asked him to leave town, Neville says he employed an atavistic ritual to reunify his forces:

I will first suffer fire, sword; finally, all extremity, before I will bring such a stayne of infamy and shame, either upon my selfe, or you. With these words hee drew his sword; so did the rest of the Nobles (for they were all there gathered together) and hee commanded after a warlike manner (and as is usually done in greatest danger) that they should kisse one anothers sword, making the signe of the holy Crosse, and by an Oath, and solemnne promise by word of mouth, every man to binde himselfe to other, not to depart from the City, before they had utterly banished the Enemie, or else fighting manfully, had bestowed their lives cheerfully for the Kings Majestie.

Binding together his lordly fasces, Warwick embodies Paget and Smith’s fantasy of reactionary but innovative group formation. Following Sartre’s dialectic of practical ensembles, his group emerges out of the perceived threat of a counter-group, but dissimulates its own novelty with conspicuous anachronism: as Klansmen brandished Jacobite regalia and burning crosses to forge the postbellum capitalist plantocracy, and as French revolutionaries ‘performed the task of their time in Roman costume and with Roman phrases’, so Neville’s new Tudor aristocracy pursued primitive accumulation, and later a coup d’état, while dressed up as crusading feudal barons intoning neo-Latin periods.86

84. Tytler 1839, 1. 185–9.
All the Tudor chroniclers of Kett’s Rebellion sing the praises of lordly assaults, excoriate the campmen, and snub Somerset, who is conspicuous by his absence from Neville, Cheke, Sotherton, and the sections of Holinshed on Kett’s Rebellion. Alexander Neville’s *De Furoribus Norfolciensis*, a sumptuous Latin quarto published by Henry Bynneman in 1575, is the most important and culturally influential account of Kett’s Rebellion, both in itself and through Holinshed’s 1577 abridged and revised translation, also printed by Bynneman, and his 1586 second edition. Neville, who lived an unremarkable life as Tudor-Stuart middle management, dedicated *De Furoribus* to his employer and Bynneman’s patron, Archbishop Matthew Parker, who had witnessed and participated in many of the events Neville narrates. In 1582, Bynneman appended Neville’s work to Christopher Ocland’s *Anglorum prælia*, a Latin verse history of England from 1327 to 1558. The Privy Council had the Commissioners for Causes Ecclesiastical make this work an official text for grammar schools, replacing Ovid’s *Art of Love* and other works by ‘such lascivious poets’. Many copies of the 1582 editions survive, most with Neville’s tract appended, so a generation of English students may have read it. In 1615, Richard Woods translated Neville’s work as *Norfolkes Furies*; in 1623, a second edition appeared as *Norfolke furies, and Their Foyle*.

Because the enclosure commissions were not sent out to Norfolk, Neville says, ‘the common people began to murmur, and be grieved’ and entered into ‘secret counsels’. He proceeds to display these secret counsels through an initially sympathetic speech of more than seven hundred words by an unnamed spokesman for the peasant collective:

> The pride of great men is now intollerable, but their condition miserable. These abound in delights, and compassed with the fulnesse of all things, and consumed with vaine pleasures, thirst only after gaine, and are inflamed with the burning delights of their desires: but themselves almost killed with labour and watching, doe nothing all their life long but sweate, mourne, hunger and thirst.

> The people hold land miserably ‘at the pleasure of great men: not freely, but by prescription, and as it were at the will, and pleasure of the Lord’. Rioting in ‘effeminate delights’, these ‘gorgious Gentlemen’ take away the ‘common Pastures left by our predecessors for the reliefe of us, and our children’. Viewing the nobility’s attempts to hedge in the common fields, the pastures, and nature

---

herself, the speakers resolve that ‘we will rather take Armes, and mixe Heaven and Earth together, then indure so great crueltie’. 89

Annabel Patterson says Neville has ‘willy nilly, given almost more than we could ask for in terms of attributing rational motives and emotive force to radical agents’, but rationality is not on Neville’s agenda. He introduces this oration resembling that of Percennius with a Tacitean denunciation of the ‘base and vile’ rebels as ‘light, and seditious persons of the common people’, who ‘powre foorth their ungodly desires against the Commonwealth’ and ‘bitterly inveighed against the authoritie of Gentlemen, and of the Nobilitie’. He concludes it by calling them ‘desperate persons, and banckeroute varlets’, adding a stream of excremental abuse: ‘All the rest of that filthy company flowed againe to the Campe at Moushold, as into a sinke’. Similarly, Cheke says, the camp is a sewer, and the campmen are beasts, inferior body parts, a disease. 90 Neville and Cheke are far from anything like a Tudor public sphere: their overt fictionalising comes together strangely with sympathetically rendered peasant complaints which need not be repressed or misrepresented, for true or false, they remain a seditious affront. 91

Neville frequently records quite legibly an episode of canny peasant improvisation, then denounces it as bestial fury. During the first assault on the camp by Sir William Parr, Marquess of Northampton, Neville says, a number of ‘beardless boys . . . provoked our men with all reproachful speeches’, and a great company of Country Clownes, did hazard a thing not only marveilous to see, but incredible to heare. For the unarmed multitude, and others, part with Clubbes and Swords, others with Spears, Staves and Javelins, (as chance could arme every man on the sudden) cast themselves headlong into the River that compasseth the Cite, at the Bridge, called Bishops Gates Bridge. Who, without feare, swimming over, and flying to the Gates with out-cries, and most tumultuous noise, strooke such a terror in the minds of all men, as there was none almost, which thought not that day, the day of doome, both to their Citie, and to themselves. Therefore all for the most part (being afraid and discomfited) fled.

Neville turns tactics into tumult: as far back as Froissart’s Chroniques, Walsingham’s Chronicon, and Gower’s Vox Clamantis, peasant rebellions appear as apocalyptic assaults on the lordly ear. 92 The hysterical sublime sometimes

89. Neville 1615, B1v, B2r–v. The passage owes a debt to John Ball’s Blackheath sermon. See Dobson 1983, p. 371. Whittle argues that both the 1381 and 1549 rebellions were class struggles between lords and peasants, but the former focused on labour, the latter on land (2007, pp. 234, 244).
90. Patterson 1989, p. 43. Neville 1615, B2v, I3r. Cheke 1549, B4v, B6r, C3r.
91. On sedition, see Manning 1980.
92. Neville 1615, D4r, F1v. Froissart says a group of peasant rebels who saw the king’s barge
verges on inadvertent humour: describing the campmen’s settlement of Mousehold Heath, Neville writes ‘Heere they placed the Chambers (and as it were) tents of their furies, and lurking those thicke woods, as dogs in their kennels, they violated all Lawes of God and man’, but he instances only the campmen’s entering the imposing home of the recently executed Earl of Surrey, and leaving ‘the markes of their villanies’ (graffiti?). He adds that ‘such monsters of mischiefe were conceived; and such unlawfull lusts in all kinde of daliance, that my tongue abhorreth, and is ashamed to tell’, but instead of a bumpkin satyricon, he shows only the campmen’s monstrously gentle ‘desire of ease’ and of roasted livestock.93

Matthew Parker, Master of Corpus Christi College and future archbishop, was visiting nearby and came to the camp to deliver a homily against wilful disobedience and rebellion. The campmen bristle like reprobate Jews reviling Christ in a passion play, and Parker escapes being ‘thrust thorow of the raging multitude’ only through an Anglican miracle: when a colleague soothes the savage breast by singing to the campmen the *Te Deum* in English, ‘by the sweetness of which Song, they being ravished’, Parker makes his getaway.94 Like Pyrrhus entering Troy, the campmen enter Norwich like ‘wilde beasts under the shape of men’, and commit sublime monstrosities – ‘many other fearefull things (which that I may not make lesse in speaking), I willingly let passe’. Unnamed Norwich matrons offer their virtue to save their unnamed husbands, to no avail.95 Cheke charges, ‘no doubt thereof ye would have fallen to slaughter of men, ravishing of wives, deflouring of maides, chopping of children, firing of houses, beting doune of stretes, overthrowing of al together’.96

In this aristocratic Norfolk Romance, events emerge not from within, through the development of social processes, but from without, through horrific imagined transgressions, heroic responses, and miraculous happenstance. This willed incomprehension helps justify the pre-emptive assaults on the sublime Monster of Mousehold Heath.

At two key moments, Neville moves out of misty enormities into sharp-focus accounts of briskly punished plebeian effrontery. During the York Herald’s visit, Kett’s forces offer a temporary truce, which the Norwich city fathers rebuff. After the campmen assault the city, one of the

‘made such a cry, as though all the devils of hell had been among them’ (Dobson 1983, p. 144). For Walsingham and Gower, see Justice’s fine analysis of the politics implicit in turning plebeian voices into noise (1994, pp. 206–12).

93. Neville 1615, E4v, C1v, D3r.
94. Neville 1615, C4r–D1r. Thanks to Christa Pijacki for the passion play analogy.
95. Neville 1615, G4v, H1v. For further improbable accounts of nameless slain gentlemen, see D3v, D4r, F1v, F3r, I2v.
96. Cheke 1549, C8r.
cursed boyes, putting downe his hose, and in derision, turning his bare buttocks to our men, with an horrible noise and out-crye, filling the aire (all men beholding him) did that, which a chaste tongue shameth to speake, much more a sober man to write: but being shot thorow the buttocks, one gave him, as was meete, the punishment he deserved.

During Warwick's assault, the Norroy Herald delivers a long oration denouncing the campmen, prompting a similar retort:

It happened before he had made an end of his speech, that an ungracious boy, putting downe his breeches, shewed his bare buttockes, and did a filthy act: adding therunto more filthy words. At the indignity whereof, a certaine man being moved (for some of our men were on the river, which came to behold) with a bullet from a Pistoll, gave the boy such a blow upon the loines, that sodainely strooke him dead.

Cornwall comforts the gunman: ‘For all we know this soldier had intended to do no more than scare him, and by chance had scored a hit at extreme range’. But this shows only the extent to which liberal humanitarianism has inflected modern conservatism. Neville is moved only by the indignity, not the dead boys, while Woods glosses, ‘a boyling trick justly punished’.97 And for both Warwick and Neville, the campmen's continuing effort to negotiate through petitions was just another boyling trick.

**Petitions, pardons, and slaughter**

In July 1549, Somerset and his Council wrote nine letters to camps in Norfolk, Suffolk, Oxfordshire, St Albans, Hampshire, and Essex. In the first full study of these letters, Ethan Shagan adapts the older liberal interpretation of ‘Good Duke Somerset’ associated with A.F. Pollard and W.K. Jordan.98 Though Somerset was not driven by free-floating benevolence, concrete circumstances did launch him on a quest for popularity: ‘a conscious effort to appeal downward for support from those outside the political establishment, creating a power-base independent of either the court or local affinities’. These letters reveal one side of a monarcho-populist dialogue between Protector and commons, employing a gospelling ‘feedback system’ in which

---

98. Shagan suggests Somerset authored or approved all nine letters (1999, pp. 37–8).
the language of evangelical Protestantism became the political *lingua franca* between government and people. . . . [T]he Protector’s strategy involved an elaborate courting of public opinion and a stunning willingness to commit the regime to fundamental changes in policy at the initiation of the commons.99

John Hayward discussed one of these letters as early as 1631, and later historians have also drawn on them, but it remained to Shagan to show their full significance. Like a post-revisionist C. Auguste Dupin, Shagan reveals the importance of the purloined letters that were there all along.

Michael Bush and George Bernard have responded with strenuous incomprehension. Bush reasserts his earlier revisionist attempt to ‘demolish’ the liberal interpretation of Somerset. Bernard questions the significance of Shagan’s discovery and the soundness of his interpretation, adding that

> It is necessary in addition to look at *all* the surviving evidence, including proclamations, conciliar letters, military commanders’ letters, as well as narratives of the rebellions, and to consider events – military, political – over a longer timescale.100

Bernard’s advice sounds more like a stopgap effort to defer inquiry than a genuine attempt to continue it, but we should take it seriously. When we do, the result is not a revisionist muddle of contingencies but a determinate conflict between monarcho-populist and aristo-capitalist politics, with the former struggling to ally Somerset and the campmen through peaceful negotiations, the latter scheming to destroy this alliance and replace negotiation with armed conflict.

In mid-July, the Privy Council heard messengers from a Norfolk camp who asked for an emissary to receive written grievances. Somerset’s 17 July response is superficially an exercise in traditional Tudor order rhetoric, but it creates a genuine dialogue. He reminds the campmen that enclosure commissioners are already at work ‘for reformacion of thinges’, saying it is ‘your lack and blames to assemble as you doe and not to content your selves to receave things by order from the kinges Majestie’. The campmen have been misled by agitators, including ‘naughtie papists priests that seeke to bringe in the olde abuses and bloody lawes’ who ‘seeke nothinge but spoile and ravine of yow your wives daughters and servaunts’. Somerset warns that the rebellion will bring England into foreign disrepute by this rebellion and preaches the summertime parable of the provident ant who lays up for the winter. But he also promises to respond to any articles of complaint.101

---

The next day, in an astonishing second letter to Norfolk, Somerset tried to anticipate the campmen’s petition, ‘thinckinge your griefs to be of the same sorte and nature that your neighbors be’. He promises nothing less than a Velvet Revolution on commonwealth lines, conceding the primary agrarian reform by promising to restore the rents of forty years earlier. Bush admits that this reform ‘could easily be taken as radically favouring the peasant at the landlord’s expense’, but insists ‘there is no evidence to prove that this was its intent’. Short of a séance, it is not clear what Bush would count as evidence of Somerset’s intent, which seemed plain enough to the gentlemen who would work to disrupt his proposal and behead him. Somerset limits priests to one benefice, cuts the price of wool by one third, and restricts vertical monopolies by prohibiting landlords from engrossing other occupations. He offers to consider ‘anye other your articles as yow shall have good cause both to content your selves and to praye for us’ and encourages the campmen to appoint four or six representatives to present grievances to a new parliament, which he promises to call in October, one month early, ‘for the more spedy reformacion of the premisses’.102 Somerset had high hopes for his negotiations: on 22 July, the day after his herald arrived in Norwich, he wrote Lord Russell, contrasting the Western rebels, whom Russell was crushing, to the East-Anglian rebels, whose emissaries seem to have been present in London, where they say

in counsaill things of common ordre, as to have one man to have but one ferme
lands at theyr owne parrych, and suche lyke; they stand for present reformation
and yet must they tary a parlayment tyme.103

What ensued remains somewhat mysterious. The Clerk of the Norwich Mayor’s Court says two heralds arrived in Norwich on 21 July, the second with a pardon, and that the campmen rebuffed both.104 The chroniclers collapse the two heralds into one. Neville’s York Herald arrives in Norwich, proceeds to the Oak of Reformation, mentions nothing of Somerset’s offers, denounces the campmen, and offers them gracious pardon if they disarm and disperse or ‘condign punishment’ if they do not. Most of Neville’s campmen reject the pardon after Kett argues

Kings are wont to pardon wicked persons, not innocent and just men; they, for
their part, had deserved nothing, and were guiltie to themselves of no crime; and
therefore despised such speeches as idle, and unprofitable to their business.105

---

103. Pocock 1884, p. 32; abbreviations expanded.
104. The second herald may have arrived on the twenty-fourth. See Virtual Norfolk 2001g.
105. Neville 1615, E1v–E2r; see also Sotherton 1976, 85; Holinshed 1965, 3.970.
Kett's campmen had reason to be wary: in 1536–7, some of them may have been serving with the Duke of Norfolk when he persuaded Henry to issue a disingenuous pardon to gain time on the way to crushing the Pilgrimage of Grace.106 In any case, Neville's York Herald charged Kett, ‘this beastly man (and infamous in so many points of villanie)’, with

treason against the Kings Majestie, and pronounceth him a Traitor, & guiltie of high Treason. Moreover, commandeth Ioh. Petibone, the Mayors Sword-bearer, to arrest this cursed Caitife of an action of treason, against the King: but then they began a stur on every side, this way, & that way, striving with no lesse stout, then dangerous contention.

He offers not a Protectoral but a Henrician pardon: a sovereign act of exception and histrionic restraint that threatens to turn violent if not immediately accepted. Neville says the herald, Mayor Codd, and Thomas Aldrich returned to Norwich, Kett and some campmen to Mousehold Heath, and other campmen, who accepted the pardon, to their homes.107

Back in Norwich, Mayor Codd shut the gates, freed those gentlemen imprisoned by Kett in the castle, and admitted them to the war counsel, which garrisoned the city and commenced starving the remaining campmen into submission. The Chamberlain’s accounts suggest a frenzy of preparation: the gentlemen appointed a watch, positioned cannon, cast shot, distributed match and powder, and built up ramparts.108 When they heard that some campmen had entered the city and then left, Neville says, they panicked, ‘perceiving the Conspirators to plot on every side the death and destruction of men and goods’. They moved their cannon from the Castle ditch because they ‘did not much annoy the enemy…. [A]nd all the night following (for the most part) was spent in fearefull shot on both sides’.109 In other words, the gentlemen began the shooting – a provocative act that the modern chroniclers ignore or attribute, with no evidence, to the campmen.110

106. Manning 1977, p. 30, n. 52. On Henry’s disingenuous pardon at Doncaster see Fletcher and MacCulloch 1997, pp. 34, 46–7; and Shagan 2003, pp. 112–17. Kett’s caution is still relevant: Cornwall declares that some Suffolk rebels ‘were pardoned, proof positive of participation in some unlawful activity’ (1984, pp. 64–5).

107. Neville 1615, E2r.


109. Neville 1615, E2v–E3r. See also Sotherton 1976, p. 86; Holinshed 1965, 3.970. Hayward’s Edward sent the campmen a response based on Letter 1 along with a general pardon, whereupon they inexplicably ‘discharged the first shot against the citty’ (1631, pp. 68–70).

It is unlikely that either herald would have neglected his charge by delivering a mere denunciation amid Somerset’s informants and thousands of armed campmen. But if both delivered Somerset’s generous offers, why did these campmen not accept them and go home, as did others in East Anglia and beyond? They had everything to lose by rejecting Somerset’s offers, and everything to gain by accepting them: a radical rollback in rents in two months, continuing negotiations, a commonwealth Parliament in October, and safe return to their neglected families, fields, and shops. Perhaps they did not reject the offers, but merely retired to debate them. However attractive, they were complex enough to require careful and confidential consideration by the Council of Hundreds. Those campmen who headed home may simply have anticipated a full, negotiated resolution of the crisis that would reconcile Somerset’s second letter and the Mousehold Articles. And the campmen did accept at least one of Somerset’s offers in his second letter, for they sent six representatives to court: on 27 July, Somerset wrote that Sir William Parr, Marquess of Northampton had left for Norwich, but

we trust ther shalbe no great matyer, for presenteyle are come hither half a dozen chosen of theyr compayny who seke the kyngs Majesties mercie and redresse of things, and be returned to receyve pardon by dyrecccons of the mrques siche as will seke yt at his handes.111

They may even have travelled to court with the York Herald. If so, then either the chroniclers exaggerated the hostilities, or the campmen were magnanimous enough to overlook an artillery barrage.

In any case, the chroniclers who recorded the first negotiations in Norwich found the initial phases of the monarcho-populist dialogue too obscene to narrate: with the exception of Hayward, they mention nothing of Somerset’s offers. Rather than assuming the historical accuracy of this furious set-piece, we should probably look to its formal function in Neville’s narrative: it feels like another imagined scene, perhaps a back-formation from the later pardons and battles, motivated by loathing of Somerset’s accommodating offer and by the need to fill in the narrative space left after excising it. But whether these excited accounts of conflict on 21–2 July were fact or fiction, they reveal the gentlemen’s underlying fear that class war would fail to break out, that the negotiations would succeed, that rents and the price of wool would be rolled back, and that a commonwealth Parliament would convene in October to ratify these actions and consider further ones. Given that the other

111. Pocock 1884, p. 28; Pocock misdates the letter 17 July.
camps had dispersed with the promise of fundamental social reform, Mousehold Camp held forth the last chance for a slaughter and a coup.

When news of the encounter reached the Privy Council, Somerset foolishly assembled the first expeditionary force under Northampton, who combined the general animus of the peers against commonwealth ideology with a personal grudge against Somerset, who had frustrated his efforts to divorce and remarry. A larger aristocratic conspiracy against Somerset had begun taking shape as early as June, fuelled by resentment of Somerset’s executing his own treasonous brother, Thomas, in March; his enclosure commissions, personally aggravating to Warwick; his gentle treatment of earlier risings; and his arrogance toward other councillors. Hales (probably) and another contemporary chronicler both say Warwick began scheming against Somerset from the beginning of his Protectorate by setting him against his brother. Van der Delft, the imperial ambassador, reported to Charles V that Mary had told him that

> there was much rivalry and division in the Council, for the Earls of Warwick, Southampton and Arundel, and the Great Master [Sir William Paulet] were working against the Protector and his new Council and sending to sound her to see if she would lend her favour to an attack on the Protector, whom they wished to impeach for lese-majestie.

And the gentlemen may have short-circuited efforts at peace by disrupting communications between Somerset and Mousehold Heath.

Northampton’s army reached Norwich on 31 July and entered the city. The next day, the campmen attacked, slew Sheffield, and drove Northampton out. Somerset complained Northampton had ‘evill governed’ his charge, for where he

> was specially instructed tovoyde the fight, and being a nomber of horse should by speciall order have kept the feld and so have penned them from vitaill, and otherwyse so awaked them as to have made them sought theyr pardon; And thereby to have preserved the kyngs subjects bothe of the marques parte and of thother corrupt members who might have been brought to the acknowledge of theyr dewties, yf it had bene well handeled, he and suche advyse of counsiall as he had there lefte quite their Instruccion and went to pynne them selfes within the towne of Norwich, which afterwards they were fayne to habandon.

114. Virtual Norfolk 2001c.
Most historians have seen Northampton as a bumbling sonneteer, but there was a method to his cavalier bravado, which helped subvert the peaceful programme Somerset had promised the campmen. True, any people striving to leave behind a culture of deference needs to learn that earls can be killed, but Sheffield’s death played right into the berserker cunning of the gentlemen, who saw to it that the rising ended not with monarcho-populist legislation but with spurts of patrician, then torrents of plebeian blood.

Indeed, even Somerset seems at first to have decided on a ‘terrible example’ in retribution. But by 24 August, he had calmed down, saying there was ‘no great losse saving the losse of the lord Sheffield’, with fewer than five hundred killed on both sides, none of them gentlemen. Though he originally intended to head the second expedition himself, Somerset foolishly delegated the job to Warwick, who marched to Norwich with his sons Ambrose and Robert and a force of 6,000 foot. Ominously, Warwick asked that Northampton join him in returning to the scene of his humiliation. ‘They arrived on the twenty-third and were joined by 1500 horse, mostly Swiss mercenaries. The chroniclers say Warwick began with a pardon, in the form of a long secular sermon by Gilbert Dethick, the Norroy Herald. Neville looks into the hearts of the campmen and finds them trembling ‘for the guilt of Conscience’, but nevertheless offended and ready to accuse Dethick of serving the gentlemen, not the king. They reject the pardon, which ‘in appearance seemed good and liberal, but in truth would prove in the ende lamentable and deadly, as that which would be nothing else; but Barrels filled with Ropes and Halters’. Neville follows with some formulaic denunciations of their pestilent madness, but negotiations proceed until Warwick’s gentle gunman shoots the second Rabelaisian camping boy, leading the campmen to fear a general bloodbath:

\[
O \text{ my companions, we are betrayed. Do you not see our fellow Souldiers cruelly slaine before our eyes, and shot thorow? what shall wee hope for, being dispersed, and unarmed, when yet being in armes, violence is offered? For surely this herald intendeth nothing else, but we being inclosed, all of us on every side with traynes, and weakned, may most cruelly be slaine of the Gentlemen.}\]

Tacitean Neville feels no obligation to address the logic – quite valid, as it turned out – of the argument he records or creates.

---

119. Neville 1615, H4r–I1v.
But the gentlemen underestimated the campmen’s patience, for Kett ‘joyned himselfe with the Herald, and minded to have spoken with Warwicke, face to face’. Sotherton emphasises Kett’s self-sacrifice: the pardon had excluded him from mercy. As they moved toward Warwick’s camp, Neville says a ‘mighty rout of Rebels’ followed them, declaring that ‘they were willing to undergo with him what fortune soever (though never so sharpe) and if he would needs goe any further, he should have them his companions and partners, both in life and death’. At Dethick’s request, Kett demonstrated his good faith by returning and quieting the campmen. Had he been allowed to return to Warwick’s camp, perhaps atoning for Sheffield’s blood with his own, England might have remained on track for the October commonwealth Parliament.\footnote{\textsuperscript{120}}

But Warwick headed off this peace offensive:

\[W\]hen hee perceived that they were all carried headlong (with a certaine frenzy, and as it were, a blinde rage of the minde) to destruction: and that neither by intreaty or faire promises; not yet by the feare of punishment, they could bee wonne to cease from their filthy enterprise: It seemed best unto him, to leave off for ever the hope of peace: a thing aswell by himselfe, as by others often proved in vaine, and now at the length to deale by open warre.

As usual, in the absence of any concrete provocation, Neville piles up pejoratives, but without denying Kett’s efforts to avert a battle. The modern chroniclers repeat or improve on his account. Cornwall accepts Neville’s account of Warwick’s internal state: ‘[I]t was now clear to Warwick that the attempt at pacification had failed’. Loades ignores the restored orderliness of the campmen: ‘Kett’s men were in an ugly mood, and he had lost his control over them. Not being a soldier, he did not know how to handle such a situation’. Land embroiders: the words of the rebels who rode up to Kett ‘can also be seen as an assertion that Kett would not be allowed to go before Warwick as the sole representative of the rebel cause’. Beer wantonly transfers Warwick’s reported decision to Kett: ‘sensing that his own authority was diminishing, Robert Kett decided that a meeting with Warwick would be fruitless’.\footnote{\textsuperscript{121}}

Warwick ordered his pioneers to break open a gate where ‘they first entred the City, and killing many, they easily remove the enemy from that place’. Entering the marketplace, they found almost sixty rebels begging for pardon, whom they proceeded to punish in a ‘warlike manner.…. For without hearing

\textsuperscript{120} Neville 1615, I2r; Sotherton 1976, pp. 94–5.
the cause, all of them were presently (as the manner of warres is) manifestly convict of their wickedness, and received their last punishment’. 122 The Chamberlain's accounts for that boisterous day list an outlay of 8p for erecting a gallows, 3p 'for mendyng of a leddy r that was broken at the Crosse with hangyng of men', and 3s 9p 'for the Charges of beryeng of xlix men that war hangyd at the Crosse in the market, for makyng pytts and carryeng to them'. The battle proceeded with full force, particularly in the city, where three or four gentlemen were killed. With one volley, a Captain Drury slew 130 campmen (Neville's tally) or 330 (Woods's). Myles, the campmen's gunner, slew Warwick's master gunner with a shot.123

On 26 August, Warwick cut the supply lines between Norwich and Mousehold Heath, and the campmen decided to make a stand at nearby Dussindale, where there may have been better hope of provision. The usual explanation – that they were acting on a deluding prophecy – is implausible. Neville gives the 'unsavory and sottish verses' in English, and Woods renders them thus:

The Country gnooffes Hob, Dick, and Hick,
With clubbes, and clouted shoone,
Shall fill up Dussyn Dale:
With slaughterd bodies soone.124

Mousehold Heath and its environs had been associated with plebeian uprisings as far back as the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, and the campmen may well have authorised their struggle with populist prophecies, but it is difficult to imagine them engaging in such witless self-mockery.125 However, the chroniclers, old and new, fancy the Delphic irony of 'slaughterd bodies' (intended aristocrats, actual campmen), for it retroactively vindicates the gentlemen: if they meant to slaughter us, who can blame us for slaughtering them?126 In any case, on 27 August, after a pitched battle, most of the campmen broke ranks and fled, and

122. Neville 1615, I2r–v. In his first edition, Holinshed thriftily illustrated these and other hangings with two favourite woodcuts, used as far back as his account of Vortigen hanging recalcitrant Scots and Picts (1577, pp. 1670, 1674, 110). Albion's fatal tree becomes a visual leitmotif for its history.
123. Russell 1859, p. 132. Neville 1575, p. 131; Neville 1615, I2v, I3r.
124. Russell 1859, p. 214. Neville 1575, p. 141; Neville 1615, K1v. Quoting Neville, the OED defines 'gnoff' as a 'churl, boor, lout'.
126. Puttenham discusses this prophecy as an 'amphibology' (1589, p. 218); so does Blomefield (1806, p. 252, n. 3). Cotta compares it to the prophecy Aeneas receives at Delphi (1616, pp. 64–5). Beer claims the campmen 'foolishly based their strategy on the obscure prophecy' (Sotherton 1976, p. 75). Thomas hears an actual prophecy, perhaps improved after the fact (1973, p. 478). Patterson hears genuine peasant ideology (1989, p. 40).
the Swiss cut them down. Somerset counted a thousand dead, Neville 3,500, and Robert Parkyn, 7,000 on both sides, with many other counts in between.127 These estimates vary because of the chroniclers’ contradictory impulses to magnify both the victors’ mercy and their rigour, their class indifference to the dead campmen, and the summertime necessity for getting tons of rotting flesh underground quickly. After capturing, trying, and convicting the Kett brothers, the state hanged them in chains, Robert from Norwich Castle, William from Wymondham Abbey.128

In the midst of battle, says Neville, one group of rebels drew together and ‘resolved they had rather die manfully in fight, then flying, to be slaine like sheepe’. When promised pardon, they demurred:

But, they have had already experience, of their cruelty upon their companions in all places. . . . And in truth, whatsoever they pretend, they know well, and perceive; this pardon to be nothing else but vessels of Ropes and Halters, and therefore have decreed to die.

Warwick promised to abide by the pardon, and ‘thus many men . . . were saved by the Wisdom and Compassion of Warwicke’. Somerset told Sir Philip Hoby that Warwick had pardoned all,

The chief heads, ringleaders, and postes excepted, Kett and iii of his britherne with sundry other chief captaines, all vile persons, were also taken, who now remaine in honde to receive that which they have deserved.129

But Warwick stretched the truth. ‘Judgement in the Castle’ began the day after the battle, ‘and an inquiry was made of those that had conspired, and many were hanged, and suffered grievous death. Afterward nine which were the Ringleaders, and principalls’, joined by ‘many companions with them in these villainies’ died in the traditional festive fashion: half-hanged on the Oak of Reformation, cut down, castrated, slit open, their living bowels cast into a fire, then decapitated and quartered, with the pieces displayed about town.130 The nine included Myles the cannoneer and the prophets Rugg and Wilse, but the ‘many’ who also suffered presumably included some of those promised pardon, since Neville has mentioned only the 3,500 slain in flight and the large group taken into custody.131

130. Neville 1615, K3v.
Neville’s attention deficit lets him move in two paragraphs from praise for Warwick’s gentle magnanimity to awe at the solemn spectacle of his gibbets. There is no cross-class public sphere, no requirement for ideological consistency – what matters are the affront and its punishment. As beastly plebeian ‘sedition’ need imply no mendacity, so godly gentle pardon need imply no mercy: the sovereign power to make exceptions shines forth equally from the pre-emptive attack, the pardon, and the pardon’s abrogation. Drawing on the Norwich Roll, now lost, Blomefield estimates 300 hanged during and after Warwick’s assault, with at least a week of executions. Anticipating the eighteenth-century’s parliamentary enclosures, this gentle riot offered the victors a windfall opportunity for state-aided primitive accumulation. On 3 September, six days after the battle, Sir Thomas Woodhouse wrote his brother William that

You shall understande that my lord of Warwike doth the execution of many men at Norwiche. And the gentlemen crave at his hande the gyft of the rycheess of them, and doe dayly bring in men by accusacyon.

The modern chroniclers identify spontaneously with the hangmen. With brisk domestic whimsy, Cornwall says ‘Warwick spent two weeks at Norwich mopping up’. Beer says ‘Warwick’s strategy for pacification called for exemplary sentences for the leaders and pardons for the smaller fry’. Land, with stiff-lipped historicism, says ‘Recent writers have condemned the punishment as excessive, but to do so is unhistorical’. Loades is judicious but rigorous:

Warwick administered the inevitable punishments in Norfolk with moderation, and in strict conformity to the law. That did not mean that the toll was light; some 600 died on the gallows.

However unreliable as a historian, Neville is a more astute sociologist than his successors. After a landlordly epiphany, his Warwick redeems the captive campmen:

There must be measure kept, and above all things in punishment men must not exceed. He knew their wickednes to be such, as deserved to be grievously punished, and with the severest judgment that might bee. But how farre would they goe? would they ever shew themselves discontented, and never pleased? Would they leave no place for humble petition; none for pardon and mercy? Would they be

Plowmen themselves, and harrow their owne lands?’ These speeches appeased greatly the desire of revenge, and brought to passe, that many which before burned wholly with cruelty, afterward notwithstanding were farre more courteous towards the miserable Common people.134

The hysterical sublime dissolves into pardon, mercy, and courtesy, but only when scared silly by the harrowing spectre of a gentleman ploughman.

Serial yearning for fusion

As the greatest anticapitalist rising in British history, Kett’s Rebellion has attracted populist historians and novelists.135 But perhaps because its particular form of anticapitalism resisted assimilation to the long-dominant ‘bourgeois-revolution’ model of social change, it has drawn surprisingly little attention from the British Marxist historians. Marx never mentioned it. Tawney considered it throughout The Agrarian Problem, but overemphasised its traditionalism. Hill never took it up. Even Robert Brenner, critic of the bourgeois-revolution model, mentions it only briefly and does not feel compelled to account for the campmen’s appearance in an England he views as already thoroughly capitalist.136 The neglect may also be due to the fact that the East-Anglian rebellions marked not just a beginning, but an ending: they offered the first large-scale anticapitalist struggle aiming at national social transformation, but the slaughter at Dussindale ended any hope that the county community might be the basis for another such struggle. The fatal change came as independent yeomen like Kett formed the second leg of the classic agrarian-capitalist triad of rent-earning landlords, rent- and wage-paying tenant farmers, and wage-earning labourers.137 Commoning traditions certainly continued for centuries, perhaps everywhere we find resistance to the enclosure of land, knowledge, and resources, as Massimo De Angelis argues. But later Tudor risings were either sectarian or baronial revolts (Dudley’s attempted coup against Mary, Wyatt’s Rebellion, the Northern Rebellion, Essex’s Rebellion), or minor local disturbances (the Oxfordshire Rebellion, Hacket’s Rising).138 We

134. Cornwall 1977, p. 224; Beer 1982, p. 184; Land 1977, p. 125; Loades 1992, p. 126; Neville 1615, K4r. Jane Whittle suggests only the Ketts and four more were hanged or outlawed after the rebellion but does not give her source (2007, p. 240, n. 51).
135. Lawrence Stone says that 1549 ‘witnessed the most threatening and the most widespread series of popular revolts in the nation’s history’, with ‘clear class-war overtones’ (1974, p. 20). For popular histories, see Clayton 1912 and Groves 1946. For an insightful historical novel, see Lindsay 1949.
can measure the utopian promise of the camps and the extent of the loss suffered by English small producers in 1549 by comparing Robert Kett and the campmen to Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers, exactly one hundred years later. Winstanley, the greatest social theorist of seventeenth-century England and a brilliant prose stylist, left behind a body of writing far larger than everything we possess from the camps. But the Diggers lacked the campmen’s extensive local power base, their impressive (though finally inadequate) military organisation, and their access to the ear of a great political leader. Without these, the Diggers remained isolated, impotent, and politically inconsequential.139

What kind of revolution did the campmen envision? Not capitalist, of course, as we can see in their struggle against primitive accumulation. Not neo-feudal, as we can see in their hatred of vassalage, their Protestantism, and their vision of a people’s parliament. And certainly not socialist, as we can see in their commitment to small property. I have called ‘monarcho-populist’ their effort to graft a progressive small production onto a benevolent despotism that would help check capitalist forces. Could this tenuous hyphenated alliance have ‘clipped the wings of rural capitalism’, as S.T. Bindoff suggests?140 Denying a hypothetical is as dubious a task as asserting one, but it is hard to see how even an upright dynasty of populist, anticapitalist monarchs could have held off forever the established dynamic of English capitalist accumulation, or how a non-monarchical republic might have spread outward from East Anglia and Somerset House to unify the nation. I think those clipped capitalist wings would have grown back, stronger and meaner.

Monarcho-populist solidarity did linger, but only in a weakened form. When Warwick launched his coup in October 1549, Somerset had Edward issue a remarkable downward petition to ‘all his loving subjects’ to come to Hampton Court to defend them against ‘a most dangerous conspiracy’. One ‘Henry A’ seconded Somerset, damned the arriviste Council as ‘but late from the dunghill’, noted that their coup interrupted the commonwealth parliament promised for October, and prophesied against London, ‘called Troy untrue, Merlin sayeth that twenty-three of aldermen of hers will lose their heads in one day’. Perhaps 4,000 untrained commoners heeded the call, to no avail, and Warwick’s forces captured and imprisoned Somerset.141 On 22 January 1552, the Privy Council ordered the people to stay indoors during Somerset’s execution. Many disobeyed, creating a commotion around the scaffold, until

Somerset quieted them and decorously laid his head down. 142 After Edward’s death in 1553, John Dudley, now Duke of Northumberland, briefly enthroned his son Guildford and daughter-in-law Lady Jane Grey. Remembering the slaughter at Dussindale, the gospelling populace of East Anglia turned on him, helping Mary win the day. Later, when advocating continued agrarian reform, they reminded Mary of her debt to them, to little effect. 143 Concretely, the monarcho-populist alliance survived in the Tudor-Stuart poor law and anti-enclosure legislation: their indigent English beneficiaries owed to the campmen what Western welfare recipients owe to the Bolsheviks. 144 But these were no more than faint echoes and aftershocks.

Though it has attracted very little attention from historians or literary critics, the cultural afterlife of the struggle was considerable: seen from Mosehool Heath, the high English Renaissance reveals not just a court culture and an emergent imperial nation, but conflicting triumphalist and elegiac views of the mid-Tudor crisis. 145 In the midst of the rebellions, Cranmer coordinated the preaching against the camps by both native English and continental refugee clerics. Chastising enclosers but damning rebels, their sermons helped fabricate the classic Anglican ‘middle way’. Cranmer’s own sermon on rebellion was quite bold toward Somerset: the rebellions were God’s scourge of lax governance, and ‘David, because in time he did not correct his three sons Amon, Absolon, and Adonias, he lost them all three, and was in great danger to be destroyed by them himself’. In a preface of 1551, John Véron sympathised with the poor, but called for the pitiless exemplary punishment of rebel leaders, comparing them to Absalom. 146 In 1549, Bernardino Ochino wrote an Italian dialogue translated into English as A Dialogue betwene the kinge and his people, in which the King counsels the rebellious People to submit to order, even to ‘dye for hunger’ if no remedy appears for their suffering. In a 1549 letter about the Western and East-Anglian Rebellions, translated by Somerset himself, John Calvin advised him ‘to hold the brydle shorte’, for ‘insomuch as menne pardoneth suche enormities, it must folowe that GOD must take vengeaunce’. 147 Like Calvin, Cranmer, and Cheke, Thomas Smith was close to Somerset but

145. For two partial exceptions, see Patterson 1989, pp. 32–51; and Norbrook 2002, pp. 28–52.
147. [Ochino] n.d., 327–8; thanks to Tim Raylor for help with transcription. Calvin 1550, D7r.
critical of the ‘hotlings’ surrounding him, who ‘devise commonwealths as they list’. During the Rebellion, he wrote *A Discourse of the Commonweal*, a fictional dialogue ostensibly occasioned by Somerset’s enclosure commissions. But where Somerset aimed to restrain agrarian capitalism by bringing together in each parish ‘Twoo Freholders, twoo Fermers, twoo Copie holders, or tenauntes at wil’ to investigate enclosures, Smith brings together a Doctor (a civil lawyer), a Knight, a Merchant, a Capper, and a Husbandman (actually, a wage-paying farmer) in what Kendrick calls an ‘anti-camp’: a restricted capitalist utopia managed by the Doctor, who proposes a strictly monetarist solution for the problems of ‘dearth’, or inflation.

A Dudleian current of nervous gentlemanly culture began in 1549, when Norwich burghers mounted the Dudley family’s heraldic ‘ragged staff’ on the city gates. The city instituted a yearly sermon to commemorate the Rebellion’s defeat. As Northumberland took power, he attacked both verbal and agrarian commoning by prohibiting extraordinary assemblies and rolling back the anti-enclosure legislation of the previous 65 years. In December 1561, Elizabeth removed the taint of treason that Northumberland had passed to his sons Ambrose and Robert Dudley. The next month, the Inns of Court honoured Robert at their Twelfth Night revels with an avant-garde blank-verse history play, *Gorboduc or Ferrex and Porrex*, by Richard Sackville and Thomas Norton, who had been secretary to Somerset and tutor to his children in 1549. Most critics have focused on the play’s role in the succession controversy and its possible nomination of Robert Dudley as consort to Elizabeth. But it ranges further: Gorboduc tyrannically combines arrogance in ignoring his counsellors with weakness in dispersing his sovereignty – for the gentlemen in attendance, qualities most apparent in the worrisome brief reign of Somerset. The fatal rivalry of Gorboduc’s sons recalls Somerset’s with his brother Thomas Seymour. A gentle perspective on the Somerset years also appears in the play’s primary additions to its chronicle sources: its emphasis on counsel and its peasant revolt against Gorboduc (the chronicles describe only a civil war). Indeed, the two come together, for the counsellor-physician Eubulus cures the state’s civil sickness by proposing to send ‘the power of horsemen’ against the

---

150. Rye 1905, p. 20; Neville 1615, K4r. The 1642 sermon seems to have had little effect on its hired preacher, one Laurence Clarkson/Claxton, probably the future Ranter (Virtual Norfolk 2001d).
peasants, and by hanging the survivors with 'the strangling cord'. One of the play's chief sources, *Coopers Chronicle*, also gives the first substantial published account of Kett's Rebellion, showing the pardoned rebels handing over 'their chief capitaines to punishment'; similarly, some of the rebels in *Gorboduc* hand over their leaders as a 'wholesome terror to posterity'.

This Dudleian tradition includes Neville's history itself. After Matthew Parker died in 1575, Neville quickly rededicated his history to Archbishop Grindal, favourite of Robert Dudley, now Earl of Leicester, who later enlisted Neville in his dealings with Archbishop Whitgift. Philip and Robert Sidney, Leicester's nephews and Warwick's grandsons, knew Neville well. A narrative of lapsed sovereignty like *Gorboduc*’s drives Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia*, with tyrannically self-deposed Duke Basilus, dangerously elevated peasant Dametas, and hysterically slaughtered peasant rebels. Drawing on Neville in 1577, Holinshed had shown that 'butcherly knave' Fulkes slaying Sheffield with a club; revising this account in the peasant rebellion of Book 2, Sidney shows Prince Pyrocles beheading a ‘butcherly chuff’ who menaces him with a club. In Book 4, the gibbeted rebel remnant inspires a defence of lynch law: they suffer 'that without law which by law they had deserved'. In 1587, Neville dedicated to Leicester a compilation of funerary verse for Sidney. The entire *Faerie Queene* of Edmund Spenser, also a Dudley client, shows would-be gentlemen how to fashion themselves by killing conspecifics. Kett’s Rebellion echoes loudest in Book 2, when autochthonous ‘Captaine Malegar’ and his peasant rebels menace the Castle of Temperance, a decorous aristocratic body politic, until Arthur raises him up to kill him in the open air, as Hercules killed Antaeus; Joab, Absalom; and Warwick, Captain Kett.

But there was also a cross-sectarian monarcho-populist tradition. Robert Crowley’s great works of the commonwealth years combine admonitory sympathy for the campmen with apocalyptic attacks on enclosers. His masterpiece, *Philargyrie* (1551), connects the money-grubbing Roman-Catholic counsellor Hypocrisie with his corrupt gospelling successor, Philaute, who evokes not just Henrician plunderers but Northumberland’s engorged Privy Council. A reawakened Prince and his godly advisors send Philaute

---

154. Cooper 1560, 43r, 47v, 345r. Sackville and Norton 1970, 5.1.92, 5.2.26–33. In a timeserving 1552 letter to Calvin, Norton blamed Somerset for his own death, saying 'he plotted the destruction of certain others of the royal council' (Robinson 1846, pp. 339–42). Norton later translated Calvin’s *Institutes*, with its denunciation of Anabaptist rebels.
packing, along with Philargyrie himself.157 Miles Hogarde, the plebeian Catholic hosier, poet, and polemicist, ferociously opposed both the Reformation and agrarian capitalism. In 1557, he dedicated to Mary a manuscript poem entitled *A Mirroure of myserie*, which attacks rack-renting and other oppressions of the poor. John Heywood’s insect allegory, *The Spider and the Flie* (1556), the stillborn epic of monarcho-populism, stages a series of debates about agrarian class struggle and a pitched battle between spiders and flies that clearly alludes to Kett’s Rebellion. It concludes hopefully with a vision of fundamental agrarian reform through a utopian alliance of Queen Mary and commoners against Northumberland and the gentlemen who survived him.158

Perhaps recalling the origin of Kett’s Rebellion with a play in Wymondham, a royal proclamation of August 1549, in the midst of the Rebellion, prohibited the performance of any ‘interlude, play, dialogue, or other matter set forth in form of play’ until All Saints Day, on the grounds that they ‘contain matter tending to sedition, and contemning of sundry good orders and laws’.159 But the stage provided the primary aesthetic medium for remembering the camps. Nicholas Udall’s interlude *Respublica* (1553) centres on the monarcho-populist solidarity of the Marian title character with ‘People’, an honest rustic, against a disreputable quartet of advisors representing both the recently-executed Northumberland and the ex-Protestant plunderers remaining on Mary’s Privy Council, who may have attended the performance. William Wager’s *Enough Is as Good as a Feast* dramatises the conflict of Enough and Tenant and Prophet and Heavenly Man with rack-renting Covetousness and Worldly Man.160

A concern for the agrarian moral economy, all but invisible in Sidney and Spenser, pervades English Renaissance drama, including fear of enclosure and vagrancy (Arden of Faversham) and wistful homage to Somersettelike paternalists in *Thomas of Woodstock* (the title character) and *Jacke Straw* (King Richard). Shakespeare conducted the most extended and sympathetic meditation on monarcho-populism by dramatising traditions of popular debate and petitioning (*2 Henry VI* and *Coriolanus*), treacherous aristocratic slaughter (*The Henriad*), and sympathetic versions of Protector Somerset (More in *Sir Thomas More*; Queen Katherine, Buckingham, and Cranmer in *Henry VIII*).161 In *2 Henry VI*, the Duke of Suffolk combines two mid-Tudor enemies of the campmen. At first he resembles Northumberland, for he is an

encloser, a ripper-up of petitions, and the murderer of Good Duke Humphrey, Lord Protector Gloucester, who suggests Good Duke Edward, Lord Protector Somerset. But when righteous pirates loyal to Gloucester capture Suffolk, he looks more like the haughty Sheffield, for he tries to save himself by revealing his aristocratic attire and offering ransom. Unmoved, they ridicule and behead him.  

The campmen and their survivors left the most poignant reflections on Kett’s Rebellion: festering hatred for gentlemen, elegiac affection for Kett, and wistful yearning for the shattered camp. In the midst of the Rebellion, Sir John Chaundler, parson of Alsworth thorpe in Norfolk, said ‘I wold the towne of Lynne & all the Gentylmen there were on fyre’. Shortly after the Rebellion, Robert Burnham, parish clerk of St Gregory’s, Norwich, said ‘There are too many gentlemen in England by fyve hundred’. A baker named Mordewe said that, if the King would only make him hangman, he ‘could find it in his heart’ to hang ‘a great many gentlemen’. A Norwich man stared at Kett’s hanging body, blessed his soul, and prayed he would be decently buried, not hung up for ‘winter store’. In June 1550, a Norwich fisherman named John Oldman fondly recalled the fellowship of Mousehold Heath, where the campmen feasted on the voracious allies of the gentlemen: ‘it was a merry world when we were yonder eating of mutton’. Ralph Claxton insisted that he ‘did well in keeping in Kett’s camp’, ‘thought nothing but well of Kett’, and ‘trusted to see a new day for such men as I was’. William Mutton, an ailing campman, refused to repent for breaking down Norwich penthouses during the rising. Asked if this might anger potential employers, he responded with an eloquent, moral-economy elegy for himself: ‘he would never work more, for the Lord had enough for us all’.

The compilers of the Virtual Norfolk website suggest that ‘the overriding memory of the camping time for many local women must have been the onset of their widowhood’; in 1551, Johanne Ryches testified ‘That she was maryed to Robert Riches dwelling in Stokesby, and that he was slayn in the comoytion tyme’. In early 1549, Thomas Toly, a butcher of Norwich, paid seven shillings ‘for the fyrst 1/2 yere ferme of the 4th. and 5th. stalls bothe in oon’, but nothing for the second half of the year ‘forasmoche as he was hangyd as a traytor’. John Kyng stopped paying rents for his stall because he was ‘a rebell

166. Virtual Norfolk 2001a; Virtual Norfolk 2001c.
in Mushold kenell and was nevyr hard of syns’. The slaughter and the mass graves, with no proper mourning, bred traumatised fantasies of revenge. In February 1550, Margaret Adams of Earlham revived the missing campmen, adding messianic foreign potentates to supply the lost principle of English unity: ‘There are 500 of Musshold men that are gone down to the great Turk and to the Daupin, and will be here again by Midsummer’.167

A recurrent idiom of the campmen and their allies evokes, in the language of Sartre’s practical ensembles, a serial yearning for fusion. Before the Rebellion, William Poynet of Ipswich said ‘Gents and Richemen have all catell and wolles and suche like things in ther hands nowe a dayes and the pore peple are now Famysshed but C of us wyll rise one daye agenst them and I wylbe one’. After the rebellion, Thomas Wood, a Norwich joiner, said that, ‘if there were forty of good fellows that were of my set’, they would make Alderman Aldriche pay back his ill-gotten gains, while he and one other would ‘make a supplication to the King that would make the Alderman to sweat’. In February 1550, John Redheddes said he was one of a group of forty or more who would have the Dudleian ragged staff ‘plucked down’ from their gates, and he accurately prophesied Warwick’s ambitions: ‘it was not meet to have any more King’s Arms than one’. On 4 February 1551, William Baker of St Augustine’s, Norfolk, speaking of ‘a sort of Churls that have the church goods in their hands that the poor can have none’, said ‘I will be one of them that shall pluck it from them ere Witsun Sunday’. On 9 May 1553, John Somerd said of the aldermen’s new enclosures on the Norwich town close that ‘he would be one of the eight who would put it down, dykes and all, himself’, and one of those ‘hundred or two’ who would cast down any new closes. The murmurers even hinted at intriguing new strategies for setting this fused group into motion: on 16 January 1550, John Oldman and James Cowell vowed ‘They would have no more lieng camp but a running camp’.168

Clearly, the memory of Mousehold Heath still pulses with visions of a world ‘entirely real, average, identifiable as to place, time, and circumstances’, though ‘shaken in its very foundations . . . and transforming and renewing itself before our very eyes’.169 But the medium is important: these desperate vaunts are preserved for us as court records of one terrified commoner testifying against another. For the moment, seriality reigned.

References


Anon. (ed.) 1549, Instructions, Gisuen by the Kynges Maiestie, London.


—— 1970a [1926], Calendar of the Patent Rolls… Edward VI, Volume 3, Nendeln: Kraus Reprint.


Calvin, John 1550, An Epistle both of GoDLy Consolation and also of Advertisement.


Cooper, Thomas 1560, Cooper’s Chronicle, London.
Googe, Barnabe 1563, *Eglogs, Epitaphes, & Sonetts*.


Hotman, François 1573, *De Furoribus Gallicis*, London.


Marcos, Subcomandante n.d., *Dialogue betwene the Kinge and his people*, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 102, no. 27.


Neville, Alexander 1575, *De Furoribus Norfolciensium*, London.


[Ochino, Bernardino] n.d., *Dialogue betwene the Kinge and his people*, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 102, no. 27.


Robinson, Hastings 1846, *Original Letters Relative to the English Reformation... Chiefly from the Archives of Zürich*, vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rogers, James E. Thorold 1949 [1884], *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.


Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia. Part II: Revolutionary Epoch, Combined Liberation and the December 2005 Elections

Jeffery R. Webber
University of Toronto
jefferyrogerwebber@hotmail.com

Abstract
This article presents a broad analysis of the political economy and dynamics of social change during the first year (January 2006–January 2007) of the Evo Morales government in Bolivia. It situates this analysis in the wider historical context of left-indigenous insurrection between 2000 and 2005, the changing character of contemporary capitalist imperialism, and the resurgence of anti-neoliberalism and anti-imperialism elsewhere in Latin America. It considers at a general level the overarching dilemmas of revolution and reform. Part II of this three-part essay addresses four major themes. First, it reviews the literature on revolution in contemporary Bolivia. Second, it explains why the 2000 to 2005 period is best conceived as a revolutionary epoch in which left-indigenous social forces were engaged in a combined liberation struggle against racial oppression and class exploitation. However, it argues that this revolutionary epoch has not led to social revolution. Third it examines in detail the electoral rise of Evo Morales and his Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Towards Socialism, MAS) party in the December 2005 elections. Fourth, it explores the historical trajectory of the MAS in terms of its changing class composition, ideology, and political strategies since the party’s inception in the late 1990s.

Keywords
Evo Morales; Movement Towards Socialism; Bolivia; indigenous; reform; revolution; neoliberalism; social movements; revolutionary epoch

Part I of this essay introduced nine theses that challenged many of the underlying premises and conclusions of the existing scholarly and journalistic literature on the current social and political situation in Bolivia under the Evo Morales government. It offered an analysis of the country’s rural and urban class structures after more than twenty years of neoliberal economic restructuring. It also sought to contextualise the domestic scene within the wider trends of the regional and international political economy.
Part II builds on these foundations. It begins by briefly surveying some of the literature that has been grappling with the question of revolution in contemporary Bolivia. The suggestion is made that we ought to distinguish between the concepts of *revolutionary epoch* and *social revolution*. The second section then shows how the left-indigenous insurrectionary period between 2000 and 2005 meets the criteria of a revolutionary epoch. During this five-year cycle of urban and rural revolt sustained mass mobilisation from below and a multifaceted state crisis from above created opportunities for transformative structural change to the Bolivian state and society. The mass movements of this period were engaged in a combined liberation struggle to overcome the interrelated processes of class exploitation and racial oppression of the indigenous majority. The revolutionary epoch of 2000 to 2005 did not conclude with a social revolution, however.

The third section provides a detailed analysis of the December 2005 elections that brought Evo Morales, leader of the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Towards Socialism, MAS), into office. It is argued that these elections were defined by the utter exhaustion of the traditional neoliberal parties in Bolivia that had ruled the country through various coalitional governments since 1985. The electoral results were symptomatic of the widespread rejection of neoliberalism as an economic and political model.

Fourth, and finally, we review the trajectory of the MAS party, in terms of its shifting class composition, ideology, and political strategies. The party originated as the anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal political arm of an indigenous-peasant movement in the department of Cochabamba in the mid-1990s. In this period it was structured along the lines of the assembly-style, rank-and-file democracy of the peasant unions in the region. Its primary social base was the *cocaleros* (coca growers), a militant peasant population in direct confrontation with the American Empire vis-à-vis the local machinations of the militarised, US-led ‘drug war’ against their livelihoods. From its founding years until roughly 2002, the party focused strategically on extra-parliamentary activism and mass mobilisation in the countryside and cityscapes of the Cochabamba department. Since 2002, the MAS began to change course, stressing electoral politics and distancing itself from direct action in the streets. The highest layers of the party were increasingly composed of a *mestizo* (mixed race), middle-class, and urban intelligentsia. The consequences of this shift in class composition, combined with the party’s new tactic of courting the small urban middle class in electoral contests, led to substantial ideological changes. Anti-imperialism and anti-neoliberalism faded from view as reformist electoralism moved to the fore.
Revolution

Trotsky wrote approximately one hundred years ago that, ‘Revolution is an open measurement of strength between social forces in a struggle for power’.1 Such a naked measuring is widely believed to have been in the offing in the Bolivian context since the beginning of the current century. Here is only a brief overview of some of the discussion on revolution that has been reverberating around the current Bolivian process. One of the most important proponents of the revolutionary thesis from outside of Bolivia is the Mexican historian Adolfo Gilly. Here he is referring to the October 2003 Gas War:

A revolution is not something that happens in the State, in its institutions and among its politicians. It comes from below and from outside. It happens when center-stage is taken over – with the violence of their bodies and the rage of their souls – precisely by those who come from below and outside: those who are always shunted aside, those who take orders, those whom the rulers look down on as a mass of voters, electoral clientele, beasts of burden, survey-fodder. It happens when these erupt, give themselves a political goal, organize themselves in accordance with their own decisions and awareness and, with lucidity, reflection and violence, insert their world into the world of those who rule, and obtain, as in the present [Bolivian] case, what they were demanding [the resignation of President Sánchez de Lozada].2

Gilly maintains that

what we are witnessing is a revolution, whose moment of triumph was the taking of the city of La Paz and the flight of the government of Sánchez de Lozada on October 17, 2003. I do not know what will come after. I know that revolution is once again alive in these Latin American lands, even if to conservative eyes it appears as ‘a confused, amorphous and bloody conflict.’3

Historians Forrest Hylton and Sinclair Thomson are, in one sense, more cautious, employing ‘revolutionary’ only as an adjective. Writing in 2005, prior to the electoral victory of the MAS, they argue, ‘The current cycle… constitutes the third major revolutionary moment in Bolivian history’, the first being the anti-colonial indigenous rebellion led by Túpaj Katari in 1781, the second being the 1952 National Revolution, which they posit as ‘the first national-popular revolution in postwar Latin America’.4 The endgame of the

revolutionary moment was still in play at the time their piece was written, and, for Hylton and Thomson, there were no predetermined outcomes: “The twin volcanoes of 2003/2005 have shifted Bolivia’s political landscape; yet their outcomes remain highly uncertain.”5 James Dunkerley, long an incisive analyst of Bolivia, is somewhat reticent to speak firmly of a Third Bolivian Revolution, though, in the final instance, he is willing to go along with proponents of this view. His reticence flows from the fact that he remains concerned about long-term consequences and not simply the process of rebellion:

Is it, then, at all sensible to talk of a ‘revolution’ that was at least six years in the making and that had yet to deliver, in the form of materially implemented public policy, striking changes in the human condition? This may, indeed, be tantamount to a promotion of rhetoric and popular ambition over substantive and lasting change. Yet the first years of the 21st century have continually upheld the images, expectations and behavioural patterns associated with the urgency and emergency of revolution. It is plain that a revolution is widely felt to be underway.6

Nonetheless, while advising we ‘should take care’ about using the term ‘revolution’, Dunkerley suggests that we ought not to be too preoccupied in our usage, given that the usual ‘social science criteria’ for defining revolution ‘are simply unmeetable in the present or foreseeable future’.7 We can, on this view, call what is happening in Bolivia a revolution in spite of the fact that it does not meet the traditional criteria.

I argue, conversely, that social revolution has not been unrealisable in recent years in Bolivia, nor should it be seen as impossible in the foreseeable future, and that, furthermore, we ought to retain the strict ‘social science criteria’ for defining revolution. One way out of the quandaries of process and consequence that arise in defining revolution is to separate the notion of revolutionary epoch from social revolution. The concept of revolutionary epoch provides us with a way of understanding that revolutionary transformative change is possible but not predetermined in a certain period, stressing the uncertainty – and, yet, not wide openness – of alternative outcomes. The concept of social revolution, on the other hand, while it still connotes process and uncertainty, nonetheless is more decisively concerned with accounting for and measuring the depths and consequences of lasting structural change which have been successfully won through the popular struggle of a revolutionary epoch.

5. Hylton and Thomson 2005, p. 64.
I will employ the useful definition of revolutionary epoch developed by Bolivian intellectual and current Vice-President Álvaro García Linera, following Karl Marx:

It was Marx who proposed the concept of the ‘revolutionary epoch’ in order to understand extraordinary historical periods of dizzying political change – abrupt shifts in the position and power of social forces, repeated state crises, recomposition of collective identities, repeated waves of social rebellion – separated by periods of relative stability during which the modification, partial or total, of the general structures of political domination nevertheless remains in question…. A revolutionary epoch is a relatively long period, of several months or years, of intense political activity in which: (a) social sectors, blocs or classes previously apathetic or tolerant of those in power openly challenge authority and claim rights or make collective petitions through direct mobilizations…; (b) some or all of these mobilized sectors actively posit the necessity of taking state power…; (c) there is a surge of adherence to these proposals from large sections of the population; the distinction between governors and governed begins to dissolve, due to the growing participation of the masses in political affairs; and (d) the ruling classes are unable to neutralize these political aspirations, resulting in a polarization of the country into several ‘multiple sovereignties’ that fragment the social order….

Finally, the standard social-science criteria of social revolution that I propose we retain, and to which Dunkerley refers, are famously outlined in the work of Theda Skocpol:

Social revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures; and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below. Social revolutions are set apart from other sorts of conflicts and transformative processes above all by the combination of two coincidences: the coincidence of societal structural change with class upheaval; and the coincidence of political with social transformation. In contrast, rebellions, even when successful, may involve the revolt of subordinate classes – but they do not eventuate in structural change. Political revolutions transform state structures but not social structures, and they are not necessarily accomplished through class conflict. And processes such as industrialization can transform social structures without necessarily bringing about, or resulting from, sudden political upheavals or basic political structural change. What is unique to social revolution is that basic changes in social structure and in political structure occur together in a mutually reinforcing fashion. And these changes occur through intense sociopolitical conflicts in which class struggles play a key role.

8. García Linera 2006c, p. 82.
The revolutionary epoch

Following fifteen years (1985–2000) of right-wing neoliberal assault, elitist ‘pacted democracy’ between ideologically indistinguishable political parties, and the concomitant decomposition of popular movements, left-indigenous struggle in Bolivia was reborn with a vengeance in the 2000 Cochabamba Water War against the World-Bank-driven privatisation of water in that city. This monumental uprising initiated a five-year cycle of rural and urban reawakening of the exploited classes and oppressed indigenous nations that gradually spread throughout most of the country. The rebellions reached their apogee in the removal of two neoliberal presidents, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in October 2003, and Carlos Mesa Gisbert in June 2005. These two moments were dubbed the ‘Gas Wars’ because of the centrality of the demand to re-nationalise the oil and gas industry in Bolivia – the country has Latin America’s second largest natural gas deposits after Venezuela.

The social forces behind the rebellions were multifarious, but the Aymara indigenous peasants of the western altiplano (high plateau), and the 80-percent-indigenous, informal proletarian city of El Alto – with its rich insurrectionary traditions of revolutionary Marxism from ‘re-located’ ex-miners, and indigenous radicalism from the Aymara, Quechua and other indigenous rural-to-urban migrants – played the most important role at the height of sometimes bloody confrontations with the state. While the popular forces were overwhelmingly unarmed, the state responded with repression at various intervals, most viciously in October 2003, when Sánchez de Lozada (‘Goni’) sent in the military to crush the slum revolt in El Alto, leaving at least 67 dead and hundreds injured and maimed by bullets wounds.

Guiding demands of this wave of protest were the nationalisation of, and social control over, natural resources such as water, natural gas and oil, mining minerals, land, and indigenous territory. A plethora of popular organisations

13. This section is not suggesting that there was no resistance during the period of neoliberal hegemony (1985–2000). The important thing to recognise, however, is the dramatic nature of the turn from relative quiescence of popular movements in the 1980s and 1990s, to wide-scale insurgency following the Cochabamba Water War of 2000.
14. For the figures of deaths and injuries see ASOFAC-DG 2007, p. 3.
and movements rekindled an historic fight to refound Bolivia through a revolutionary Constituent Assembly which would see the organic participation of representatives of all the popular sectors in the country, and reverse the internally colonial racial domination by the white-mestizo elite over the majority indigenous population, a system of oppression petrified in state institutions at the founding of the republic in 1825, and resistant to change even in the wake of reforms carried out during the 1952 nationalist-populist revolution. Anti-imperialist resistance to the multilevelled interventions of the US and other core capitalist states, and international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), were entrenched in the common sense of these movements.

Radical visions of anticapitalism and indigenous liberation were readily visible in leading sectors of the left-indigenous forces, even if they were not universally ascribed to by all participants in the movements. Left-indigenous forces from 2000 to 2005 represented a combined liberation struggle which clarified the overlapping of racial oppression and class exploitation and was rooted in the experience of the traditional Bolivian working class, the urban informal proletariat, and poor and/or landless indigenous peasants. It was a combined struggle that registered the necessity of overcoming both sides of racial and capitalist class exploitation and oppression simultaneously because of the deeply intertwined bases of these phenomena in the Bolivian context. The rebellions, in their best moments, were characterised by assembly-style, democratic, and mass-based mobilisation from below, drawing from the organisational patterns of the Trotskyist and anarchosyndicalist tin miners – the vanguard of the Bolivian Left for much of the twentieth century – and variations of the indigenous ayllus – traditional communitarian structures – adapted to new rural and urban contexts. The movements were rooted in the everyday necessities of the popular classes while at the same time – at least at points of greatest intensity and mass mobilisation – effectively linked these issues to the broader quest for political power and fundamental structural transformation of the state and economy. Notably absent from the scene, however, was a revolutionary party with roots in the key movements and a broad, cross-regional social base capable of unifying the multiplicity of popular struggles on the rise. Rather, the MAS, led by cocalero union leader Evo Morales, was the only popular party able to articulate some of the sentiments of the organised masses beyond a local or regional basis.

While the MAS played an important role in the Cochabamba Water War of 2000 and anti-imperialist cocalero peasant movement, it was largely absent from the streets in the defining moments of October 2003, and played a
moderating, reformist role in the May–June 2005 uprising. In the first case, the MAS opted for a constitutional exit to the state crisis, aligning itself initially with the neoliberal successor government of Carlos Mesa. In May–June 2005, the MAS distanced itself from the massively popular demand for a real nationalisation of natural gas and oil, and steered the political conjuncture away from the radicalism of the streets toward the more domesticated terrain of electoral politics. It is against this backdrop that we need to situate our discussion of the current government in office in La Paz. History did not begin on 22 January 2006, when the MAS took office and Evo Morales gave his historic inaugural speech.

The December elections

The results of the 18 December 2005 presidential, legislative, and prefecture elections in Bolivia were historic in a variety of ways (see Tables 1 and 2). Most astonishing, of course, was the 53.7 per cent of the popular vote garnered by Evo Morales, leader of the MAS. Not even the ‘most optimistic [MAS] militants had imagined such a result’.\textsuperscript{15} This was the first time in over forty years that a presidential candidate in Bolivia won an absolute majority. The percentage of votes obtained by the MAS exceeded by almost 15 points the top showing of any party in any of the elections since the return of electoral democracy in 1982.\textsuperscript{16} The MAS won over 30 per cent more of the popular vote than it did in the preceding presidential elections of 2002, a gargantuan climb without precedent in Bolivian history. Moreover, the overall electoral turnout was an impressive 84.5 percent of eligible voters, up 12.5 per cent from the 2002 elections.

Geographically, the elections broadly sliced the country into eastern and western parts. The MAS won in the departments of La Paz, Oruro, Potosí, Cochabamba and Chuquisaca, while the neoliberal coalition, PODEMOS [We Can], finished second overall and first in Pando, Beni, Santa Cruz and Tarija. As was expected, the MAS had its best results in the countryside. In particular, the party continued to dominate the rural parts of the department of Cochabamba, where the cocaleros’ peasant unions remain the party’s columna vertebral [spinal column], even if their influence in directing the MAS’s overall agenda has subsided. The MAS also did well in the northern sector of the department of Potosí, the southeast of the department of La Paz, and the east

\textsuperscript{15} Stefanoni and Do Alto 2006, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{16} Romero Ballivián 2006, 49–50.
### Table 1: Presidential Elections, December 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Presidential and Vice-Presidential Candidates</th>
<th>Number of Votes</th>
<th>Percentage of Valid Votes Obtained</th>
<th>Change Since 2002 Elections (Percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MAS</td>
<td>Evo Morales Ayma Alvaro Garcia Linera</td>
<td>1544374</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PODEMOS</td>
<td>Jorge Quiroga Ramirez Maria Rene Duchen</td>
<td>821745</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>Samuel Doria Medina Auza</td>
<td>224090</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MNR</td>
<td>Carlos Dabdoub Arrien Michiaki Nagatani</td>
<td>185859</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>−14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIP</td>
<td>Felipe Quispe Huanca Camila Choquetijilla</td>
<td>61948</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>−4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFR</td>
<td>Gildo Angulo Gonzalo Quiroga</td>
<td>19667</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>−18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FREPAB</td>
<td>Eliseo Rodriguez Adolfo Flores Morelli</td>
<td>8737</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USTB</td>
<td>Nestor Garcia Rojas Julio Antonio Uzquiano</td>
<td>7381</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank</td>
<td></td>
<td>124046</td>
<td>−0.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invalid</td>
<td></td>
<td>104570</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td></td>
<td>3102417</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>(84.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 2: Main Political Party Participation in 2005 Presidential Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MAS</td>
<td>Movimiento Al Socialismo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PODEMOS</td>
<td>Poder Democrático y Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>Unidad Nacional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MNR</td>
<td>Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionaria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIP</td>
<td>Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFR</td>
<td>Nueva Fuerza Republicana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FREPAB</td>
<td>Frente Patriótico Agropecuario de Bolivia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USTB</td>
<td>Unión Socialista de Trabajadores de Bolivia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and south of the department of Oruro, extending in this way its dominance in the vast majority of rural areas in the western and central parts of the country, where the party maintains important influence in rural union and indigenous community networks at the local levels. The strong showing by the MAS was also contingent on concentrated peasant support from various rural agricultural zones of the department of Santa Cruz, such as San Julián, Cuatro Cañadas, Mineros, and Yapacaní, colonised by Aymara and Quechua indigenous migrants from the western highlands. In addition, the MAS attracted the votes of both organised sectors of the mining industry – the cooperativistas [co-operative miners] and the state-employed miners – who are otherwise perennially in conflict. These and other alliances helped secure an absolute majority of the votes in the north and centre of the department of Chuquisaca, the centre and east of the department of Potosí, the eastern part of the department of Oruro, and the western region of the department of Santa Cruz.

But the MAS also took the cities. Appealing in part to the informal urban proletariat of the suburban slums and older working-class barrios of the major urban centres, the MAS was able to win in all cities, excepting the reactionary heartland of Santa Cruz. The MAS’s Vice-Presidential candidate Álvaro García Linera was instrumental in the party taking ‘33 per cent to the Right’s 42 percent in Santa Cruz Department’, where he engaged in ‘months of campaigning’. Likewise, García Linera’s emphasis on the moderate features of the party’s electoral platform and the reformism of its ultimate aims helped win over sufficient middle- and upper-class urban voters in the wealthy neighbourhoods of La Paz and Cochabamba to secure victory. Analysts have pointed out that for some sectors of the Bolivian middle and upper classes ensuring a victory for the reformist MAS was perceived as a realistic strategy for a potential end to the left-indigenous insurrections and road blockades of the preceding five years, which they despised, whereas allowing a victory for the far-right PODEMOS was thought a suicidal tactic which would most assuredly result in a rebirth of those movements. In other words, the smooth reproduction of the capitalist system in the Bolivian context was more probable under the MAS than PODEMOS. Undoubtedly, the fact that García Linera

---

18. For the divisions between the co-operative and state-employed miners and their repercussions for the mining industry under the Morales administration, see Webber forthcoming.
is a light-skinned, *mestizo* intellectual from a middle-class *Cochabamabino* family, made support for the MAS more palatable among the ‘comfortable’ urban populations. The ‘chronically racist mentality’ of the middle and upper urban classes accounts for them seeing in the bibliophile García Linera a ‘complement’ to the supposed intellectual limitations of Evo Morales.22

PODEMOS, while ostensibly a new party formation, is in fact a reconfigured coalition of major sectors of the so-called traditional parties – the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario [National Revolutionary Movement, MNR], the Acción Democrática y Nacionalista [Democratic and Nationalist Action, ADN], and the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario [Revolutionary Movement of the Left, MIR] – which, because of their association with neoliberalism, suffered considerable decline in the 2002 elections, followed by an even worse fate over the next few years. Jorge ‘Tuto’ Quiroga, the Presidential candidate of PODEMOS, was Vice-President in the ADN government, which was elected in 1997 under the leadership of ex-dictator Hugo Banzer Suárez. When Banzer was diagnosed with lung cancer and vacated the presidency prematurely in August 2001, Quiroga became President and served out the remainder of the five-year term. PODEMOS, then, is properly understood as an attempt by the old-guard neoliberals to re-invent themselves under a new electoral banner, and their primary social base remains those sectors who benefited during the neoliberal era – primarily the internationally-oriented fractions of capital in the eastern department of Santa Cruz, including those in natural gas, agro-industry, banking, and illegal narcotics. The party’s distant second-place finish to the MAS – with a mere 28.5 per cent of the vote – highlights the extent to which the neoliberal model had been discredited by December 2005.

Another remarkable component of the 2005 elections, and an additional signifier of the collapse of neoliberal ideological hegemony in the country, was the dismal showing of the MNR, certainly the most powerful party of the last two decades in the country, and the most visceral proponent of neoliberalism in Bolivia. The MNR won only 5.9 per cent of the vote, and placed fourth overall. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the results of the other ‘new’ contender in the electoral scene, the Unidad Nacional [National Unity, UN], led by Samuel Doria Medina. Doria, a multimillionaire whose wealth is based

---

22. Stefanoni and Do Alto 2006, p. 101. I have often been told by right-wing middle- and upper-class *mestizo* Bolivians of Morales’s alleged weaknesses in reading, writing and arithmetic. It was assumed in these conversations that I would draw the obvious conclusion: Evo was not ‘presidential’ material.
in the cement industry as well as in his proprietorship of the Burger King franchise within Bolivia, attempted to position the UN as somewhere in the murky middle between the ‘extremes’ of Morales and Quiroga. However, Doria, like Quiroga, has a neoliberal personal history. Most importantly, he was Minister of Government under the Jaime Paz Zamora (MIR) government between 1989 and 1993.\textsuperscript{23} The Bolivian populace was unmoved by his reincarnation and the UN finished in third place with 7.8 per cent of the popular vote.

Everything said thus far rightly indicates the triumph of anti-neoliberal ideas and the expression of indigenous pride through the ballot box in the elections of 2005. However, there were two important wrenches thrown into the MAS’s electoral finish that deserve mention. First, results of the legislative elections were less positive than the presidential election (see Table 3). While the MAS holds a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, with 72 out of 130 seats, the party is in a minority in the Senate. The MAS occupies 12 Senate seats to PODEMOS’s 13, the UN’s one, and the MNR’s one. Negotiations with – or, as right-wing opposition senators claim, the ‘buying of’ – dissidents from within these opposition parties has therefore been a feature of the MAS administration in its opening year. At the outset the MAS was able to secure opposition support to appoint a \textit{masista} President of the Senate. A second obstacle to emerge for the MAS within the electoral domain was the Right’s dominant performance in the first departmental prefecture elections in Bolivian history, which occurred simultaneously with the presidential elections. The MAS won only three of the nine prefectures (Chuquisaca, Potosí and Oruro), with the other six (La Paz, Beni, Santa Cruz, Tarija, Pando and Cochabamba) going to the Right. The deepening of the already well-developed attempts by the bourgeoisie to destabilise the MAS government through departmental politics was therefore a foreseeable component of the political scene in the immediate aftermath of the December 2005 elections. In order to understand the polarising class, race and regional dynamics of the first year of the MAS government, however, we need to delve much more deeply into society than would be possible in an exclusively institutional examination of electoral outcomes. We can begin such a reflection by considering the origins and trajectory of today’s ruling party.

\textsuperscript{23} Stefanoni and Do Alto 2006, p. 100.
Table 3: Distribution of Seats in Congress, 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Senate</th>
<th>Chamber of Deputies</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MAS</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PODEMOS</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MNR</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Corte Nacional Electoral

The MAS: origins, ideology, class composition and leadership

Where did the MAS come from? What is the party’s class composition and how has it changed over time? What have been the key components of its ideology and how have these altered with each new circumstance? What tactics – extra-parliamentary and parliamentary – has the MAS employed as its basic collective action repertoire in different periods? Exploring these questions will bring us to a fuller understanding of the complexities of the party and its evolution than would a string of citations from the contemporary presidential speeches of Evo Morales – important as these are in the construction of the new government’s popular image.

The historic roots of the MAS are in the coca-growing zone of Chapare, in the department of Cochabamba. After the crash of the international price of tin and the corresponding privatisation of the bulk of the state mining industry in the mid-1980s, tens of thousands of jobless miners were ‘re-located’ throughout the country, searching for new means of survival. While many migrated to major urban centres, thousands of others migrated to Chapare to begin a new life as small-holding cocalero peasants. Responding to the country’s comparative advantage, as neoliberal doctrine demands, the coca leaf became a central source of foreign exchange and a basic means of livelihood during the debt crisis of the 1980s and the deepening of neoliberal restructuring in the 1990s. Demand for cocaine was accelerating on the world market and therefore prices were high for much of this period. In the closing years of the 1980s, the Bolivian government, under pressure from a US administration which was launching its ‘War on Drugs,’ began to eradicate ‘illegal’ coca crops in Chapare, quickly militarising the area and threatening the means of subsistence of the cocaleros and their families.24 Ideological convergence and

mutual transformation quickly congealed a coalition of social forces in the newly-volatile, semi-tropical setting of Chapare, where the Marxist ideas and organisational strategies brought to the area by the migrant miners melded with those visions and tactics of the pre-existing networks of indigenous peasant union and community structures. Through hunger strikes, road blockades, grand protests, and historic marches tracing long stretches of Bolivian countryside and cityscapes, the cocaleros – throughout the late 1980s and 1990s – became the leading light of left-indigenous forces otherwise in retreat and disarray throughout the country. The hoja sagrada, the sacred coca leaf, became a symbol of national dignity in the face of the imperial hubris of the US state, and its brutal counter-narcotics policies and support for neoliberal restructuring in Bolivia. The cocaleros began constructing a thoroughgoing anti-imperialist, anti-neoliberal and eclectically indigenous-nationalist critique of the status quo. They demanded the reassertion of popular collective control over privatised natural resources then in the hands of transnational capital, the recognition of indigenous land and territory, the free trade and industrialisation of the coca leaf, democracy and social justice, human rights for the indigenous population, popular sovereignty for the Bolivian state (meaning both Bolivian independence from imperial impositions and the popular sovereignty of indigenous nations within the Bolivian state as against élite domination by a white-mestizo ruling class), the re-nationalisation of privatised state enterprises, and a general rejection of the neoliberal economic model.

However, as early as 1992, the cocaleros and indigenous peasant organisations in the altiplano were together articulating what they perceived as the limitations of community and peasant union mobilisation in confronting the tremendous obstacles facing the popular movement. At the Asamblea de los Pueblos Originarios [Assembly of Indigenous Peoples], held on 12 October 1992 under the umbrella of the Central Sindical de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (CSUTCB), the necessity of a brazo político, a political arm, for the peasant union movement was put on the table. The diverse currents and organisations attending the assembly were too internally fractious, however, to determine anything about the shape and content of that political arm.

Gradual steps toward the formation of an *instrumento político*, or political instrument, nonetheless proceeded over the next few years. In the First Land and Territory Congress in Santa Cruz in 1995, the main peasant and indigenous organisations of the country met and re-affirmed the necessity of a political instrument.\(^{30}\) This set the stage for the Seventh Ordinary Congress of the CSUTCB in March and April 1996 in Santa Cruz, where the move to consolidate the construction of a political instrument was ratified.

Thus was born the Asamblea por la Soberanía de los Pueblos [Assembly for the Sovereignty of the Peoples, ASP]. Peasant leader Alejo Véliz was elected as head of the party. Due to technicalities, the ASP was unable to gain recognition as a registered party in the 1995 municipal elections, but through a tactical electoral agreement, the new party ran jointly with the Izquierda Unida [United Left, IU], and won 49 town council seats and ten mayoralties, all in the department of Cochabamba.\(^{31}\) The ASP described its basis in 1995 as a struggle for a communitarian, multinational, socialist Bolivia, in which the class struggle and the national struggle would be combined.\(^ {32}\) In the 1997 presidential elections, the ASP candidates again ran under the IU banner with Alejo Véliz as their presidential contender.

However, by 1998, disputes between the three main indigenous leaders in the country – Felipe Quispe, Alejo Véliz, and Evo Morales –, characterised in equal parts by ideological disagreement and personalist *caudillismo*, led to the eventual disintegration of the ASP. In its place two new parties eventually emerged, the Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti [Pachakuti Indigenous Movement, MIP], led by Felipe Quispe and primarily appealing to the Aymara indigenous radicalism of the *altiplano*, and the Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos [Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples, IPSP], led by Evo Morales and appealing to a much broader, inter-ethnic and cross-regional social base. Again, due to technicalities, the IPSP was unable to establish status as an official party in the electoral arena and therefore assumed the name of an officially registered but defunct political party, the Movimiento al Socialismo [Movement Towards Socialism, MAS]. Under this banner, in the 1999 municipal elections, the IPSP-MAS ticket garnered 3.27 per cent of the national vote, 10 mayoralties, and 79 municipal council seats.\(^{33}\)

---

30. In attendance were the Federación Nacional Mujeres Campesinas de Bolivia – Bartolina Sisa (FNMCB-BS), the Central Sindical de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (CSUTCB), the Confederación de Colonizadores (CSCB), the Central Indígena del Oriente Boliviano (CIDOB), and other indigenous peasant organisations.
32. Stefanoni and Do Alto 2006, p. 61.
33. Van Cott 2005, p. 86.
To be clear, municipal electoral politics was only one component of the MAS strategy in the late 1990s, a period, it should be remembered, of relatively weak popular resistance to the neoliberal model throughout the country. The cocaleros and the MAS continued to engage in the extra-parliamentary actions highlighted earlier. Moreover, when the social movement tide turned in 2000 with the Cochabamba Water War, and, shortly thereafter, with the Aymara indigenous uprisings of 2000 and 2001 in the altiplano, the MAS continued to focus on extra-parliamentary, mass action. Indeed, Morales was expelled from Congress in 2001 for his ‘illegal’ participation in cocalero street actions, and was famously denounced by then-US ambassador to Bolivia, Manuel Rocha.

In addition to recognising the extra-parliamentary radicalism of the party in these years, it is also important to note that the MAS was consciously formed as a political instrument, rather than a political party, because of the deep and broad disgust with the Bolivian political class throughout society, but also, and more importantly, so that the MAS would act as a federating body of diverse social movement organisations deeply rooted in urban and rural union and community networks, rather than as a crude overseer in the Stalinist style, or a clientelist machine in the manners of the ‘traditional’ neoliberal, or old populist parties. At least from the late 1990s until 2002, these principles closely approximated the real functioning of the party, with a great deal of its power residing in the grassroots. Hence, anthropologist Robert Albro can write the following passage, based on field research carried out in 2001 and 2002, with a certain credibility:

Morales and other masistas emphasise that the MAS ‘does not have its own separate structures’. MAS legislators claim not to be politicians or political representatives. They are, rather, ‘messengers’ to congress, ‘spokespeople’ for a base-driven consensus, emergent from face-to-face rank-and-file union meetings, at which they are expected to report … . The mid-level MAS hierarchy functions as a variable number of ‘cabinets’, created on an ad hoc basis to define key issues. These cabinets have tried to institutionalize the ‘public assemblies’ used so successfully during the Water War. At the most local level, the MAS can be hard to distinguish from the local union structure of the Six Federations of the Chapare, and where it has won elections, from the provincial municipal bureaucracy. This is what MAS militants mean with their talk of ‘refounding the country based upon an authentic participatory democracy’ or of ‘recuperating a democracy kidnapped by neoliberalism’ (Prensa Obrera, 2002). They are referring to the politics of face-to-face assembly that is so ingrained in both indigenous community and local union politics.34

Therefore, during this period, we can establish that the MAS was rooted in extra-parliamentary political action, deeply responsive to its *columna vertebral*, the *cocaleros* of Chapare, and functioned as a radically anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist party. Regarding this era in the MAS’s development, the common descriptions of the party as a radical and left-wing movement, hold considerable weight. During this period, the MAS was a messy amalgamation of a new left nationalism in which the national-popular contradistinctions of the early 1950s – between the ‘people’ and the ‘oligarchy’, and the ‘nation’ and ‘imperialism’ – were maintained, but in an altered form. The MAS helped to ‘indianise’ that nationalism, bringing indigenous issues to the centre of political life by drawing on the legacy of the *katarista* indigenous movement of the 1970s, and, at the same time, reflecting the basic cultural tenor of the popular cycle begun in 2000.35 Hylton and Thomson capture this new cultural orientation when they write, ‘The mingling of these symbols [the *wiphala* indigenous chequered flag and the Bolivian flag] reflects the degree of overlap between Indian and Bolivian identities, and between Indian and national-popular struggles today.’36 ‘The new Bolivian Left, which the MAS helped to define in the late 1990s and early 2000s, was led by indigenous rural poor, an unprecedented trait of party politics across the political spectrum in the country’s history. The calls for indigenous solidarity of the MAS in those years ‘acquire[d] their potency as an invitation to the recognition of an indigenous heritage shared by all of Bolivia’s popular sectors that is in explicit contrast to the perceived ‘individualism’ of the neoliberal market’.37

It was out of this milieu that Evo Morales arose to become a national political figure. He was born Juan Evo Morales Ayma on 26 October 1959, in the province of Sud Carangas in the department of Oruro. Four of his seven Aymara indigenous siblings died from illnesses related to poverty and the absence of sufficient health infrastructure in the region. His family, like many others, migrated to northern Argentina in search of work. In Argentina, Morales dropped out of school because of difficulties with the Spanish language after having being raised exclusively in Aymara. He would eventually return to

35. Stefanoni and Do Alto 2006, pp. 64–9. The *kataristas* were an Aymara and Quechua indigenous movement that arose in the early 1970s. The movement contained several different currents. Many of the organic intellectuals of the movement were based in urban centres, but the social base of the movement was the poor peasantry of the *altiplano*. The *kataristas* attempted to combine class consciousness and ethnic consciousness in their dual critique of internal colonialism and capitalism.
school in Oruro, working at various points as a baker and a trumpeter in the well-known Banda Real Imperial. At the outset of the 1980s, his family was forced to migrate to Chapare due to a massive drought in the altiplano.\footnote{Stefanoni and Do Alto 2006, pp. 53–6.} Today, his primary language is Spanish, and while he is also relatively fluent in Quechua (from his time spent in Chapare), he no longer speaks confidently in Aymara. In Chapare, Morales began his gradual ascent through the ranks of cocalero peasant unions, becoming secretary general of the Six Federations in 1988. Ten years later, he was elected leader of the MAS and has maintained this post ever since. By 2002, he was a serious candidate in presidential elections.

This is the year when the trajectory of the party takes a rather sharp turn, the depth of which passes unnoticed in many sympathetic accounts of the party’s history. In the 2002 elections, Evo Morales and the MAS placed second with 20.9 per cent of the popular vote to Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada and the MNR’s 22.5. This unexpected triumph spurred changes in party tactics. The sights were set on contesting the 2007 presidential elections. Parliamentary strategies were privileged over protest politics, as witnessed most dramatically in the relative absence of the MAS in the October 2003 rebellions.\footnote{Orozco Ramírez 2005, p. 20.} The party began moderating its economic demands in an effort to attract urban middle-class voters, a moderation captured in party officials’ constant refrain: ‘de la protesta a la propuesta [from protest to proposal]’. There was an explicit effort made to extend from the cocalero regional and corporatist base to a wider, cross-regional, and cross-class constituency which would incorporate other indigenous movements, peasant movements, the urban poor, and the urban working class; however, the thrust of the new trajectory was to win over urban intellectuals and the urban middle class.\footnote{García Linera 2005b, p. 13.}

The shift in the party’s ideology toward moderate reformism after 2002 cannot be explained as fallout from the whims of a few important leaders, nor as a consequence of changes in the outlook of Morales himself; rather, the shift is indicative of an alteration in strategic orientation toward electoral politics and of the changing class composition of the party over time. The weight of the anti-imperialist, anti-neoliberal cocalero peasantry diminished, while an urban middle-class intelligentsia played an increasingly important role. The character of the first MAS cabinet in 2006, and the slightly broader peripheries around the cabinet (such as vice-ministerial portfolios), reflects
these developments. It is evident that the origins of many of the individuals selected to fill these positions are in the popular classes (peasants, miners); however, they currently make up part of the relatively privileged, middle-class sectors of the rural and urban economies. One indication of this is the fact that, on average, the ministers in the first MAS cabinet each had declared net assets of over $50,000 US. In Bolivia, such an accumulation of wealth places them squarely in the middle layers of the urban and rural economies.

Some of the rationale behind the party’s decision to ask Álvaro García Linera to run as the MAS vice-presidential candidate in the December 2005 elections has been rehearsed above: a light-skinned mestizo intellectual with calming, moderate rhetoric was thought to appeal to the middle- and even upper-middle-class sectors, while Morales was expected to continue to bring out the popular indigenous vote. While Morales continued to invoke many of the symbols that conjured up the radical past of the MAS, García Linera became the primary public voice of the MAS’s new economic development programme during the 2005 campaign. As part of this trajectory, he began publishing and speaking in various fora about the impossibility of establishing socialism in Bolivia for at least 50 to 100 years. Instead, García Linera posited that Bolivia must first build an industrial capitalist base. The capitalist model he envisions — Andean-Amazonian capitalism — projects a greater role for state intervention in the market. The formula essentially means capitalist development with a stronger state to support a petty bourgeoisie which will eventually become a powerful national bourgeoisie to drive Bolivia into successful capitalist development. That national bourgeoisie will be indigenous, or ‘Andean-Amazonian’. Only after this long intermediary phase of industrial capitalism has matured will the fulfillment of socialism be materially plausible.

Fernando Molina, a neoliberal critic of the MAS, has correctly pointed out that in many respects Andean-Amazonian capitalism closely resembles the old line of the Stalinist Partido Comunista Boliviana [Bolivian Communist Party, 41. Orellana Aillón 2006, p. 25.

42. Álvarez 2006.
43. García Linera was born in Cochabamba in 1962, and trained as a mathematician while in university in Mexico. Upon returning to Bolivia he participated in the short-lived Ejército Guerrillero Túpac Katari [Túpac Katari Guerrilla Army, EGTK], as a consequence of which he spent five years in jail, between 1992 and 1997. He was never charged and was tortured while imprisoned. Upon his release, he became a sociology professor at the main public university in La Paz, a prolific writer on political affairs and social movements, and one of the most important TV personalities of the 2000s, perpetually making the rounds of the evening-news programmes and talk shows.

44. García Linera 2006a.
PCB], which stressed the necessity of a ‘revolution by stages’: feudalism to capitalism (bourgeois), and, *eventually*, capitalism to communism (communist). ⁴⁵

García Linera expounded further on the character of the MAS after the party formed the government in 2006, attempting to define the ideology of ‘Evismo’. The indigenous, democratic and cultural ‘revolution’, he reminds us, does not imply ‘radical’ economic change, or even transformative restructuring of political institutions. Rather, ‘modifications’ in the existing political structures of power and elite rule are all that is promised in the current context:

In the case of Evismo, we are before a political revolution that has its impact in the economic realm but not in a strictly radical manner. Evo Morales has himself conceptualized the process that he is leading as a democratic cultural revolution, or a decolonizing democratic revolution, that modifies the structures of power, modifies the composition of the elite, of power and rights, and with this the institutions of the state. It has an effect on the economic structure because all expansion of rights means the distribution of wealth. ⁴⁶

Having thus charted in some depth the trajectory of the MAS, we are now in a better position to begin our evaluation of its first year as government in Part III of this essay.

**Conclusion**

In Part II we explored four major themes. We showed, first, that the left-indigenous cycle of rebellion between 2000 and 2005 and the subsequent election of Evo Morales have provoked renewed theoretical discussion regarding revolution in Bolivia. It was argued that distinguishing between revolutionary epochs and social revolutions should help to clarify the terms of debate.

From here, the mass mobilisations between 2000 and 2005 and the parallel state crisis were shown to have precipitated the opening of an authentically revolutionary epoch in the country. It was also claimed, however, that this epoch has not led to a social revolution.

A third objective of Part II was an extensive analysis of the December 2005 elections. The results show the unambiguous trouncing of the traditional neoliberal parties and the exhaustion of neoliberal ideological hegemony in the country.

Finally, we examined the shifting trajectory of the MAS from an anti-neoliberal, anti-imperialist, and mass-mobilisation party, to an increasingly

⁴⁶. García Linera 2006b.
reformist one focused on winning elections by moderating its platform. It was determined that a principal cause of this shift was the changing class composition of the higher layers of the party structure over time. In Part III, we shift our attention to central features of the MAS government’s first year in office. We examine some of the complexities of the politics of indigenous liberation, trends in macro-economic policies, reforms in the hydrocarbons (natural gas and oil) sector, the constituent assembly process, and the incipient rearticulation of the political Right through a politics of ‘autonomism’ in the eastern lowlands. The fact that the revolutionary epoch of 2000–5 did not conclude with a social revolution will be clearer once these subjects have been interrogated.

References

ASOFAC-DG 2007, Avances, riesgos y retos del juicio de responsabilidades a Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada y sus colaboradores, La Paz: Asociación de Familiares Caídos por la Defensa del Gas (ASOFAC-DG), Defensor del Pueblo, Comunidad de Derechos Humanos.
García Linera, Álvaro, Marxa Chávez León, and Patricia Costas Monje 2005a, Sociología de los movimientos sociales en Bolivia: Estructuras de movilización, repertorios culturales y acción política, La Paz: Oxfam and Diakonia.
García Linera, Álvaro, Raúl Prada, and Luis Tapia (eds.) 2004, Memorias de octubre, La Paz: La Comuna/Muela del Diablo.
García Linera, Álvaro, Luis Tapia, Oscar Verga, and Raúl Prada (eds.) 2005b, Horizontes y límites del estado y el poder, La Paz: La Comuna/Muela del Diablo.
The ‘Returns to Religion’: Messianism, Christianity and the Revolutionary Tradition.

Part II: The Pauline Tradition

John Roberts
University of Wolverhampton
jorob128@aol.co.uk

Abstract
The central strength of the Hegelian dialectical tradition is that reason is not divorced from its own internal limits in the name of a reason free from ideological mediation and constraint. This article holds onto this insight in the examination of the recent (and widespread) returns to religious categories in political philosophy and political theory (in particular Agamben, Badiou, Negri and Žižek). In this it follows a twofold logic. In the spirit of Hegel and Marx it seeks to recover what is ‘rational in religion’; at the same time, it examines the continuing entanglements of politics (and specifically revolutionary thinking) with religious categories. That this is an atheistic and materialist project is not in a sense strange or anomalous. On the contrary, it is precisely the ‘secularisation’ of Judeo-Christian categories in Kant, Hegel and Marx’s respective theorisations of history that provides the dialectical ground for the atheistic recovery and invocation of Judeo-Christian thought (in particular messianism, renunciation, and fidelity) in recent political philosophy. Consequently, this discussion of religion, or ‘religion beyond religion’, has very little to do with the spread of obscurantism and anti-rationalism in the global upsurge of reactionary Christian and Islamic fundamentalisms, neo-pagan mysticisms, and other retreats from the real, or with the left-liberal denunciation of religion in the recent writings of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Rather, ‘religion’ here, in its Judeo-Christian legacy, is that which embodies the memory or prospect of a universal emancipatory politics.

Keywords
Christianity, Judaism, messianism, eschatology, apocalypticism, anti-historicism, fidelity, transcendence, truth-event, dialectic

I believe that it is appropriate particularly for a secular and enlightened philosophy not simply to undermine… [religious] ideas by subjecting their authority to critical scrutiny, but also – in the course of reflection on the nature of thought – to salvage them as ingredients of moral action and incorporate them into one’s actual conduct.

Theodor Adorno

1. Adorno 2000, p. 98.
As many recent scholars of Paul have pointed out, Paul’s thought in his letters is directed and framed by specific theological demands, demands that are grounded in a politics of transition from the ‘old’ church to the ‘new’ church. Yet the Catholic, synthesised Paul of modern Christian ecclesiastical practice has tended to obviate this contextualism. In this way, Paul’s theology has been handed down in Christianity as ‘revealed doctrine’, diminishing Paul’s hermeneutic skill in creatively rendering what he sees as the core principle of the gospel tradition – salvation for all through the reality of the resurrection – as living speech. As J. Christiaan Beker argues, ‘[f]or Paul, tradition is always interpreted tradition that is executed in the freedom of the spirit’, or, as he adds, a ‘form of ortho-praxis’.

Thus, in Galatians, Paul addresses the ‘sectarianism’ of the Gentile Christians who follow the law to the letter. In order to become ‘whole’ Christians living in the domain of salvation, the Galatians require that all male Christian Gentiles adopt circumcision and the Torah. Paul’s response is emphatic: ‘Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by the message of faith’. In other words, it was not Abraham’s observance of the Torah, and his defence of circumcision, that made him pleasing to God; it was his faith. The Galatians therefore break with faith and with the Abrahamic promise.

In Romans, Paul is dealing with an ethnically mixed church; in this light, he establishes that the Church represents the power of God to bring about salvation for everyone, both Jew and Gentile, Greek and non-Greek. Consequently, it is because the Church is neither Jewish nor Gentile that it preserves the unity of the people with God and the Abrahamic promise to Israel. Paul’s aim, then, is to overthrow any Jewish claim to superiority over the Gentiles and self-elevating Jewish pride in the Torah. This is because sola fide is incompatible with distinctions of race and privilege. This puts faith on a new ‘ontological level’. The subject of faith is no longer a Jew or Gentile, but the embodiment of the ‘many’. Accordingly, Jewish Christianity has no special status for Paul beyond its fulfillment of the divine promise to Israel.

Paul’s letters were written some twenty to thirty years after Jesus’s death. Thus there is no ‘pre-Pauline’ tradition of Christianity to speak of. The Jesus-tradition of Christianity is largely a modern construct. This absence of a Jesus-tradition – beyond that of the oral tradition of the living apostles at the time – allowed Paul, therefore, to concretise and ontologise Christ’s teaching without the dogmas of ecclesiastical precedent. This is not to say that Jerusalem

---

5. Gal. 3:2.
Christianity did not have a codified view of Jesus's ministry, but its intellectual and institutional leverage was weak, enabling Paul to bring the eschatological rupture of the resurrection-event into focus.

Crucially, the resurrection-event represents a teleological problem for Paul. Without the rupture of apocalypticism, the resurrection-event becomes simply a docetic miracle: an event that appears in history without affecting its direction. With the rupture of apocalypticism, however, it becomes, as we have noted, an event for the sake of history's transformation. Hence Jesus's resurrection for Paul has massive eschatological significance. In its proleptic disruption of historical time, it inaugurates the prospect of a new worldly creation. But, although, for Paul, the new age of creation has dawned with Christ's resurrection, the 'already' of this creation is not to be confused with the 'not yet' of Christ's Parousia. Paul's thought, therefore, has a double focus. "The resurrection of Christ cannot be asserted apart from the future apocalyptic resurrection because it derives its meaning from its future referent".6 This is why, for Paul, there is no contradiction between apocalypticism and the contingencies and daily demands of missionary strategy (reflected in the context-specific character of the letters themselves). Indeed, for Paul, the belief in the imminent coming of Christ, consciousness of the end of history, and the transformation of history, are all intimately related. Thus it is wrong to assume that the imminent end of history and of the world imply unconcern for this world or an escape from ethical responsibility. In the letters, there are no accounts of demons, angels and fiery conflagrations, no litany of impending punishments, only concerted persuasion and systematic argument. As Beker says: 'He does not relish the rewards of the blessed or delight in the torture of the wicked'.7 This is why, as Beker, Jacob Taubes, Monika Hooker and other Pauline scholars have argued, Paul would have been horrified by the way his teaching has been subject to legalistic forms and withdrawal into moral passivity. Essentially, according to this position, the Paul we have – or mostly have had – is actually post-Lutheran (just as the Jesus we have – or mostly have had – is post-Lutheran). That is, with the shift from Christianity-within-Judaism in Paul's letters to 'Christianity' proper came the dissolution of the communal and collective content that the Abrahamic promise had for early Christians. By the time of the Reformation, as Hooker states,

we find Luther laying great emphasis on justification by faith; but ignoring what Paul said about the salvation of Israel. As a result, Luther's emphasis on faith over against 'works' – now reinterpreted to mean acts that were believed to give an

individual 'merit', rather than the 'works set out 'in the law' – become a rallying
cry of Protestants against Catholics . . . of 'Gospel' against 'Law', and so of Christian
against 'Jew'. Judaism was now seen as a legalistic religion and was understood to
be based on the assumption that one could earn salvation by obedience to the law,
in contrast to Christianity, which was seen as a religion of grace.\(^8\)

Yet, if Paul’s debt to the collective Abrahamic promise is ever-present in the
writings, Paul admittedly has little interest in citizenship and social questions.
He fails to condemn outright the iniquities of a Roman polity that supposedly
speaks in the name of godliness, yet lets millions suffer in slavery. For instance,
and most famously, Paul returns the runaway slave Onesimus back to his
master Philemon,\(^9\) with the message that Philemon should accept him back
as a brother in the Lord.\(^10\) The tension, therefore, in Paul’s apocalyptic
interpretation of the resurrection-event, between an immediate commitment
to action and faith (the necessity for binding acts of faith that produce a
commitment to liberation in the here and now), on the one hand, and a
commitment to action and faith postponed to the future, to universal
resurrection, on the other, has been at the centre of the political reading of
Paul’s philosophy in the twentieth century. Thus today, in the spirit of Beker,
Taubes and Hooker, it is the notion of Paul’s ‘other-worldliness’, and what
Bloch called Paul’s sacrificial-death theology, that is contested in Badiou, Žižek
and Agamben.\(^11\)

**Badiou’s Saint Paul**

Alain Badiou has made it clear he has no religion, and, as such, his interest in
Paul has no Christianising agenda. This is undoubtedly true philosophically,
certainly in the light of his mathematical (Cantorian) extension of Feuerbach’s
atheistic defence of infinitude as an immanent human potentiality.\(^12\) But, all

---

10. See Ziesler 1990.
11. For Bloch, Paul’s ‘cult of the resurrection’ is seen as weakening the Abrahamic promise of
justice in the here and now. In *Atheism in Christianity*, he openly challenges the Pauline
transmutation of Christianity, by attacking the reduction of eschatology in Paul to what he calls
a sacrificial-death theology. Christ’s relationship to praxis and ethics was for more complex and
assertive, Bloch argues, than the supernatural notion of freedom in resurrection after death. So
much of Paul’s writing on Christian patience is comfortable with the idea of the oppressed
submitting to the law of their oppressors in the name of God: ‘He who resists the authorities
resists what God has appointed’ (Rom. 13.1 ff.). The result is that ‘the world is looked on as
perishable and yet at the same time unchangeable’. Bloch 1972, p. 143.
12. See Badiou 2005. For an introductory discussion of Badiou’s Cantorianism, see Hallward
the same, this denial is slightly disingenuous, since it is precisely the turn to the early-Christian subject of Paul’s writing that provides the asocial political character of Badiou’s theory of the political subject: if my faith could be proved it would no longer count as faith. There is no once-and-for-all decision for my faith, faith has to be continually reinvoked and tested, worked for. In the language of Christianity, faith – or fidelity for Badiou – is something that has to be won and re-won as a condition of the universality of truth. Thus, without wanting to say that Badiou defers philosophically to early Christianity’s critique of alienated finitude, it can be claimed that the Christian context of being faithful to what transcends me in its universal truthfulness has contributed to shaping his critique of post-metaphysics, and, by extension, places his work within the broader Engelsian problematic I have mapped out in this two-part article.  

In a sense, and against the grain of his own rationalism, this also makes his project strongly Adornian: what does the legacy of Judeo-Christian thought allow me to say, and possess, as a philosopher?

Badiou’s principal concern in his reading of Paul’s letters is to show, above all else, how Paul subtractus truth ‘from the communitarian grasp’. In designating the resurrection as the site of universal faith, of faith for all, Paul never allows any ‘legal categories to identify the subject’. In Pauline faith there is ‘neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female’. On this basis, Paul considers all converts to Christianity as fully practising followers irrespective of their social status, gender, or, in the case of men, whether they have been circumcised. Faith, then, is identified as the negation of the law, rather than its expression. So is Pauline Christianity thereby without law? Badiou asserts that, in Paul, there are two conceptions of law: the law of the letter and the law of the spirit. Under the latter the subject is committed, in faith, to a non-particularist account of law – one that addresses truth to all. Thus, for the new Christian subject, the transgression of the letter of the law must be aroused by love’s infinity (love thy neighbour as thy would love oneself), meaning that ultimately: “The subjectivity of faith is unwaged”. The letter of the law, in contrast, is without such infinite grace: the subjectivity of faith is sustained solely through the performance of good works; in other words it is ‘waged’. The important lesson for Badiou, then, is that the formation of a subject cannot be founded on what is assumed to be due to it. Rather, truth is co-extensive with the subject’s declaration and

---

13. For Part I, see Roberts 2008.
re-declaration of faith, and not with any pre-existing (law-given) prescriptions. It is evental. Accordingly, what is philosophically attractive about this ‘unwaged’ conception of truth for Badiou is that faith takes the form of a kind of relentless striving, and hope is defined by perseverance and patience: ‘[it] is the subjectivity proper to the continuation of the subject in process’.18

Consequently, for Badiou, Paul is not a mythologiser of faith, he is a materialist thinker and militant moral-rationalist: it is vain to want to justify faith through the pursuit of virtue alone, or through recourse to the ineffable claims of the prophetic. This latter point is crucial. At no point does Paul collapse the truth of the resurrection-event into a discourse of the miracle so as to make Christian faith more appealing. In this regard, Paul’s singularity lies in his dissociation of faith from (the Judaic and Greek) discourse of the master. By instating a model of truth that is founded on that which is not due to the subject, the force of truth is made to be immanent to that which is ‘weak’. That is, hope is the practical and patient work of universality and not the projection of an abstract and imaginary ideal of justice. This makes Saint Paul’s theology purposively ex-centric for Badiou.

In this light, Saint Paul’s resurrection-event and his fidelity to its universal call forms, for Badiou, the basis of a theory of the subject and truth. This rests on the notion that the resurrection-event is, first and foremost, an authentic event or Truth-Event, and an authentic event for Badiou is that which instigates a radical new beginning and therefore, consequently, shatters the old conditions of subjectivity and ideological allegiance. As Žižek, puts it, the Pauline resurrection-event,

is thus an example (although probably the example) of how we, human beings, are not constrained to the positivity of Being; of how, from time to time, in a contingent and unpredictable way, a Truth-Event can occur that opens up to us the possibility of participating in Another Life by remaining faithful to the Truth-Event.19

Moreover, in breaking with a prevailing or normal state of affairs, this kind of event can strike without warning, and, as such, can occur in a situation that has been declared closed.20 The result is that the event emerges ‘out of nothing’, ex nihilo, so to speak. But the emergence of the event is not self-explanatory and therefore cannot be self-sustaining. On the contrary, it can only emerge as an event and sustain itself as such through those who make a wager on its

authenticity, on its actual status as a Truth-Event. Hence the subjective investment in the authenticity of the event is indivisible from its nomination as a Truth-Event. And this is why Paul’s identification of the resurrection-event as a Truth-Event is so exemplary in this form for Badiou. Paul intervenes into the historical process in order to name and codify Christ’s resurrection as a Truth-Event, preventing the resurrection-event from becoming simply a docetic miracle. Paul thereby identifies the authenticity of the event with the fidelity to its truth. For Badiou, this reveals an important insight into the formation of the political subject. We become a political subject – a subject of truth – by submitting ourselves to the collective force of the event’s truthfulness. But this fidelity is not to the transmission of the event as received knowledge (historical doxa; group loyalty; party orthodoxy). This is because as work, as patience, the dissemination of truth can only take a non-propositional form. The Truth-Event, then, begins an infinite procedure of verification; it does not or cannot complete this process. This means that the authentic subject of truth demands the indiscernible for truth to emerge, and, more properly, for it to continue to emerge. Truth is produced at the interface between the singularity of the decision for truth, and the infinity of truth’s emergence. In this sense, in subjecting truth to a fidelity to truth, truth is opposed to the universalisability of truth as a finite path of becoming. And this is where Badiou’s commitment to an immanent ‘transcendentalism’ becomes clearer. The transcendent character of the Truth-Event lies not in its amenability to finite possession by the subject, but in its infinite productive and processual powers of creativity.

On this score, Badiou uses Saint Paul to divide truth into three models: the ‘proper’ or contiguous, in which truth and meaning are held to be coeval (as in various religious fundamentalisms and scientific positivisms); hermeneutics, in which meaning asserts itself over truth (as in deconstructionism and phenomenology); and truth-as-the-void, in which truth opposes itself, and evacuates itself, from (customary and everyday) meaning and belief. Following this, Badiou offers Saint Paul as an exemplary model of the last and as such a militant figure for contemporary anticapitalist praxis: in subtracting truth from the givenness of a situation, truth is indefatigably opposed to the empty link and ‘reciprocal maintenance’ between abstract universality and ‘barbaric’ particularism. That is, in being ‘indifferent’ to the given state of a situation, truth founds a new universalism, on the basis of what the situation excludes, or what lies outside of its perceived boundaries. True universalism is active, declarative, irruptive, and supernumerary.

But if the Truth-Event is that which is nominated as Truth-Event how do we know this is the real Truth-Event and not a false or chimerical one? For Judaism, Paul’s production of the resurrection-event as a Truth-Event has no veracity. Yet, for Badiou, Truth-Events are not judged true or false on the basis of their appeal to sectional or particularist interests. Rather, the Truth-Event is that event which produces a transformation in the horizon of truth in the interests of a greater and more inclusive universality. As such, as in the case of the resurrection-event, irrespective of disbelief or dismissal, the event expands the conditions for a ‘new life’ to everyone. Furthermore, it achieves this on the basis that it is able to secure the fidelity of the subject to its truth beyond the event’s immediate unfolding. This is why Truth-Events are relatively rare. Because, although history is littered with Truth-Events that open up the conditions for a ‘new life’, very few are revolutionary events capable of sustaining fidelity to the event’s truth beyond the event’s immediate unfolding. In this respect, Badiou mentions the Russian Revolution and (perhaps more contentiously) the Chinese Cultural Revolution – the cardinality of which rests on their collective transformation of subjectivity – but this cannot be claimed, so obviously, of May 68. In fidelity to revolutionary truth, no one gives oneself up to 68’s prerevolutionary and atomised spontaneities in quite the same way as one gives oneself up to the world-historical irruption and global horizons of 1917.

**Žižek’s Saint Paul**

Žižek follows Badiou in much of his defence and analysis of Paul, but, unlike Badiou, he pursues this within an explicit discussion of Christianity, making his contribution to the debate one more openly centred on the twofold legacy of Marxism and Christianity. What is a matter of little concern to Badiou – the links between revolutionary praxis and Christian belief – is, in Žižek, the focus of his reading of the Pauline legacy.23 In this, Žižek adopts a Blochian stance: in order ‘to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience’.24

As with Badiou, Žižek begins his reflections on Paul by emphasising how indifferent Paul is to the life and beliefs of Jesus; at no point does Paul explore

---

23. I say of little concern, but in 1976 Badiou did co-author, with François Balmès, *De l'idéologie*, a Unión des Communistes de France Marxiste-Léniniste (UCFML) publication, which looked in part at Engels’s writings on Müntzer and revolutionary apocalyptic Christianity. See Badiou and Balmès 1976.

the meaning of Jesus’s parables or comment on his testament. On the contrary, the only thing of importance is that Christ died on the cross and was resurrected. This is because, for Paul, the sanctification of the resurrection-event is Christianity’s path out of its sectarian origins into a religion of universality or, more concretely, into universality itself. By first placing humanity in the realm of Sin, God allowed humanity to be redeemed through Christ’s sacrifice and the creation of ‘new life’. Echoing Badiou, Žižek then locates the distinctiveness of Pauline Christianity in the fact of the break with its Judaic origins. For, in the resurrection, the ‘new life’ has already arrived, thereby irredeemably shifting the Jewish God of the sublime beyond, to that of the terrestrial ‘already’.

Judaism reduces the promise of Another Life to a pure Otherness, a messianic promise which will never become fully present and actualized (the Messiah is always “to come”); while Christianity, far from claiming full realization of the promise, accomplishes something far more uncanny: the Messiah is here, he has arrived, the final Event has already taken place, yet the gap (the gap which sustains the messianic promise) remains... In other words, the ‘new life’ of the resurrection dispels the interminableness of Jewish messianic hope, forcing the faithful to live up to the implications of the qualitatively new event. And this is the crucial focus of Christianity for Žižek: ‘the resurrection of the dead is not a “real event” which will take place sometime in the future, but something that is already here – we merely have to shift our subjective position’. That is, Christ’s sacrifice may formally redeem all humanity, but Christians, in the actuality of their faith, are compelled to engage in the difficult work of realising its truth in this moment. Thus what remains vital and ‘dangerous’ about the Pauline irruption for Žižek is precisely its perverseness or asociality. Unlike in the modern Jesus-tradition, with its benign ecumenical message of social responsibility, the centrality of the resurrection-event in Pauline Christianity is that it grounds faith in fidelity through struggle. And this explains why the notion of asociality – particularly in Badiou – plays such a large part in Badiou’s and Žižek’s defence of the revolutionary content of their political philosophy: the abnegation of Pauline Christianity reconnects politics to the necessity of drawing a line in order to hold onto the possibility of a universalism of the break. The reciprocity of the one and the other, the one and the all, is ruptured. Thus, just as Badiou insists

25. The empirical details and the life of Jesus are expunged from Paul’s letters. In Badiou’s words ‘they are splendidly ignored’. Badiou 2003, p. 33.
27. Žižek 2003, p. 87.
on the necessity of philosophy engaging in a process of ‘counter-sophistic appraising’, Žižek defends Pauline Christianity in terms of its capacity to divide the circle of the One-in-the-All – those meditative, absorptive and ecumenical practices associated with Eastern Religions such as Buddhism and Taoism and post-Christian paganism – that it would seem now so dominate the populist and New-Age spiritual horizons of the West. In these belief-systems, the One-in-the-All is distinguished by the integration of humans into the cosmos through a kind of vitiation of the self and objective reality (a distended and internally undifferentiated universalism). Humans have to find their authentic ‘smallness’ and insignificance, so to speak. Indeed, this vitiation is seen, particularly in Buddhism and Taoism, as a joyous release from conflict, sacrifice and earthly reason.

Here we have a clearer picture, then, about what is politically at stake for Žižek in his adaptation of Badiou’s Saint Paul. In Paul, the subject of Christian faith is cast under a truth that transcends him, allowing the subject of faith to become the name of that which disturbs the harmony and balance of the Whole. Thus, in a climate where post-metaphysics, repressive desublimation, and bland multiculturalism have effectively voided the subject in and of faith, the subject of the Truth-Event, Pauline Christianity effectively replaces truth in the All with a truth for the All. For what the former position denies is the possibility that the excluded (the Christian remainder) might actually embody the All: ‘We were nothing, we want to become All’. A weak universality is replaced by a fighting universalism. This clearly recalls Christianity to its classic conditions of Marxist dialogue and interrogation: how are humans to resist the daily ignominy of alienated finitude and by what collective agency is this to be accomplished?

[T]he division introduced and sustained by the emancipatory (‘class’) struggle is not the one between the two particular classes of the Whole, but the one between the Whole-in-its-parts and its Remainder which, within the Particulars, stands for the Universal, for the Whole ‘as such’, as opposed to its parts.

In other words, the agent of a fighting universalism is actually the remainder itself, ‘that which has no proper place in the “official” universality grounded in exception’.

---

28. ‘Following the sophistic or postmodern appraisal of the disasters of the century comes a time of counter-sophistic appraising’. Badiou 1999, p. 135.
29. Žižek 2003, p. 133.
30. Ibid.
This leads Žižek to develop his own reflections on the Truth-Event as revolutionary praxis. In his recent work on Lenin and political philosophy, he develops a very Badiouian defence of Lukács’s messianic theory of Augenblick from the 1920s – perhaps the closest Marxism gets to the notion of Truth-as-wager. In Lukács, the revolutionary act does not await its objective conditions of realisation – in that case it would wait forever – rather, it risks a possible conjunction or alignment with these objective conditions through the actions and intervention of the collective revolutionary subject.\(^{32}\) In other words, although revolutionary acts base their prospective success on an objective assessment of their conditions of possibility, there is no second-guessing these conditions. There is, therefore, no second-guessing what a prospective revolutionary Truth-Event will look like, even if we act on the basis of our fidelity to an earlier Truth-Event. The Truth-Event, rather, is what the historical process offers up as a result of the unanticipated effects of the risk of revolutionary intervention. For Žižek, then, Lukács’s Augenblick is the theory of the political act that refuses ipso facto to accept the prematurity of its own conditions of possibility. All revolutionary acts, irrespective of their objective content and possibilities, are premature. The point here is not that Pauline Christianity and Lukács thereby share a political eschatology, but that, in Paul and in early Lukács, the time of the Event (in Paul the Parousia, in Lukács the hoped-for post-1917 revolution in Europe) cannot be announced, given the fundamental unpredictability of the messianic event – meaning that, pace Badiou, ‘there is no Event outside the engaged subjective decision which creates it’.\(^{33}\)

‘Messianic time’ ultimately stands for the intrusion of subjectivity irreducible to the ‘objective’ historical process, which means that things can take a messianic turn, time can become ‘dense’, at any point.\(^{34}\)

**Agamben’s Saint Paul**

In comparing faith to work and hope to active patience, Badiou interprets Paul’s letters within what he believes to be an anti-apocalyptic and anti-prophetic setting. The letters, he insists, offer a view of Paul as a ‘political strategist’, rather than a barnstorming preacher of damnation or the ‘end’. This is true, to a certain extent; Paul is no intemperate prophet or emotive

---

32. Žižek 2000. See also Žižek 2003.
33. Žižek 2003, p. 135.
34. Žižek 2003, p. 134.
reader of the ‘runes’, idly and wildly projecting into the future. But, for all the emphasis on Paul’s strategising, Badiou’s reading weakens the interdependence in the letters of the apocalyptic and missionary, prophetic and political. Indeed, an insistence on the interdependence of the apocalyptic, the prophetic, the missionary and the strategising has been crucial to the best recent scholarship on Paul. This is why Giorgio Agamben, in a close reading of the letter to the Romans, seeks to restore Paul – in a fashion similar to J. Christiaan Beker and to Taubes’s *The Political Theology of Paul* – to his proper apocalyptic and messianic context. Key to this, for Agamben, is how Paul envisages the ‘time of the now [ho nyn kairos]’ within the temporal/atemporal continuum of ‘the already’, the ‘not yet’ and the ‘to come’. For Paul, the ‘time of the now’ is the crucial ‘time that remains’ between the resurrection and the Parousia, and therefore represents the very core of messianic faith and experience. In this, it draws on the past (the already conceived messianic event – the resurrection) as the time of the future.

As Agamben points out, in lieu of what I have said already about the apocalyptic, there is a common confusion between the messianic, the prophetic and the apocalyptic. The apocalyptic and prophetic are usually focused on the ‘last day’ and the end of time. Messianic time, however – as the time of the apostle and strategist of faith in Badiou’s image – is not focused on the end of time at all, but the time or the timing of the end. Consequently, messianic time possesses a specificity that is quite different from the traditional apocalyptic eschaton.

Secular time, or historical time, spans the time from creation to the messianic event. At this point, however, historical time contracts and begins to end or ‘fade’ until the time of the Parousia (the full presence of the Messiah) and the actual end of time. Messianic time, therefore, represents a cut in historical time; by dividing the old age from the world to come, it introduces a remainder into historical time – the ‘time that is now’ – that exceeds the division between past and future. And it is this that represents the meaning of Paul’s universalism in Agamben. Because the messianic event is ‘already’ and the full content of the messianic is ‘not yet’, what is opened up by the messianic event – the fact that division between men and men and women and men and God no longer exists – means that no universal identity can be found for men and women, Jew and Greek, until Parousia redeems and fulfills the original messianic event. The messianic vocation, then, separates every identity from itself (Jew from Jew, Jew from non-Jew, Greek from Greek, Greek from non-Greek), on the basis that no universal man can be found either in Jew or non-Jew, Greek or non-Greek. But the founding of this universality lies in the promise of the new age. What is left in the time that remains, therefore, is the impossibility of
men and women truly coinciding with themselves. For Agamben, this identifies a very particular kind of Christian calling in Paul: to live in the messianic is to live without identity under the form of the ‘as not [Hos me]’. Clearly, this reading has a kinship with Badiou’s understanding of Paul’s invitation to ‘weakness’ as an attack on the ‘mastery’ of Jewish priest and Greek intellectual alike. But, in Agamben (and other scholars), this has a specific meaning in relation to Pauline faith and Jewish law, that is very different from Badiou.

For Agamben, to live in the Pauline messianic is not to live outside the law, or even to question its ultimate authority, but to suspend the operation of the law. Indeed, in Paul, the ‘dissolution’ of the identity of ‘Jew and ‘Greek’ is never a straightforward negation of the law and procession to the ‘new age’. On the contrary, in suspending all identity in the ‘as not’, the law is de-activated, disabled. ‘The law can be brought to fulfilment only if it is first restored to the inoperativity of power’.35 In this sense, the messianic life renders the law ‘inexecutable’, not redundant.36 This reading seems to be much closer to the majoritarian – and suasive – scholarship on Paul, which insists on the strong Judaic context of Paul’s writing, something that Badiou pays scant attention to, driven as he is by an anti-dialectical insistence on the resurrection-event as ‘a pure beginning’.37 In this scholarship, Paul’s relationship to the law and to the passing of the old age is based, as we have identified, on the continuation of Jewish law and the Abrahamic covenant. Hence Paul’s understanding of the future-as-promise remains essentially Jewish; the letters are not a Christian attack on Judaism, but, on the contrary, a reconfiguration of the Abrahamic covenant as liberation. Indeed, as Taubes puts it, Paul defines his ambition as a Jewish-Christian apostle preaching to the Gentiles precisely through the Abrahamic promise to found and deliver a people.

Because the Covenant begins with Abraham. And with Abraham begins circumcision, the seed, and so on. Paul’s trick was to come and say: You are children of Abraham! Because it says of Abraham [Gen. 15:6: ‘And he believed the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness’].38

What is not Jewish, however, is Paul’s understanding of the ‘age to come’ as already having arrived. In this light, as the first Jewish theologian of inaugurated eschatology, as opposed to traditional realised eschatology, Paul conjoins the

36. Ibid.
37. Badiou 2003, p. 49.
‘the already’ and the ‘to come’, rather than separating them, as in traditional Jewish apocalyptic thought. This means that, after the Christ-event, far from living solely in a ‘new age’, believers are held to be living in two ages simultaneously.39 The ‘new creation’ of the Christ-event, therefore, is not creation ex nihilo (in Badiou’s language) but a redemption, transformation and completion of the ‘old time’.

Thus when Badiou argues that Paul’s rupture with the Jewish community ‘is not in doubt’,40 he places Paul’s theology back into the two-age dualism of conventional apocalyptic thought, splitting Paul from his Jewish messianic context. This is particularly ironic given Badiou’s insistence on Paul as a worldly missionary and strategist, for it is contempt for this world that is precisely characteristic of two-age dualism. Thus, there is something substantive at stake in Agamben’s account of Paul that allows us to re-focus our attention on the links between Marxism and its Judeo-Christian legacy: the origins and place of dialectic.

In insisting on the messianic context of Paul’s writing, the apocalyptic divisions between ‘the already’, the ‘not yet’ and the ‘to come’ are given a temporal interdependence. ‘The time that remains’ between the resurrection-event and the Parousia and the simultaneous time of the ‘old age’ and the ‘new age’, is a time that focuses neither on the end nor on the present or past, but on their interrelation. There is, thus, no split of history in two (in Badiou’s image) in Saint Paul, but, on the contrary, a move across and between the cut and preservation. In these terms, there is good textual evidence – Agamben insists – to connect Paul’s concept of the suspension of the law, to the secularisation of this double-move in Hegel’s concept of Aufhebung. In defining faith as the suspension of the law, Paul uses the words katargesi [deactivation] and histanein [preservation], both cut and memory.

We find a genuinely messianic exigency re-emerge in Hegel in the problem of the pleroma [fulfilment] of times and the end of history. Hegel, however, thinks the pleroma not as each instant’s relation to the Messiah, but as the final result of a global process.41

As such, messianic time – as the heightening of dialectical time – is neither identifiable with chronological, historical time nor with the instant of time’s end. Rather, it is what Agamben calls ‘operational time’.42 This is a time that

40. Badiou 2003, p. 35.
42. Agamben 2005, p. 68 (‘Afterwards the end delivers the kingdom to God and the Father, when he will render inoperative all rule, and all authority and power’ (1 Cor 15:24)).
operates within historical time, transforming it internally, immanently, in order to make time end. In other words, messianic time is the time we take hold of in order to achieve our representations of time, the time that we ourselves possess. The time ‘that time takes to come to an end, or more precisely, the time we take to bring an end, to achieve our representation of time’.

Or, as Michael Walzer states in his discussion of Jewish messianism, a ‘feature of political messianism is the readiness to “force the End” – which doesn’t mean merely to act politically . . . but to act politically for ultimate purposes’. The identification, then, between the messianic and the ‘to come’ as the future, is simply false. The messianic is not the end-time of predestination; neither is it a third time lying between past and present, but, rather, the unannounced arrival of the past in the present, and the reconfirmed appearance of the present in the past. Hence, the Parousia represents a contraction of past and present. The present becomes a moment through which time is fulfilled as ‘an end’. ‘The tension toward what lies behind is produced on and out of what lies behind’, as Agamben says. Consequently, it is the ‘ungraspable quality of the “now”’ that is the opening through which time is seized, represented and made an ‘end’. At this point, Agamben offers his own political re-inscription of Paul’s theology: far from being a model for an exemplary kind of strategising, asocial and interventionist militant, the letters to the Romans are the founding text of the Western dialectical tradition. In this, Feuerbach’s atheism is closer to the truth than he possibly imagined. Hegel’s Aufhebung, Agamben asserts, is the very embodiment – as ideality – of the messianic double-move of cut and preservation. But, if Hegel ’restores’ Christianity, as Feuerbach correctly puts it, he could also be said to fail it, in his subsumption of the messianic event under the global historical process. For Agamben, therefore, it is precisely where the messianic double-move is itself preserved that the dialectic is to be found and sustained; and this means, of course, identifying the messianic with where the Christian cut is restored to its original Judaic context: the late writings of Walter Benjamin.

It is in Benjamin, and Benjamin first and foremost, that the Judaic double-messianic move, and ‘the time that remains’, is brought to dialectical self-consciousness in the Western philosophical tradition. In Benjamin’s messianic defence of Marxism in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ the liberation of the proletariat is borne through the collision with, and fulfilment, of the redeemed past.

43. Agamben 2005, p. 68.
44. Walzer 1985, p. 139.
46. Feuerbach 1986, p. 34.
Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.47

Or, as Agamben writes, ‘an instant of the past and an instant of the present are united in a constellation where the present is able to recognize the meaning of the past and the past therein finds its meaning and fulfilment’.48

In this sense, both the struggle for communism and the inauguration of God’s Kingdom are dependant on the redemptive content of the messianic ‘time that remains’. Agamben’s reading, therefore, is to be seen as a defence of the Pauline presence in Benjamin, a connection that, remarkably, has rarely been addressed in Western Marxism and Benjaminian scholarship, with the significant exception of Taubes.49 Thus, Agamben sets out to reposition the relationship between Marx and Christianity directly on the terrain of Benjamin’s anti-historicism, allowing us to re-establish the messianic kinship between Benjamin and a broader, eschatological tradition in Marxism, as represented by a writer such as Bloch. As Bloch declares: ‘Messianism is the burning mystery of all revolutionary, all fulfilled, enlightenment’.50

Thus, if Badiou uses the Pauline cut to subject official notions of the dialectic in Marxism to critique, Agamben identifies Benjamin’s Pauline double-move of cut and preservation in order to reinstate (a messianic) Marx and dialectic against orthodox Marxism. From this perspective, it could be said that Agamben is involved in a triple-preservative move: firstly, to defend Marx’s anti-historicist revolutionary account of history; secondly, to defend the Jewish context of Saint Paul’s Christian messianism; and, thirdly, to defend the ‘messianic’ content of Marx’s writing itself. In an early essay on Benjamin and historicism, ‘Time and History: Critique of the Instant and Continuum’, which develops an anti-historicist historical materialism prior to Agamben’s assimilation of Saint Paul, Marx is discussed in terms of the appropriation of historical being: ‘Man is not a historical being because he falls into time, but precisely the opposite; it is only because he is a historical being that he can fall into time, temporalizing himself’.51 Thus, so long as humanity is reconciled with historical time as a continuous succession of instants – as the nullification of the present – men and women will not be able to concretely appropriate their own history. It is only, therefore, when men and women take possession

49. For instance, there is not a single reference to Saint Paul in Benjamin and Osborne (eds.) 1994.
of history through the gateway of the present as an *abridgement* of past, present and future, that this will happen. Hence the importance of Benjamin’s messianic recovery of this process of self-temporalisation for a de-Stalinised, anti-historicist historical materialism.

True historical materialism does not pursue an empty mirage of continuous progress along infinite linear time, but is ready at any moment to stop time, because it holds the memory that man’s original home is pleasure. It is this time which is experienced in authentic revolutions…

These three versions of Paul, in a sense, all identify messianism and fidelity to the Truth-Event with the revolutionary cut. Where they differ is in the philosophical character of this scission, and its relationship to Marxism, dialectic and Christianity. In this, both Agamben and Žižek, despite their political and philosophical differences, use Saint Paul in order to restore dialectic to the Christianised origins of its ‘wakefulness to the future’. In this, the detemporalising and re-temporalising logic of the messianic is not a metaphysical sideshow to the narrative of ‘progress’, but the very space in which the wager on the authentic political event is produced and defended. For Žižek, this involves an explicit Christianising of this revolutionary space: because the messianic event has already happened, fidelity and struggle are thereby able to begin; the named Event is that which opens up the *subjective space* of struggle.

[T]he Messiah is here, it’s done, [this] means that the space is now open for struggle. It’s this nice paradox that the fact that the big thing happened does not mean it’s over. It precisely opens the space for struggle. This is what I find again so incredible. Which is why to the horror of some of my Jewish friends, who [don’t] like this idea that in Christianity everything happened whereas in Judaism the Messiah is always postponed, always to-come, and so on [I reply] No, I like… this crazy radicality of Christianity; which is that, no, it happened, it already happened. But precisely that doesn’t mean everything is already decided.

In Agamben, there is no explicit Christianising of revolutionary temporality and practice. Rather, what concerns Agamben more generally is how the ‘second Christ’ of Saint Paul, and the formation of messianism as a cut *in* history, founds a science *of* history. Paul’s messianic destruction of history as eternal recurrence brings history into the space of human calculation. Messianism, then, is the agency of representation, precisely because it generates

52. Agamben 1993, p. 115.
53. Žižek 2004, p. 36.
a state of historical preparedness (‘weakness’). And, it is this messianic watchfulness – the time of ‘now’ – that is in turn the founding moment of the dialectic, rendering history open to reflective reason.

[Not only is Hegelian though involved in a tightly knit hermetic struggle with the messianic – in the sense that all of its determining concepts are more or less conscious interpretations and secularizations of messianic themes – but this also holds for modernity [Marx and Benjamin], by which I intend the epoch that is situated under the sign of the dialectical Aufhebung.54

In contrast, as a militant philosopher of non-relationality, Badiou is not interested in any explicit insertion of Paul into the debate on Marxism and Judeo-Christianity. This smacks too much of finding some ‘challenging dialectical connection or resolution’ to the present political conjuncture. There is, thus, a strong resistance in Badiou to having his philosophy placed within the ambit of anything so positivistic, so ‘journalistic’, as the ‘return/s to religion’. In this light, Benjamin’s messianism is not a determining presence in Badiou’s anti-historicism; indeed, if anything, Badiou’s anti-historicism owes more to Blanchot’s thoroughly de-sacralised ‘double-dialectic’ or ‘in-out’ dialectic, in which language and the political subject are assumed to possess two historical tasks: negativity and ‘neutrality’, neutrality being ‘cut-off from being and from not-being’.55

In the same way each of us ought both to be a free and speaking subject, and to disappear as passive, patient – the patient whom dying traverses and who does not show himself.56

Consequently, Badiou is as disinclined to ‘open’ out his theory of the Truth-Event to a discussion of the messianic and eschatological, as he is loath to exploring the crisis of political subjectivity through any historical account of Marxism and Christianity – although, clearly, his theory of the Truth-Event remains notionally messianic in form. What preoccupies him, rather, is how the present crisis in politics and political subjectivity requires something more than a renewed meeting of Marxism and the paradoxes of Christianised agency: that is, the possibility of a cut without remainder. Or, rather, a cut, in Blanchot’s terms, that allows us (the political subject) to ‘disappear’, ‘remain patient’ and ‘passive’ in a ‘non-passive’ way. This is because the crisis of politics

56. Ibid.
is as much an obstacle to entry into the Truth-Event, as it is the basis for the renewal of communist struggle. This is why Badiou sees Paul less in terms of the renewal or deepening of the dialectical tradition, than as an exemplary militant of irreconcilability for our times. For what Badiou sees as overwhelmingly significant about Paul’s letters – what takes them beyond their original theological context – is not just their resistance to forms of ‘alienated rule’ through the universal truth of the resurrection-event, but their fidelity to truth in circumstances where the idea of truth has been either lost or destroyed or reduced to blind doxa. And this, clearly, has a hyper-, even hysterical, Engelsian dynamic to it: in conditions of absolute abjection for the workers’ movement, for proletarian self-emancipation, for the communist international and for secular scientific values, revolutionary politics must renew itself again from a position of ‘weakness’ and disengagement.

Messianism, politics and invariant communism

Because thinking consciousness is not the outward universal form for all mankind, the consciousness of the true, the spiritual and the rational, must have the form of Religion, and this is the universal justification of this form. Hegel57

In conclusion, I want to return to the ‘return/s to religion’ and the messianic space of politics generally, in order to broaden out my discussion of the Engelsian problematic.

As I have noted, despite their different relationships to the dialectic, Agamben, Badiou and Žižek do at least share one philosophical agenda: an antipathy to Derridean weak messianicity.58 In direct opposition to Derrida, they all insist that without a strong sense of the messianic we are left with history as a process of infinite deferment or a ‘dead process’. ‘All that remains is the spectre of a promise’, as Žižek declares.59 In this respect, the transcendent, as that which exceeds representation – that which shatters the prevailing

58. However, what these authors do share with Derrida (and recent French phenomenology) is that they do not see religion as a mere epiphenomenon within modernity. Religion may, on a global scale and across belief systems, be operationally secondary to the secular reproduction and transformation of capitalist democracy, but, at those points where the democratic fails to reproduce itself, where it cannot no longer rely on its ‘technical’ and ‘neutral’ language of self-justification, religion – in particular Judeo-Christian thought – retains a significant figural relationship to the critique of the Whole and Totality. See Derrida and Vattimo 1998.
59. Žižek 2003, p. 140.
political settlement or situation – is something shared by all writers. By locating politics in fidelity to the messianic event or Truth-Event, the universal horizon of the emancipatory and world-historical event is, in the spirit of Benjamin, brought forward, so to speak; that is, it is brought back from the realm of what is to be expected on the basis of what is known into the realm of the unanticipated and unbidden. In this light, considerations on Paul aside, the attack on historicism in these authors’ writings offers a more general set of reflections on politics, the party, and history.

Although they offer different entry points into the messianic they all identify ‘revolutionary action’ and ‘revolutionary consciousness’ outside of what we might call the twentieth-century historical form of Marxism: the relationship between party, class and state. In this sense, these works exhibit an explicit critique of Marxism as a theory of class leadership within the confines and disciplinary framework of the institutions of the capitalist state. This is not because, for these writers, Marx and Marxism cannot provide the revolutionary co-ordinates for superseding bourgeois political economy, but that Marxism as failed state praxis is now too embedded in historicist conceptions of ‘progress’ to be useful to revolutionary theory. That is, the idea of building a new communist International from inside the disciplinary framework of the capitalist state would simply subject Marxism once again to the social-democratic limits and inertia of the political process. Marxism, as an actual or nascent form of mass-based party struggle has, in these terms, reached its internal limits within the global system; hence, the assertiveness of messianic-type thinking in these writers, and the general link between revolutionary practice and the ‘walking away’ from heteronomy in much of the new writing on Christianity and politics. This means that this kind of messianic thinking, at an important level, returns revolutionary practice to its non-historicist position prior to 1917, and, therefore, to the authenticity of Lenin’s own cut-as-desire: his decision to defy the historicist restraint of the Mensheviks in order to directly enter the gateway of history. There is in this corpus of writing, then, an emphasis on a return to the precipitousness of the political act (particularly in Badiou and Žižek) – the notion that there is no authentic political space and temporality outside the messianic wager. Politics (before the work of defending and building the revolutionary break with capitalism) is messianic or it is nothing. Consequently, the Stalinisation of Marxism in the East and the social-democratic dissolution of Marxism in the West – that is Marxism’s demise as a form of mass democratic praxis – has not so much dissolved revolutionary struggle, as confirmed its obverse: the explicit identification of revolutionary practice and consciousness with a continuous messianic state of emergency. How one thinks the messianic, then, how one acts
in the period of its between time (as Agamben’s reading of Paul puts it) is the key to living within this state of emergency, and being ‘wakeful’ to the future. The messianic, this writing suggests, is not a kind of metaphysical add-on to a soon to be restored socialist political process, but the space in which socialism defines its present and unanticipated future, and thereby extracts itself from its historical slumbers.

In this sense, there is no messianic politics as such (just as there is no Christian politics as such) because the conditions of its possibility cannot be named and fulfilled in practice. Consequently, we might talk about this messianic writing, in the wake of the collapse of ‘communism as the real movement that abolishes the present state of society’, as a form of suspensive revolutionary consciousness. In its identification of a politics with the refusal to participate in the formal channels of the political process, it renders the idea of struggle in present conditions largely antinomian. This is very different, then, from the broad continuum of communist and left opposition from the 1920s to the 1980s, in which a socialist culture in the broad sense prided itself on the autonomy of its institutions and the vitality of its history. But the autonomy of these institutions as parts of an oppositional and collective force has been systematically and contingently stripped out of the polity and the public sphere since the 1980s. As a result, it is this general and crippling sense of destitution that shapes this messianic state of emergency. In a world where capitalism cannot be named (or named as anything but the enlightened development of economic reason) and socialism cannot be named as anything but the remainder of the political process, the language of revolution has to be revivified outside of the history of state praxis and its institutions. In a crucial sense, this reveals the unconscious of the recent atheistic ‘turn’ to Christianised categories. Revolutionary practice, it is assumed, has more in common with the early Christian church and its de-sacralisation of the political process, than all the ‘enlightened’ state practice pursued in the name of socialist and democratic politics since the 1930s.

This is why Engels’s writings on religion provide an instructive context for understanding the current atheistic turn to Christian categories and the renaissance of messianic thinking. For what distinguishes Engels’s writing on Christianity throughout his life is the way it provides a setting for the discussion of invariant communism: those forms of communism, usually religious (such as Protestant Bible communism), that unify the universal aspirations of the oppressed and exploited; and which predate, and also, in a sense, install themselves in Marxism’s historical transformation, supersession and synthesis of precapitalist revolutionary movements. At key points in his writing, invariant communism provides not only a point of sharp ideological
contrast, but offers a source of reflection on the future of workers’ struggles. Indeed a strange symmetry bookends Engels’s revolutionary career: in 1843, in his early twenties, he writes a sympathetic account of the ‘community of goods’ communism of the Ranters and the Rappists in the US;60 and, over fifty years later – the year before his death – he writes his final reflections on religion, ‘On the History of Early Christianity’, in which the seditious passion of early Christianity becomes a focus for the renewal of socialist struggle. This is not to say that throughout his life Engels had a secret passion for invariant communism in direct contravention of Marx’s attacks on revolutionary idealism and feudal socialism. Rather, as a point of ideological contrast (and possible) revolutionary renewal, invariant communism is constantly in the background of his and Marx’s reflections on political subjectivity and party organisation. This is why ‘On the History of Early Christianity’ is such a curious piece. Ostensibly a history of pre-Nicene Council Christianity, in truth it is a retrospective account of the crisis of political subjectivity and the First International (the International Working Men’s Association). The First International was formed in 1864 and collapsed under extreme internal pressure in 1872, to be disbanded in 1876. The Second International was formed in 1889 – six years after Marx’s death – and, although Engels played a consultative role in its formation, he had no direct involvement in its

60. When Engels was writing on Christianity and socialism in the 1890s, he was thoroughly aware of the history of communist-Christian societies in the United States during his lifetime. In 1843, he wrote a short and supportive article on the early development of these societies, such as the Shakers and the Rappists (Engels 1975, pp. 214–28). Arriving in America at the beginning of the nineteenth century, many of these societies (The Inspirationists, the Harmony Society or Rappists, The Society of Separatists, Aurora and Bethel Communes) had their origins in Germany, and were themselves, like Marx and Engels, dissident exiles from the repressive Prussian, Christian state. Although these societies established their sexual relations and living arrangements in different ways (the Society of Separatists opposed marriage for instance; the Inspirationists separated the sexes and adopted a simple uniform of dress) what linked these societies, generally, was a non-sectarian and anti-ecclesiastical commitment to the defence of common production and property as the prefigurative social form of the imminent kingdom of God. As Charles Nordoff puts it, writing about John Humphrey Noyes, the leader of The Reflectionists, one of the American societies (founded in 1848): ‘Communism they hold therefore to be the “social state of the resurrection”’ (Nordoff 1966, p. 271). With the exception of the (French) Icarians, however, none of these communities survived beyond the 1860s. See Rancière 1989. In many ways, then, it is easy to treat these societies as a feeble sideshow to the massive class struggles and convulsions that these groups left behind in Europe, or took their distance from in the US. Yet, their attack on private property and defence of egalitarianism and sexual equality (for all the societies’ self-imposed poverty) looked less insubstantial than it perhaps should have done at the end of the nineteenth century, as the great waves of the workers’ movement in Europe were beginning to unfold (and being rolled back). It is no surprise, then, that Engels at the end of his life is less judgemental about Christianity and Bible communism than he might have been expected to be.
development. ‘On the History of Early Christianity’ is written, then, at a point when the workers’ movement had emerged from a period of internecine struggle and collapse, to be replaced by an organisation that increasingly submitted itself to the illusions of evolutionary state socialism. There is a certain historical irony here, therefore, which is not lost on Engels; in the First International what overwhelmingly preoccupied Marx and Engels were the disorganising effects of the millenarian, idealist and sectarian forms of invariant communism, such as Bakunin’s anarchist International Alliance of Socialist Democracy. In ‘Fictitious Splits in the International’ written in 1872, Marx and Engels attack Bakunin and other sectarian and idealist communist thinkers on the grounds that these forms of invariant communism have, in this new stage of workers’ struggle, been made historically redundant.

The first phase of the proletariat’s struggle against the bourgeoisie is marked by a sectarian movement. That is logical at the time when the proletariat has not yet developed sufficiently to act as a class. Certain thinkers criticize social antagonisms, and suggest fantastic solutions, thereof, which the mass of workers is left to accept, preach and put into practice. The sects formed by those initiators are abstentionist by their very nature – i.e. alien to real action, politics, strikes, coalitions. Such forms of invariant communism may, act as ‘levers of the movement in the beginning, but become an obstruction as soon as the movement outgrows them’. And this is precisely why Engels turns again to reflect on early Christianity: for the new International may have finally dispersed the chancers, swindlers, mountebanks and cranks that attached themselves to the invariant communism of the First International – the ‘international within the International’ – but the removal of this ‘obstruction’ in the incipient state machinery of the Second International, in turn, delimited the workers’ movements’ world-transforming capacities. ‘Here we have neither the dogma nor the morals of later Christianity but instead [in pre-Nicene Christianity] a feeling that one is struggling against the whole world’. Engels’s sympathetic analysis of early Christianity, therefore, both hides and advances a restitutive revolutionary function of utopian invariant communism within an International that was adapting itself to parliamentary democracy; and this is why, after Marx’s death, Engels was also so concerned with re-establishing Marx’s debt to

62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. Engels 1987.
Hegel and German idealism against the fledgling positivisation of Marxism as a science of political economy amongst the new generation of activists.\textsuperscript{65}

Badiou’s, Žižek’s and Agamben’s return to Saint Paul is, in the above sense, an engagement with, and recasting of, invariant communism at the expense of (state) Marxism. As Bruno Bosteels argues, we are witnessing in this writing ‘a project to salvage an idea or practice of communism from the agonizing history of its own defacement’,\textsuperscript{66} in order to recover the name of communism as ‘an unheard of-type of rebellious subjectivity, or an unprecedented form of being-in-common’.\textsuperscript{67} Hence, the distance taken from Marxism as a theory of the leadership of the working class within the confines of the capitalist state in these writings is in direct proportion to the reinvestment in invariant communism as a renewal of the revolutionary tradition. Indeed, invariant communism is something that has, at various stages, preoccupied Badiou in his career, mostly in his early directly Maoist writing.\textsuperscript{68} Yet, if communism and party-form are being rethought, it would be wrong to say of any of these writers that they seek to divorce communism from the traditions and institutions of Marxism \textit{tout court}. Thus Bosteels is certainly correct on this point in relation to Badiou. Badiou is not a ‘speculative leftist’: rather, the presence of invariant communism in Badiou’s defence of the non-relationality of Pauline Christianity is, in a sense, a continuation of the debate on the form or forms \textit{under which} Marxism is practised – the move from his earlier Maoist reflections on the party-form of a ‘party of a new type’ to his current defence of political organisation without a party\textsuperscript{69} – and, in this sense, is precisely continuous with Engels’s own reflections on the problems of organisation and disorganisation within and beyond the invariant communist form. It could be argued, then, that Badiou’s non-relational cut is a cut \textit{from within} Marxism.

I say this because it would be wrong to assume that the messianism of this writing is symptomatic, in the distance it takes from the state-form and party-form of Marxist struggle, of post-Marxism. On the contrary, what remains invigorating about this writing is that, in returning to the messianism of Saint Paul and the early Christian legacy it places the present crisis of Marxism as internal to the history of the crisis of political subjectivity itself within the Marxism of the twentieth century. The emphasis on messianic weakness, therefore, is precisely the means by which Marxist subjectivity is able to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{65} Engels 1976.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Bosteels 2005a, p. 753.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Bosteels 2005a, p. 754.
\item \textsuperscript{68} For example, Badiou and Balmès 1976.
\item \textsuperscript{69} For a defence of the philosophical continuity between the early Maoist writing and the later writing, see Bosteels 2005b.
\end{itemize}
separate itself from those traditions and forms of organisation of ‘the old type’; and not from the history and practice of Marxism as such.

Is all that remains for these writers then, in any authentic sense, a politics of the chiliastic? Agamben and Žižek are both notoriously vague on this question⁷⁰ – and, for obvious reasons, it might be said: there is no party of the new type that can currently give mass form to the messianic wager. But there is, nevertheless, an important question to be answered about the renunciative and asocial dynamic of politics within messianic time: what are the limitations of revolutionary ‘weakness’? For – significantly – the paradox of a non-relational politics is that its strengths easily lead to unmitigated powerlessness once relationality (without party organisation) has to be adopted in some form or another. Thus, one of the ironies of Badiou’s move from the party of the new type to politics without a party is that, when push comes to shove, his model of Pauline interpellation for the renewal of revolutionary subjectivity actually fails to hold onto to its own anti-positivistic strengths and virtues. Once Badiou starts talking about questions of organisation, he ends up sounding like the thing he appears indefatigably opposed to in his ethics: an advocate of movementism. By calling for a new philosophy of action, he hopes that we (the Left that is) can ‘have new movements, and not only organisations that are not like parties’.⁷¹ In the end this would seem to offer very poor returns after all the rigours of the Truth-Event and counter-sophistic philosophising.

These issues are not to be treated lightly. If it is easy to be critical of Badiou’s non-relationality (and its weaker reflection in Žižek) Badiou correctly assesses that there is no revolutionary politics in this present period without non-relationality: the subtractive, renunciative, and suspensive conditions of the political subject are the necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for clearing a distance between what might be named as revolutionary politics and the day-to-day ‘democratic’ representation of politics under mature capitalism. So is messianism, then, fundamentally opposed to the question of party organisation? Insofar, as the revolutionary event might be distilled through the guidelines of the party in accord with its objective assessment of the historical process, we would have to say: Yes. But if the party of the new type, or parties of the new type in the plural, are ‘wakeful’ to their own sense of contingency, as they are to the present moment of the ‘future’, we would have to say emphatically: No. We might, then, wager a concluding paradox: just as Christians have to divorce themselves from Christianity in order to remain

---

Christians, Marxists have to become messianists in order to live and struggle and organise in the here and now.

References


Intervention

Debating Lebowitz: Is Class Conflict the Moral and Historical Element in the Value of Labour-Power?

Ben Fine
School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
bf@soas.ac.uk

Abstract
Prompted by the debate over Michael Lebowitz’s contributions on the relative absence of class struggle in Marx’s Capital (and, in particular, the determining if subjective role played by labour in resisting capital), this paper seeks to push analysis forward by closer examination of the notion of the value of labour-power. It does so by arguing that labour markets are structured, reproduced and transformed in complex and differentiated ways, whilst the moral and historical elements that make up the use-value interpretation of the value of labour-power also need to be addressed in a differentiated manner rather than as a fixed bundle.

Keywords
value, labour-power, Lebowitz, Marx, consumption

That debate should be provoked by Michael Lebowitz’s contributions is understandable. He goes to the heart of Marx’s methodology and, directly or indirectly, raises issues concerning the relationships between value theory, inter- and intra-class conflict, the abstract and the concrete/complex, and more besides within Marxist political economy. There is also the claim that Marx himself is not only guilty of being one-sided in his treatment of capital-labour relations, unduly neglecting the active or subjective role of labour in opposing capital and promoting its own interests, but also that this bias has been characteristic of much of the tradition of Marxist political economy that he inspired. To some extent, the commentary on Lebowitz has provided some corrective to the extremes to which he has pushed his case but, I suspect, like

myself, many readers will remain dissatisfied with what appears to be an unresolved outcome of the debate and the failure to make constructive progress.²

There is good reason for this. In making his case for re-introducing labour, Lebowitz explicitly and centrally raises the issue of what happens in the case of productivity increase during capital accumulation. If rewards to labour remain the same in use-value terms, then there will be an increase in profitability. But, if the value of labour-power remains the same, then this will represent an increase in the use-values that can be commanded by labour, and profitability will remain unaltered.³ In Volume I of Capital, it is presumed that the use-value reward to labour remains the same, and this leads Lebowitz to reprimand Marx, and his followers, for neglecting alternative outcomes that are contingent upon active intervention by labour that raises the latter’s rewards anywhere up to the level consistent with continuing profitability.

Indeed, Lebowitz deploys a specific concept, ‘the degree of separation’, to determine the outcome of this distributional division of the rewards of productivity increase. Significantly, this concept attracts no comment in the debate despite its novelty. Yet, as will be argued, it is fundamentally flawed. First, though, observe that, if the degree of separation simply serves as an ex-post measure of the outcomes, then it has no causal or analytical content. Second, otherwise, as is apparent in Lebowitz’s account, the degree of separation is designed to reflect some degree of organisation of the working class at some aggregate level, primarily in reacting to or resisting and thereby accruing the gains from productivity increase.

But is such an abstract and aggregate concept legitimate for the analytical role that is assigned to it? It is simply presumed to be so. Does – one test of Marx’s method – the degree of separation demonstrably correspond to the real processes of capitalist accumulation? Perhaps there is an implicit parallel with the rate of surplus-value, the terms on which aggregate capital and labour confront and exchange with one another over the buying and selling of labour-power. In practice, and at a more complex level, this exchange takes place through disaggregated acts of exchange of individual capitals and labour. But they are homogenised through the value relations that connect them both at

---

². See special section in Historical Materialism, 14, 2, 2006: 49–134.
³. This is not completely accurate as profitability will depend upon how the increase in productivity is brought about. If, through an increase in organic composition of capital, then some part of productivity must accrue to capital in order for profitability to remain the same. This qualification need not detain us here but it is of crucial importance in the understanding of how productivity gains are distributed as opposed to the limits within which they are confined. See below.
any moment in time and through the reproduction of the capital-labour relation itself. The result is not, it should be emphasised, a division of value produced between capital and labour with one only gaining at the expense of the other. This is a Ricardian view in which distributional relations between capital and labour are determined \textit{ex post}, a dividing-up of the cake. In contrast, for Marx, the buying and selling of labour-power is \textit{ex ante} and distributional outcomes are \textit{ex post}, contingent on the extent to which surplus-value has been extracted through the intervention of production. In short, the capitalist mode of production is fundamentally based on the exchange between the two classes as a whole, irrespective of the detailed division of labour within and across commodity-producing and other activities that are its complex consequence.

In this light, the parallel with the degree of separation does not carry through. First, capital and labour as a whole do not necessarily conflict over productivity increases, leaving aside the division of its spoils. Progress in the methods of production can lighten and enhance work even where there is specialisation and deskilling, and especially where there is not. Workers may even demand more advanced methods of production – a lawnmower rather than a scythe to cut the grass, or other means more generally to reduce the burden of work.

Second and more fundamentally, the structures and processes leading from productivity increase to division of output are too many and too complex to be reduced to a single analytical index. Do we have a balance of class struggle from which we can read off distributional and other outcomes? Both the elements and incidence of class struggle are too varied, numerous and complex (multi-layered and impure) to allow this. Lebowitz himself mentions, for example, globalisation (itself multi-dimensional) and contracting out, the pressure of unemployment and, inevitably, solidarity in and across workplaces. But this is only to touch the surface in terms of the forms and content taken by class struggle. And, as for the previous point, class struggle and its outcomes do not constitute a zero-sum game. How, otherwise, apart from shift from one mode of production to another could class struggle serve as the motive force of history within modes of production? Further, whilst value relations do necessarily yield a degree of separation \textit{ex post}, since the various elements of class conflict do have to resolve themselves however partially and temporarily through the circulation of capital, there is no basis for this degree of separation to be acted upon by the simultaneously constituted value relations (as if there were a law of the tendency of the rate of degree of separation to be equalised as there is for profitability or surplus-value).

In short, if the degree of separation brings labour and class struggle back in, it only does so as an \textit{ex-post} fix. And, as Marx himself observes, he was not the
discoverer of class conflict. Rather, one of his self-acclaimed achievements was to locate class struggle in the context of particular modes of production. For capitalism, the production of surplus-value sets the parameters within which class struggle can be located. But those parameters themselves have to be uncovered before class struggle is introduced. Marx even begins *Capital* with the commodity, not capital and labour, let alone class conflict, as a preliminary in order to be able to begin to address the forms taken by class struggle.

Thus, Lebowitz’s appeal to the degree of separation presupposes the answer to the question he has set. Paradoxically, the frequent observation that Marx plans a theory of wages for a later volume is perceived as evidence for his neglect of class struggle in the earlier ones. But to use the degree of separation is to resolve (distributional) issues arising out of productivity increase before those intervening volumes are in place. To the contrary, the structures and processes of accumulation have to be specified before the mode, nature and impact of class struggle can be assessed. The degree of separation simply leapfrogs from the abstract to the concrete, appealing to a few elements and locating none in the analytical scheme as a whole. In a sense, the degree of separation is the volume on the theory of wages reduced to a single concept.

In this light, I want to approach the issues involved in a different and more constructive way, rather than unduly demonising the degree of separation idea (although criticism of it will recur). This is by closer examination of that most peculiar of commodities, labour-power, something not greatly engaged in the debate. As a commodity, it has both use-value and exchange-value. These need to be examined closely in turn. As a use-value, labour-power has the universal, if not exclusive, capacity of creating use-values. In a commodity-producing context, it has the unique capacity to create value. And, for capitalist commodity production, it alone creates surplus-value. But precisely because it produces value (use-value and exchange-value), labour-power as a whole is differentiated in its own use-value. Through the application of different concrete labours, it produces different use-values, albeit in the common form of exchange-value. Those differences in concrete labour prevail within and across production processes even if they are homogenised (rendered equivalent if not equalised) as values and in (surplus-) value production.

That different labour processes are differentiated from one another is sufficient by itself to negate the notion of the degree of separation. For the latter to prevail, there must be some process that overcomes these differences. But there is no such mechanism, as is apparent in the specific context of changes in production. The way in which workers organise within and across sectors (company or trade unions for example) is highly contingent as are the employers’ organisations that they confront. Changes in production from one
place to another are not rendered equivalent to one another. For they depend upon the restructuring of labour processes, skills, and the division of labour within and between sectors and, in major part, are contingent upon the material nature of the production processes and products themselves. In other words, there are many different degrees of separation across the commodity labour-power, not one representing or homogenising them all.

I will return to this point later at a more complex level. Nonetheless, that the commodity labour-power can be put to different uses and in different ways does not distinguish it from other commodities for which the same is true. The (exchange-)value of labour-power is an entirely different matter for, unlike other commodities, it has no direct determinant in the labour-time of production. Labour-power is not (re)produced as a commodity by capitalist production but by economic and social relations and processes that lie, in major part, outside the accumulation and circulation of capital. But there are two ways in which capital does necessarily and directly contribute to the reproduction of labour-power. This is through the payment of variable capital in the form of money wages to purchase labour-power, and by the production of the commodities that enter into working-class consumption. Unfortunately, in Marxist political economy, there has been a tendency to acknowledge all of this only in the limited sense of substituting for the value of labour-power either the value of a bundle of use-values or a quantity of money wages that correspond to the ‘moral and historical’ subsistence of the working class.

But this procedure raises more questions than it answers. First and obviously, what determines this bundle? Second and related, how does it change and how are the changes to be accommodated analytically? Third, how do we account for the flexibility in consumption that is a necessary consequence of the value of labour-power being realised in money form (that is, take-home pay and not a bundle of goods)? And, fourth, even leaving all of this aside, what about the unavoidable differences across the working class (and other strata) in remuneration and, hence, necessary standards of living, moral and historical or otherwise? To begin to address these issues is to begin to unpick the complexity of the degree of separation.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the moral and historical subsistence constituting the value of labour-power has to be understood in a more refined manner in two respects. First, how ‘subsistence’ is determined varies from commodity to commodity – each of housing, food, clothing, transport, entertainment, etc., is attached to a different mode or system of provision, running through from

production to consumption, including corresponding norms and cultures (levels and meanings) of consumption. Second, such norms are not to be perceived as a single standard across everybody or as an average with some above or below to reflect these differences in consumption across and within commodities. Rather, the consumption of each commodity not only enters differentially into the value of labour-power as use-value, it is also differentially distributed across the working class in terms of levels, modes and meanings of consumption.5

A number of implications follow from this approach. First, class struggle is an important determinant of the moral and historical element, not least over levels of wages in response to productivity change. However, second, even if, as denied earlier, this could be accommodated by the notion of the degree of separation, class struggle determining standards of living is neither confined to nor reducible to the economic sphere. Struggles over housing, education, welfare, transport, and so on are often not directly engaged with nor incorporated within the production and circulation of value. Indeed, such struggles often involve the deliberate attempt to decommodify provision or to (re)commodify it, as in nationalisation and privatisation, respectively, of ‘public’ services. It stretches credibility to attach the balance of such factors, determining varieties of consumption norms, to a single concept such as the degree of separation. And, third, the determination of such norms involves the economic and social intervention of classes and movements that are not reducible to those between, and within, the two major classes of capital and labour.

In sum, in looking at both use-value and exchange-value of the commodity labour-power in just slightly more detail than is common in most abstract analyses, it follows that the incorporation of class struggle as a determinant presumes a structure and complexity of analysis that goes far beyond that contained in Volume I of Capital. No wonder, then, that the theory of wages is put off until a later volume or so of Capital. Indeed, the notion of the degree of separation as a means of bringing class struggle forward essentially has the effect of collapsing Marx’s analytical structure by addressing the determinants of the value of wages before they have themselves been orderly identified and incorporated. In this respect, there is a striking parallel with the equally abrupt definition of the value of labour-power as a money wage by the approach of the ‘new solution’ to the transformation problem. This fixes the value of labour-power in money terms without considering the complex determinants involved and as just outlined.6 Lebowitz substitutes the material degree of

5. For this as theory of consumption, see especially Fine 2002.
6. For more on this, see Fine et al. 2004.
separation in place of money wages to fix these problems. Both only address the problems by setting them aside.

In light of all of this, consider now the position of the value of labour-power across the three volumes of *Capital*. In the first two volumes, it is presumed to be determined by the value of given use-values (variously distributed across the working class as a whole). In Volume I, this is in order that the means and consequences of producing (absolute and relative) surplus-value can be identified. The idea that class struggle is thereby absent or absented is nonsensical since it necessarily follows in various ways from the (re)division and extension of the working day. In Volume II, the value of labour-power also remains constant, as do the conditions of production themselves, in order to uncover the means and consequences of the circulation of (surplus-) value.

Yet, from Volume I itself, it is already apparent that the abstraction of given use-values in the value of labour-power is placed under tension. For the consequences of increasing productivity in just one sector is to reduce values so that money wages would have to be reduced overall for capital to accrue the full benefits of productivity increase. In other words, the production of relative surplus-value poses conflict over money wages. But it does so in a way entirely different in the case of conflict over the length of the working day or, for example, the shift between time- and piece-forms of paying wages. It is impossible to address these issues satisfactorily until the economic and social structures and processes in which they are located have been identified. Accordingly, Volumes I and II both proceed with given use-value of labour-power whatever it might be and however it might be determined.

Volume III is an entirely different matter for it brings together as a unity the separate analyses of Volumes I and II and integrates them with the tensions of accumulation identified in Volume I. For this reason, the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (LTRPF) swings, in the first instance, to the opposite extreme as far as the value of labour-power is concerned, fixing it and the rate of surplus-value, despite the productivity increase (and production of relative surplus-value) that accompanies accumulation (and implying all productivity benefits accrue to labour).

It is as if the degree of separation has gone from zero to one in moving between Volumes. But this is to take no account of the counteracting tendencies to the law. For, whilst the LTRPF as such focuses exclusively upon the devaluation of commodities through productivity increase (to the benefit of workers’ consumption and at the expense of capitalists’ commodity capital

---

7. For some detail in support of the approach to *Capital* adopted here, see Fine and Saad-Filho 2003.
revenues), the counteracting tendencies point in the opposite direction with a rising rate of surplus-value (reduction in the value of the given use-value of labour-power), and devaluation of constant (and variable) capital (cheapening of inputs to capitalist production). How the law as such and the counteracting tendencies interact to give rise to more complex and concrete outcomes cannot be derived simply from identifying their presence. Further theoretical and historical analysis is required, of which the determination of the value of wages is but one part (alongside other distributional relations, the role of the state, finance and commerce, etc.). These are all attached to class struggle, occasionally in ways that are overt, over wages, unemployment and so on. But, overt or not, the significance of such class struggle still needs to be located analytically in terms of the accumulation and circulation of capital.

Marx considered that making the distinction between labour and labour-power to be one of his most important discoveries. To understand this, I like to deploy the analogy with hiring a TV set. How much you pay for the rental bears no relation to the amount of time that the TV is on. It could be on all the time or not at all. This depends upon a multitude of factors from quality of programmes, their own timing, other things going on in your life, availability of electricity and reception, and so on. No doubt, there is some indirect connection between the value of TVs and the cost of hiring them, and each of these may have some general common determinants in socio-economic factors. But it gets us nowhere at all to posit a degree of separation between ourselves and our TVs in order to address the issue of the quantity and quality of TV watching.

The same applies to the degree of separation for labour-power. It identifies but does not address a problem in Marxist political economy, and unduly reduces it to the omission of class conflict and labour subjectivity in Marx’s Capital and Marxist political economy more generally. I have argued that the problem can be redefined and addressed by a more refined approach to the (use-value and exchange-value) value of labour-power. For the exchange-value, it is a matter of examining the moral and historical subsistence of separate items in the systems of provision (and differentiated norms of consumption) of the working class. For the use-value of labour-power, I would equally point to the differentiation of the working class, especially by occupation and sector, although these give rise to segmented labour markets in different ways, within and across commodity groups and strata of the population. The factors and processes involved in this across the restructuring of capital, technology, labour processes, formal and informal (de)skilling, formal and informal work and non-work organisation, etc, are as complex as those that determine the norms of working-class consumption. Accordingly, there are numbers of differentiated
labour markets, not only in what workers do and how they are rewarded but also in how they are structured, reproduced and transformed.8

This leads me to two final comments. The first concerns a sense of overstatement of the underachievement in Marxist political economy by Lebowitz that seems, at least in part, to be accepted by his critics. By contrast, the determinants of the use-value and exchange-value of labour-power have received considerable attention from Marxist political economy (and others) in the terms that I have outlined, from the labour-process literature across studies of industrial relations and from studies of the welfare state through the material culture of working-class consumption. Consciously, whether Marxist or otherwise, these studies address the subjectivity of labour and its struggles with capital on the terms in which they are realised in practice.

But, second, where does this leave Marx’s projected, if undelivered, volume on the theory of wages? Here, it is necessary to distinguish between the value of labour-power and the value of wages, just as it is necessary to distinguish the value of a commodity from its price that is subject to the (structured) vagaries of the market. We know, for example, over the business cycle that the value of wages tends to rise and fall relative to the value of labour-power in conformity to overall conditions in the labour market. Yet, it has also been argued that the value of labour-power itself is subject to contradictory forces as productivity increase is or is not appropriated beneficially into the moral and historical determinants of subsistence.

This raises the issue of when a change which benefits labour is to be considered a deviation around, as opposed to a shift in, the (use-) value of labour-power. When are improved wages to be considered permanent and not temporary, to be consolidated into the moral and historical? I would tentatively answer as follows. As already argued, the determinants of the value of labour-power can be identified in abstract terms by reference to the conditions governing the (re)structuring of labour markets and the (re)forming of norms of consumption. Such analysis can only be taken forward on this basis through more complex and concrete study. This will, in turn, provide the basis by which to distinguish between the value of labour-power and the value of wages. In other words, the relationship between values of labour-power and wages is not fixed analytically as is the distinction between constant and variable capital, for example, but is contingent upon complex and shifting determinants between them. Incomes or other policies, for example, shift the nature of the way in which the value of labour-power conditions the value of wages. Such conditions are not open to abstract analysis in the style of

They need to be broached, at least in part, historically in relation to specific social formations.

In other words, the projected theory of wages would have to be not only a more complex rendering of the categories of political economy but also one that is historically specific. The same is almost certainly true of Marx’s other projected volumes, on the state and the world economy. These volumes would have to go beyond the sort of increasing complexity marking the journey across the three volumes of Capital to incorporate in addition the specifics of labour markets, world economy and the state. This might explain in part the difficulty (if not the failure) in writing them. It certainly does not reflect a one-sided approach to labour and class conflict.

References


Abstract
This work is a companion piece to ‘The American Worker’, Karl Kautsky’s reply to Werner Sombart’s Why Is There No Socialism in the United States? (1906), first published in English in the November 2003 edition of this journal. In August 1909 Kautsky wrote an article on Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor, on the occasion of the latter’s first European tour. The article was not only a criticism of Gompers’s anti-socialist ‘pure-and-simple’ unionism but also part of an ongoing battle between the revolutionary wing of German Social Democracy and the German trade-union officials. In this critical English edition we provide the historical background to the document as well as an overview of the issues raised by Gompers’ visit to Germany, such as the bureaucratisation and increasing conservatism of the union leadership in both Germany and the United States, the role of the General Commission of Free Trade Unions in the abandonment of Marxism by the German Social-Democratic Party and the socialists’ attitude toward institutions promoting class collaboration like the National Civic Federation.

Keywords
Kautsky, Karl; Gompers, Samuel; Luxemburg, Rosa; Legien, Karl; American Federation of Labor, National Civic Federation, Generalkomission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands

Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg and the trade unions
Rosa Luxemburg carried on a polemic with the officials of the German ‘Free’ (i.e. Social-Democratic) trade unions ever since the revisionist controversy. In her 1899 booklet against Eduard Bernstein, Social Reform or Revolution?, Rosa Luxemburg famously wrote that ‘the objective conditions of capitalist society transform the two economic functions of the trade unions [the defence of
labour-power against the profit system and the amelioration of the condition of the workers] into a sort of labour of Sisyphus.¹ Kautsky endorsed this point of view, for instance in his 1906 article ‘The Party and the Unions’, where he wrote that, in opposition to the Social-Democratic Party’s final aim (the abolition of capitalism), ‘the union work, indispensable and beneficial as it is, might be called a labour of Sisyphus, not in the sense of a useless work, but in the sense of a work that never ends, and that must be every time began anew’ in order to maintain the gains of the unions’ struggle.² This metaphor had such an impact that as late as 1910 the General Commission of Free Trade Unions of Germany used it for their criticism of Kautsky’s book The Road to Power.³

The General Commission of Free Trade Unions of Germany [Generalkommission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands], the federation of Social-Democratic trade unions, was established on 16–17 November 1890 by a Conference of Trade-Union Executives held in Berlin. The chairman of the General Commission for thirty years, from its establishment in 1890 until his death in 1920, was Carl Legien, a member of the right wing of German Social Democracy. Legien had a major influence on the policy of the General Commission as editor of its official journal, the Correspondenzblatt, whose first number appeared in 1891. As early as the 1893 Köln congress of the SPD, Legien stated that, in his opinion, the Party and the unions were ‘equally important’. The speaker for the Party Executive, Ignaz Auer, accused him of attempting to separate the unions from the Party and of turning them into a rival power. In a rather awkward metaphor, he warned Legien against attempting to follow Gompers’s example: ‘The German labour movement’, he stated, ‘is not the kind of field in which the corn of Gompers and consorts bloomed’.⁴ In addition to his post in the General Commission, Legien held a number of important political posts: Reichstag deputy (1893–8 and 1903–20), secretary of the International Bureau of Socialist Trade Unions (1902), and in president of the International Trade-Union Federation (1913).⁵

Kautsky sounded the alarm against the unions’ leaders striving for independence from the Party under the slogan of neutrality as far back as 1900.⁶ The Correspondenzblatt answered that ‘even against Kautsky, we must

¹. Luxemburg 1970, Chapter VII.
². Kautsky 1906.
⁴. Quoted in Varain 1956, p. 16. Thirteen years later, in 1906, Werner Sombart drew the same analogy: ‘…the President of the American Federation of Labor, whose equivalent in Germany would be Karl Legien’. Sombart 1976, p. 36.
⁵. Schneider 1991, p. 86.
⁶. Kautsky 1900.
hold fast to the view that the tactic of the trade unions will be determined solely by the resolutions of the union congresses’ rather than those of the party congresses.  

The Russian Revolution of 1905 and ‘union revisionism’

After the so-called Bernstein-Debatte won over the majority of the SPD away from revisionism and into ‘orthodox’ Marxism, its leaders felt that their revolutionary prognoses were confirmed by the exhilarating events of the first Russian Revolution, which began on ‘Bloody Sunday’ (9 January 1905). All aspects of Kautsky’s thought underwent a considerable radicalisation under the influence of the 1905 Russian Revolution and of Rosa Luxemburg, which given his ignorance of Russian served as the main interpreter of Russian events for him.

In May 1905 the Social-Democratic Free Trade Unions held their fifth congress at Cologne (Köln), in which they flatly rejected the use of the mass political strike – a demand inspired above all by the revolutionary events in Russia. The General Commission’s spokesman on this issue, Theodor Bömelburg, president of the construction workers’ union, attacked not only the SPD left wing but even Eduard Bernstein (who saw in the general strike not a revolutionary means to overcome reformist parliamentarism, but a means of defending the parliament and democratic rights from the attacks of reaction), arguing that ‘in order to expand our organisation, we need peace and quiet [Ruhe] in the labour movement’.8

The resolution adopted by the Cologne trade-union congress rejected the mass strike as a political tactic and prohibited even the ‘propagation’ (i.e. the propaganda or discussion) of this means of struggle. It also argued that the mass strike was defended by ‘anarchists and persons without any experience in economic struggles’ and warned the organised workers ‘to avoid being hindered from the everyday work of strengthening the workers’ organisations by the adoption and promotion of such ideas’.9

When Kautsky criticised the resolution,10 the central organ of the SPD, the Vorwärts, under the direction of Kurt Eisner, accused him of being a doctrinaire ideologue who preached the neo-anarchist utopia of conquering

---

political power through the general strike. In October 1905, Eisner and four other editors were dismissed, and a new left-wing editorial board took control of the *Vorwärts*.\(^{11}\)

In November 1905 Kautsky argued that, precisely when the bankruptcy of theoretical and political revisionism (ministerialism) had become evident, a new kind of revisionism arose, the *trade-union revisionism*, which found its support in a part of the union bureaucracy. This revisionism preached, under the flag of neutrality, a disavowal of Social Democracy. It did not regard Social Democracy as the party of the working class, but as a party like any other. Not as the party that *unites* the proletariat, but as one of the parties in which the proletariat is *divided*. Social Democracy was seen as a factor hindering the organisational union of the proletariat. If one wanted to unite the Catholic, conservative and liberal workers with the Social-Democratic ones in a trade union, then that should be done, not by showing the usefulness and necessity of Social Democracy, but by the union relinquishing the Social-Democratic spirit out of which it had been born.\(^{12}\)

At the Jena Congress of the SPD, convened in September 1905, Bebel criticised the hostility of the trade-union leaders towards the political mass strike as dangerous ‘pure-and-simple unionism [*Nurgewerkschaftlerei*]’.\(^{13}\) Against the resolution of the Cologne trade-union congress, the Jena Congress adopted a resolution endorsing the use of the mass political strike in the fight for electoral and democratic rights; though, at the insistence of Bebel, it was described as a defensive tactic against the expected assault of the bourgeoisie on the growing gains of the socialist movement.\(^{14}\) The *Correspondenzblatt* rejected even this watered-down version of the general strike. It reported that ‘Legien called the propaganda for the political strike an unseemly concession to the anarchists’ and added that, although ‘the motion of Legien and his comrades was rejected and the resolution of Bebel adopted by 288 votes against 14’, it was ‘impossible for the Party to force its resolutions on the trade unions. It can only be a question of reaching an agreement on this issue’.\(^{15}\)

And so it turned out to be: at a secret conference of the SPD executive and the General Commission held on 16 February 1906, the party executive pledged ‘to try to prevent a mass strike as much as possible’. If it should nevertheless break out, the Party would assume the sole burden of leadership:

---

12. Kautsky 1961a, emphasis in the original.
the trade unions would not participate in it officially, and agreed only ‘not to stab it in the back’.

‘Comrade Luxemburg and the trade unions’

In April 1906, Kautsky was forced to come out in defence of Rosa Luxemburg, who was then leading the revolution in Warsaw and had been arrested together with Leo Jogiches on 4 March 1906, when she was attacked by a trade-union organ. The Zeitschrift für Graveure und Ziseleure wrote that it had ‘witnesses of flesh and bone that comrade Luxemburg in a Berlin assembly “drivelled” about the trade unions being an “evil”’. Kautsky replied that it was

not comrade Luxemburg that undermined the relations between the Party and the unions, but those union officials and editors that have taken Rexhäuser as a model. The narrow-minded hatred of these elements against any form of the labour movement that sets itself a higher goal than five pennies more per hour is indeed an ‘evil’.

He dismissed the unions’ accusations as a false and added:

It is new in our movement, indeed unheard-of, for comrades to hurl such nonsensical and frivolous accusations against a leader of the proletarian class struggle precisely at that moment in which the hangman of all freedom [the Tsar] has arrested her and made her defenceless, because of her tireless work at the service of the proletariat. Even our bourgeois opponents, at least the more decent ones – to be sure they are not many – avoided attacking comrade Luxemburg. It is with the most infamous and shameless press flunkies of capitalism and the aristocracy [Junkertum] that a trade-union organ goes hand in hand in this worthy business.17

The organ of the General Commission, the Correspondenzblatt, considered ‘shocking’ the adoption of such tone by ‘the alleged first theoretician of the Party’, and asked rhetorically whether effrontery was the necessary product of an academic education.18 Kautsky answered by asking why the unions failed to name those alleged ‘witnesses of flesh and bone’ against Rosa Luxemburg.19

---

16. Ludwig Rexhäuser was the editor of the Correspondent für Deutschlands Buchdrucker und Schriftgiesser, the organ of the printers’ union (Verbandes der Deutschen Buchdrucker). See Luxemburg 1973b.
'The Party and the unions'

Between the Jena and Mannheim SPD congresses, in August 1906, Kautsky wrote his major work on the relationship between the political party and the trade unions, where he argued against the political neutrality of the unions and demanded their subordination to the revolutionary leadership of the Party. The article pointed out that, depending on the political circumstances, the unions could become the elite of the working class or a narrow-minded aristocracy of organised skilled workers; a means for the class struggle or a hindrance to it. The unions represented the momentary economic interests of its members, while the revolutionary party represented the interests of the whole proletariat as well as the final aim of its struggle: the conquest of political power by the working class. It attacked the ‘reine Gewerkschafter [pure unionists]’ as much as the union officials dismissed the ‘Nurpolitiker [pure politicians]’. To many union leaders, the Party appeared as a threat to their peace and quiet and as the harbinger of political catastrophes that could ruin the unions. Kautsky’s article denounced the ‘search for a new trade-union theory’ among union officials who felt constrained by the ‘party theory’ of the class struggle.20 With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the warm reception accorded four years later to Samuel Gompers’s gospel of ‘pure-and-simple’ unionism by the General Commission of the Free Trade Unions and by Legien was not so much a question of an American ‘business unionist’ corrupting the German Marxist union officials as of a German union officialdom in open rebellion against the Party’s programme seeking for support among like-minded union leaders across the ocean.

Kautsky recalled how the English union officials in the First International felt Marx’s leadership to be an increasingly unbearable ‘authoritarianism’, and did not hesitate to unite themselves with the ‘revolutionary romanticists’ of the Bakunin fraction, as soon as Marx’s tendency to establish an independent political workers’ party in England became clear.

They did so because they

instinctively felt that in that way a power would have been created which would have put an end to their autocratic rule. In the same way, there is in America no more poisonous enemies of the Social-Democratic Party than the mass of the trade-union officials, with Gompers at their head.21

Interestingly, in its answer to Kautsky’s article the Correspondenzblatt correctly pointed out that ‘Kautsky’s struggle is not aimed against the union organisations but against the union leaders and editors… in order to shake the confidence of the union members in the leaders of their organisations’.  

The Mannheim Congress of the SPD

The polemic continued at the SPD congress held in September 1906 at Mannheim. In his speech to the congress, Kautsky openly posed the question of the rising bureaucratisation of the Party itself, and drew attention to the danger of the formation of a conservative bloc between the Party and union apparatuses:

Our own party, as it grew larger, has become in a certain sense a rather cumbersome apparatus. It is not easy to bring new ideas and actions into this apparatus. If now the trade unions want peace and quiet, what perspectives open up for us if they are fastened to the already cumbersome party body as brakes.

Kautsky compared the breach of discipline by the union functionaries (i.e. the rejection of the Jena resolution on the mass political strike by the Cologne trade-union congress) with that of the French socialist members of parliament when Millerand became minister of the bourgeois government headed by René Waldeck-Rousseau – a move which resulted in a split in French socialism and in the expulsion of eighteen deputies from the French Socialist Party.

Legien, in turn, pointed out that the anarchists had regarded the Jena resolution as a shamefaced adoption of their own idea of the general strike, and that, even within the ranks of Social Democracy, many people had understood from it that the Party was ready to use the political mass strike in the near future, especially to obtain the general suffrage in Prussia. Against this attitude, Legien recalled that ‘for more than two decades we in Germany were educated in the conception of [Ignaz] Auer that “general strike is general nonsense” [Generalstreik ist Generalunsinn]’. He emphasised the reformist tactics of the SPD:

It has been taught for ten years in the Party that revolutions in the old sense are no longer possible. We have always said that we grow best in the framework of legality. We have time and time again said that we can organise no violent resistance.

22. Generalkomission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands 1978a, p. 527, emphasis in the original.
By means of these gradualist methods, the SPD had won many electoral successes, but ‘then came the events of the Russian Revolution’, making many people ‘look for new means of struggle and consider it necessary for the political mass strike to be recognised as such in a resolution’. Legien concluded: ‘I consider the discussion about the political mass strike dangerous.’  

**Rosa Luxemburg’s pamphlet on the mass strike**

It was against the background of this attitude in the leading circles of the German Social-Democratic trade unions that Rosa Luxemburg published, in the same month of the Mannheim Congress (September 1906), her famous brochure *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*, which defended the idea of the mass political strike as the main lesson of the first Russian Revolution for the German working class, counterposing the spontaneous revolutionary initiative of the working masses to the conservative policies of the labour leaders.

The resolution of the Mannheim Congress, again drafted by Bebel, represented a historic victory of the trade-union bureaucracy vis-à-vis the revolutionaries in the SPD. Even though it did not reject the general strike in principle, the Mannheim resolution stated that the party executive could undertake no action which the trade unions would not approve of, effectively giving them veto power over party decisions. The radical *Lepiziger Volkszeitung* drew from the resolution of the Mannheim Congress the bitter conclusion that ten years of struggle against revisionism had been in vain, ‘for the revisionism we have killed in the Party rises again in greater strength in the trade unions’. Kautsky deluded himself into thinking that, as regards ‘the central question of the conference, the relation between the Party and the unions’, the results of the Mannheim Conference had been satisfactory, because ‘the unions leaders accepted the viewpoint of the Party on the question of May Day and the mass strike’ – though in fact the contradiction between the Jena resolution and the Cologne resolution had simply been glossed over. But he did recognise that ‘Bebel’s speech in Mannheim gave the impression of representing a step back vis-à-vis Jena, as if today he considered the possibility of applying the mass strike in Germany much more remote than a year ago’. He concluded that ‘the party congress at Dresden meant the end of theoretical

---

25. On the Mannheim Congress of the SPD see Luxemburg 1972b.
revisionism, but our opponents set even greater hopes in the “practical revisionism” of the unionists.\footnote{Kautsky 1961, p. 2.}

The ability of the union leaders to impose their line on the SPD derived from two main sources: the vast membership of the unions and their even larger financial resources vis-à-vis the Party. From 215,000 in 1892, the membership of the Social-Democratic Free Trade Unions rose to more than 1.1 million in 1904 and to 2.5 million the year before the outbreak of the First World War, leaving the liberal Hirsch-Duncker associations and the Christian unions trailing in their wake with, respectively, 106,000 and 218,000 members in 1913.\footnote{Schneider 1991, pp. 70, 75.} In 1906, when the SPD took its first census, it emerged that its membership was 348,327 as against 1,689,709 for the Free Trade Unions. In 1913 the ratio was still two and a half to one in favor of the unions. In addition, the party income for the fiscal year 1906–7 was 1,191,819 marks; that of the trade unions 51,396,784 marks – that is to say, about fifty times as great.\footnote{Schorske 1970, pp. 13, 93.} Not surprisingly, the proportion of trade-union officials in the SPD Reichstag faction rose from 11.6 per cent in 1893 to 32.7 per cent in 1912.\footnote{Schneider 1991, p. 92.}

**Samuel Gompers, the American Federation of Labor and socialism**

Samuel Gompers was president of the American Federation of Labor from its foundation in 1886 until his death in 1924, with the exception of a single year (1894), when he was temporarily unseated by the populist candidate John McBride. Originally a protégé of the German-American Marxists, towards the end of the nineteenth century Gompers became increasingly conservative, under the influence of the craft-labour aristocracy that he came to represent. In 1894, he opposed the proposed adoption by the AFL of the British Trade Unions Congress’s programme, whose plank 10 demanded the collective ownership of the means of production. Gradually, he also began to oppose industrial unionism and the formation of a labour party, to accept racist policies (such the exclusion of Chinese immigration and Jim Crow segregation in the South) and – after an initially radical reaction, when he joined the Anti-Imperialist League – to support the new imperialist foreign policy inaugurated by the Spanish-American War of 1898.

Gompers came out publicly against socialism at the 1903 convention of the AFL when, during the debate on the labour party, he turned on the socialists

\begin{itemize}
\item[27.] Kautsky 1961, p. 2.
\item[28.] Schneider 1991, pp. 70, 75.
\item[29.] Schorske 1970, pp. 13, 93.
\item[30.] Schneider 1991, p. 92.
\end{itemize}
saying, ‘[e]conomically, you are unsound; socially you are wrong; industrially you are an impossibility’. After this carefully planned attack, Gompers was hailed as a hero by the press. The National Civic Federation printed a picture of him on the front page of its journal with the caption, ‘Socialism’s Ablest Foe’.31

The National Civic Federation

The National Civic Federation (NCF) and its parent body, the Chicago Civic Federation, emerged from the social and political unrest resulting from the Panic of 1893, which was one of the worst economic crises in American history. The Chicago CF played an arbitration role in the 1894 Pullman strike. The NCF was formally established in 1900. Its organiser and long-time chairman of its executive council was Ralph M. Easley. Gompers joined the new organisation as first vice-president, after having become acquainted with Easley through the Chicago CF’s ‘conciliation and arbitration’ work. Gompers proved instrumental in recruiting United Mine Workers’ president John Mitchell to the NCF. Other prominent union leaders in the NCF were Daniel J. Keefe of the Longshoremen’s Unions and Timothy Healy of the Brotherhood of Stationary Firemen. Theodore Roosevelt, then vice-president, heartily supported the creation of the NCF, and continued to do it after he became President in 1901. So did Roosevelt’s Secretary of War and future President William Howard Taft. In 1903, the National Civic Federation Review began publication, ultimately enjoying a national circulation of over 50,000.

Membership in the NCF did not require the payment of duties. The NCF’s budget came from supporters like the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, traction millionaire August Belmont, New York city capitalist Vincent Astor, railroad baron George W. Perkins and banker Otto H. Kahn. Each of these men served on the NCF’s first executive council. Edwin R.A. Seligman, a Columbia University economist and banker, chaired the NCF’s Taxation Department, and John R. Commons, a famous labour historian from the University of Wisconsin, served as the Taxation Department’s secretary.32

The NCF opposed not only socialism but women’s suffrage, and after the First World War campaigned against the recognition of the Soviet Union and fought against old-age pensions as ‘socialistic’. After the Red Scare, ‘the NCF declined mainly because it had accomplished its task. The forces of labour militancy were successfully suppressed, and the Federation’s pioneering work

32. The data for this summary were taken from Cyphers 2002, pp. 19–37.
in mediation and arbitration had been taken over by the Department of Labor and various governmental arbitration boards. 33

**Samuel Gompers and the National Civic Federation**

In December 1901, the NCF’s Committee on Conciliation and Arbitration changed its name to the Industrial Department. An Executive Committee was appointed, with Hanna as chairman and Easley as secretary. During the next few years, Gompers was deeply involved in two strikes with which the NCF was not directly connected, but in which the employer was serving as chairman of the Industrial Department. Gompers supported the position of the employer against the union in both cases.

The first strike, over the downgrading of a foreman for refusing to quit the union, took place from July to August 1903 at Buffalo, and involved none other than the Chairman of the Industrial Department of the NCF, Mark Hanna. The Buffalo blast-furnace workers were organised in an industrial union comprising all the workers in the plant. After Gompers’s ‘mediation’ of the dispute, the convention of the Blast Furnace Workers’ Association revoked the charter of the Buffalo local and re-organised it, as Hanna had requested, on a craft-union basis, that is, it became an organisation of the blast furnace workers exclusively.

The second strike broke out in March 1905. The previous year, Hanna had died and been replaced as chairman of the NCF’s Industrial Department by August Belmont. Shortly afterwards, Belmont took over the Manhattan Elevated Company, which began to implement a policy of longer hours and lower wages. After the outbreak of the strike, Gompers and William Mahon, president of the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees, drafted a message to the strikers warning them that their struggle was illegal under the rule of the Amalgamated, and ordering them to return to work on penalty of having their charter revoked. The strike was crushed in four days. The Central Federated Union of New York sent a committee to Belmont asking for the re-instatement of the strikers. When its petition was rejected, the union ordered any of its members or members of affiliated unions who belonged to the NCF to resign from it. Later, another resolution was introduced denouncing the NCF and the labour leaders who participated in its activities. Encouraged by this action, Victor Berger, Socialist Party leader from Milwaukee, introduced a resolution at the next convention of the AFL denouncing the

33. Zerzan 1974, p. 204.
'hypocritical attempt of the Civic Federation plutocrats to convince organised laboring men that the interests of capital and labor are identical' and the 'close intimacy and harmonious relations between Samuel Gompers and other labor leaders with the great capitalists and plutocratic politicians'.

The NCF and American socialism

As an organ of class collaboration and co-optation of the union leadership, the NCF was opposed by the National Association of Manufacturers from the right and by the Socialist Party of America and the Industrial Workers of the World from the left. The opposition to the Civic Federation was shared by the three major factions within the Socialist Party. We have already noted the position of Victor Berger, the main leader of the Socialist Party right wing. The head of the Socialist Party centre, Morris Hillquit, wrote in the 1910 edition of his *History of Socialism in the United States* that the NCF 'has for its ostensible object “the voluntary conciliation between employers and employees as distinguished from arbitration”', but, in reality, it served 'to palliate the aggressive spirit of labor without offering any concessions on the part of organized capital'. Eugene Debs, which was both of a Socialist Party leader and a one of the founders of the Industrial Workers of the World, said that 'the Civic Federation has been organized for the one purpose of prolonging the age-long sleep of the working class'. As for the 'Wobblies' themselves, in their founding convention, held in June 1905 under the influence of the first Russian Revolution, they wrote in their Manifesto that 'craft divisions hinder the growth of class consciousness of the workers' and 'foster the idea of harmony of interests between employing exploiter and employed slave.' The enabled 'the association of the misleaders of the workers with the capitalists in the Civic Federations, where plans are made for the perpetuation of capitalism, and the permanent enslavement of the workers through the wage system'.

At the thirty-first convention of the AFL, held in 1911, three resolutions were submitted condemning the NCF and instructing all Federation officials to sever their ties with it. The position of the Socialist Party in the debate was defended by Duncan MacDonald of the United Mine Workers, whose union

35. Hillquit 1971, p. 325.
37. Trautmann 1905.
had passed a similar resolution. Gompers came out in defence of the NCF and the resolutions were eventually defeated by 12,000 votes to 5,000.38

**The polemic over the statistics on American wages**

In May 1909, Kautsky published his book *The Road to Power*, which Lenin called ‘the last and best of Kautsky’s works against the opportunists’.39 Using statistics of the United States Bureau of Labor, Kautsky argued that, despite all the industrial struggles of the American workers, the buying power of US wages had stagnated for more than a decade, especially due to the growth of trusts and employers’ associations, and that the unions were therefore forced to enter the political arena and collaborate closely with the socialist party if they wanted to be able to withstand the employers’ pressure and defend the living standards of their members.40 This analysis led to a furious exchange with the organs of the unionist right wing of the SPD, especially the *Grundstein* and the *Correspondenzblatt*, which accused him of being ‘an opponent of unionist organisation’ and of ‘belittling and undervaluing’ trade-union work. Robert Schmidt wrote an article series in the *Correspondenzblatt* under the title ‘The Way to Illusions: Sisyphus Work or Positive Achievements?’ which accused Kautsky of wanting to turn ‘the previous achievements of the trade unions into future failures’ and of being ‘very little qualified to show us the way to power’.41 The *Correspondenzblatt* praised the success of the American unions in shortening the working day by almost 5 per cent from 1898 to 1907 and accused Kautsky of anarcho-syndicalism. ‘Kautsky doesn’t care about the development of the trade unions into powerful economic organisations in economic life. What he has in mind is nothing else but French syndicalism’.42

Kautsky countered the *Correspondenzblatt*’s charges by arguing that the industrial struggles could raise wages at a given moment, but not determine their long-term evolution, which depended on deeper economic processes. Given a rising tendency, the unions could raise wages more quickly; given a declining one, they could slow down their diminution. But they could not control these tendencies at will as the reformists argued. The unions were able ‘to maintain wages at a relatively higher level than they would otherwise reach,

---

42. Generalkomission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands 1978b, p. 641.
but they cannot guarantee an uninterrupted absolute rise in wages’. If they wanted to be able to withstand the concentrated power of the capitalists and their state, they were forced to become more and more political and had to be prepared to employ their most powerful weapon, the mass political strike. Kautsky was confident that, as in the case of Great Britain and Austria, in Germany too ‘the great struggles that we are going to meet will closely unite the Party and the unions into one mighty phalanx, in which both parts will not check each other, but on the contrary will encourage and strengthen each other for the fight’. His aim in writing _The Road to Power_ had been ‘to encourage this process by emphasising those great goals that can only be achieved through a common struggle of the Party and the unions, by accentuating the growing impotence to which isolation will condemn both sides’, but his arguments had sparked a storm of controversy from his ‘critics of the _Correspondenzblatt_. They have aligned themselves with Rexhäuser and Gompers’.44

**Samuel Gompers’s European tour**

The exchange over the American statistics grew sharper on the occasion of Samuel Gompers’s trip to Europe and Germany. At that time, the AFL had more than 1.5 million members. Gompers’s decision to visit Germany came after the fraternal delegates from the British Trade-Union Congress at the AFL convention in 1908 invited him to attend their congress the following year. The Federation dutifully sent him as a special representative and instructed him to attend the International Federation of Secretariats of the National Trade-Union Centres (International Secretariat), which met in Paris in 1909, and to visit such other countries as the Executive Council should determine.

Gompers and his family left New York on 19 June 1909, and arrived in Liverpool a week later. On 1 and 2 July, he attended the meeting of the General Federation (executive council) of the British trade unions at Blackpool. He then visited Dublin, Manchester, and London, and then he went on a two-month tour of the continent, giving conferences in Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Switzerland, and Holland. Everywhere he carried the gospel of pure-and-simple unionism. ‘And so the light is spread!’, Gompers exclaimed.45

A report to the _Washington Star_ sent from Paris on 17 July 1909 reported that the French socialists had expressed opposition to Gompers’s policy.

---

43. Kautsky 1909b, p. 523.
44. Kautsky 1909c, p. 832.
The speeches of Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, delivered this week before the French labor organizations, are arousing intense interest in labor circles. The extreme socialists bitterly condemn him as a reactionary and scoff at his big salary, but the moderates have shown much sympathy in his denunciation of the futile political role which the French General Confederation of Labor [Confédération Générale du Travail] is essaying in its revolutionary, socialistic and anti-patriotic campaigns. The moderate press of all shades of opinion expresses the hope that the French labor organizations will heed Mr. Gompers' words, abandon revolutionary agitation and devote themselves, like the American organizations, solely to the advancement of professional interests.46

Kautsky’s article on Gompers

In Berlin, a meeting was organised to greet Gompers on 31 July 1909. It is against this background that Kautsky published, on 13 August 1909, his article against Gompers, which we translate here for the first time. This was Kautsky’s major article on the American labour movement after his 1906 answer to Werner Sombart’s book *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*.47 Kautsky’s criticism of Gompers was a projection of the struggle against the German union bureaucracy waged by the revolutionary wing of Social Democracy. Lenin’s criticisms of the German union leadership echoed Kautsky’s.48 Lenin viewed Gompers as the representative of the ‘America’s working-class aristocracy’ and of the ‘bourgeois labour policy’ within the workers’ movement.49

On 30 August 1909, Gompers attended the conference of the International Secretariat at Paris. Following the international conference, Gompers went to Ipswich to attend the British Trade-Union Congress. He sailed back to the United States on 29 September 1909. In November, at the Toronto convention of the AFL, he reported on his trip to Europe and recommended on affiliation to the International Secretariat, a motion which the convention approved unanimously.50 The following year, Gompers published a book on his European tour, which was reviewed in *Die Neue Zeit* by Louis Boudin of the Socialist Party of America.51

48. See, for instance, his article on Legien: Lenin 1970.
49. Lenin 1974.
50. A selection of Gompers’s letters, articles and speeches from the period of his first European tour appears in Kaufman 1999, pp. 474–90.
51. Gompers 1910, and Boudin, 1911.
The aftermath of Gompers’s visit to Germany

Two and a half months after publishing his article on Gompers, Kautsky wrote a sequel to it called ‘The Civic Federation’, where he defended the main organ of the Socialist Party of America’s German federation. The *New Yorker Volkszeitung* had been accused by the *Correspondenzblatt* of advocating a split in the ranks of the AFL – in other words, of supporting the Industrial Workers of the World. Kautsky replied by quoting an article from the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, where the editors denied that the journal supported ‘any special movement against the Federation, because for us the unity of the trade-union organisation of our country is above everything else’. Endorsing the policy of ‘boring from within’ the AFL rather than forming separate revolutionary unions like the Industrial Workers of the World, the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* editors admitted that they fought ‘against the Gompersian spirit of the Federation, but the AFL as the unity of the American union movement has no stronger supporter than our paper’. Kautsky concluded by calling the Civic Federation ‘a band of our filthiest and bitterest enemies’, and wondering how Legien could consider himself a friend of Gompers. For more than three months, the controversy over Gompers and the National Civic Federation continued to rage on the pages of the German Social-Democratic press.

One of the last items in the exchange was Kautsky’s note answering the *Correspondenzblatt*’s charges of ‘misrepresentation’ for having compared the National Civic Federation with the Reichsverband gegen die Sozialdemokratie (Imperial League against the Social Democracy), a monarchist and militarist organisation founded on 9 May 1904. Kautsky concluded his article, called ‘Once Again the Civic Federation’, with these words:

> According to the account of the *Correspondenzblatt*, one could assume that I wilfully picked up a quarrel against them about Gompers and the Civic Federation. Nothing could be more erroneous.

> Gompers came to Europe to gain new prestige for his struggle against the Social Democracy. Had he been feted in Germany without finding the slightest opposition, he would have exploited that fact against our American comrades at his return.

> The interests of American socialism imperatively required that at least the *Vorwärts* and the *Neue Zeit* should show Gompers to the German workers as he

---

52. Kautsky 1909d.
54. Kautsky 1910a. See also Generalkomission der Freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands 1909.
55. See Fricke 1959.
actually is. That was not only our right but was our duty of solidarity, which unites most closely the socialist parties of the world against all their enemies.56

Gompers’s European tour was reciprocated three years later, when Carl Legien made a three-month trip to the United States. Legien wrote a book about his experiences in America, where, among other things, he stated that ‘one should not speak about a corrupt officialdom in the American unions, as is so often done’, that ‘one cannot say that the views of the American Federation of Labor are conservative’, and that even ‘the membership of the leading officials in the AFL in the Civic Federation… does not give to the AFL a reactionary character’. Gompers reciprocated by stating that ‘what Legien aspires to for the workers of Europe, we want for the workers of this country’.57

Marxism, centrism and social imperialism

Kautsky’s article against Gompers was the swan-song of his revolutionary career. Although, as we have seen, the traditional fear of the SPD leaders had been that Legien and his fellow union officials would separate themselves from the Party and, under the banner of political neutrality, turn the General Commission into a power independent from and opposed to the Party, actual historical development turned out to be the opposite. After waging an attrition war against the revolutionary wing of the Party and the idea of the political general strike for more than a decade, the growing bureaucratisation of the Party itself created a community of interests between the union officialdom and most of the 4,000 paid functionaries of the Party, so that eventually the reformist views of the unions – which were, at bottom, but a refurbished version of the old revisionist views of the supporters of Eduard Bernstein – held sway over the party executive, turning the union officials into supporters of party discipline and party unity, and the SPD left wing into eventual advocates of a split with the Social-Democratic Party. If this process was lost to many close observers of the SPD, such as Lenin and Trotsky, it was to a large extent due to the role played by Kautsky since 1910, when he broke with Rosa Luxemburg to become the main ideologue of the dominant SPD ‘centre’ fraction.

As late as 26 September 1909, Kautsky complained in a letter to Victor Adler about ‘the overgrowth of bureaucratism, which nips in the bud any initiative and any boldness’. He believed that ‘only when the action comes

57. Legien 1914, pp. 151–3.
from the masses one can reckon with the necessary impetus and enthusiasm’ but that ‘in Germany the masses have been drilled to wait for orders from above’ and the people above

have been so absorbed by the administrative needs of the huge apparatus, that they have lost every broad view, every interest for anything outside the affairs of their own offices. We have seen this first in the trade unions, now we see it also in the political organisation.⁵⁸

Yet five months later, under pressure from the party apparatus whose growing conservatism he had pointed out, he refused to publish an article by Rosa Luxemburg calling for the use of the general strike in order to achieve universal suffrage in Prussia, and raising the slogan of the republic as a transitional demand, in order to turn the issue of electoral reform into a channel for revolutionary action.⁵⁹ This resulted in a furious round of polemics, in the course of which Kautsky became the leading theoretician of the SPD centrists and developed the so-called ‘strategy of exhausting the enemy [Ermattungsstrategie]’ as opposed to the ‘strategy of defeating the enemy [Niederwerfungsstrategie]’ advocated by Rosa Luxemburg.⁶⁰

According to Kautsky’s best biographer, Marek Waldenberg, Kautsky considered the positive aspect of his polemics with Rosa Luxemburg to be the possibility of taking a certain distance from her extremely unpopular image in the milieu of the union bureaucracy.⁶¹ In a letter to Riazanov dated 16 June 1910, Kautsky wrote that Rosa Luxemburg’s views on the general strike generated great antagonism among the union leaders, which tended to confuse his own positions with hers.

It irritated me that my influence among the trade unionists is paralysed by the fact that I have been identified with Rosa. It seems to me that in order to develop good relations between the Marxists and the trade unionists it is important to show that on this point there is a great distance between Rosa and me. This is for me the most important question.⁶²

Yet Kautsky’s hopes of ingratiating himself with the unionist right wing, in order to win their support so that the SPD leadership would remain in the

⁵⁹. The article was finally published as ‘Was Weiter?’ in the Dortmunder Arbeiterzeitung, 14–15 March 1910. See Luxemburg 1972c.
hands of the centre fraction, ended up in failure. Within the party itself power was shifting rapidly from the Kautskyist ‘centre’ to the openly reformist and chauvinist right wing. In the words of Zinoviev, by the time of the Copenhagen Congress of the Socialist International (28 August–3 September 1910),

the opportunists (that is to say, the future social-patriots) had the majority in the German Social Democracy. That was demonstrated by the discussion on the colonial question. By then, in German Social Democracy, the true masters were already, not [the centrist] Ledebour or even Bebel, but Legien, Sudekum and David.\(^{63}\)

The shift to the right of the party executive was so marked that ‘Legien could declare at the trade-union congress of 1911 that there were no differences with the Party, but only with individual party writers’.\(^{64}\) This amalgamation of the party and union bureaucracies paved the way for the debacle of 4 August 1914, when the SPD Reichstag fraction voted in favour of the war credits, and for the collapse of the Second International as a revolutionary organisation of the working class.

References


---


\(^{64}\) Varain 1956, p. 62.


  —— 1909e, ‘Und doch noch einmal die Civic Federation’, Vorwärts, 23 November.


Laschitz, Annelies 1969, Deutsche Linke im Kampf für eine demokratische Republik: der Kampf der deutschen Linken für eine demokratische Republik und die Anwendung des politischen
Massenstreiks in Deutschland; zur Entwicklung der deutschen Linken als politisch-ideologische Strömung in der deutschen Sozialdemokratie (1909/1910), Berlin: Dietz.


Samuel Gompers

Karl Kautsky
Source: Die Neue Zeit, 13 August 1909: Volume 27, 2: 677–85

Gompers, the president of the great American working-class organisation, the American Federation of Labor, has come to Europe in order, he said, to study the labour conditions of Europe and pave the way for a closer relationship between the American and the European trade unions.

In both endeavours he can count on the full co-operation of all proletarian organisations. Social Democracy has always supported anyone who wanted to study labour conditions, even if he came from the enemy camp. All the more so the president of an organisation such as the American Federation of Labor. And since we attach a great importance to a closer association of such a powerful proletarian organisation, which also includes many thousands of party comrades, with the European organisations of the proletarian class struggle, we must take all the necessary steps for achieving this purpose, and grant to the representative of that organisation such assistance as would help the organisation itself, without criticising his personality.

We do not know if and when Gompers has been active in fulfilling the two tasks that he set himself in his visit to Europe. But it is sure that in addition he has been active in yet another way. He toured Europe in order to let himself be fêted in public assemblies and carry out propaganda for the special type of trade-union activity that he champions. But, as soon as he trod into that field, he placed himself in a position where he must submit to public criticism. The duties of international solidarity do not in any way force us to agree uncritically with any foreign propagandist because he comes from abroad. Precisely because it is often the case of people and circumstances with which one is not closely acquainted, it is necessary to regard them especially closely before supporting them. And applauding means supporting.

At the meeting that Gompers held in Berlin on 31 July 1909, in order to speak about the trade-union movement, he strangely enough prevented the comrades that attended it from learning in more detail with whom they were dealing, and refused to answer the question regarding his position towards Social Democracy as ‘improper’ and ‘personal’! Mr. Gompers must therefore allow other people to answer that question for him. I regret that my momentary absence from Berlin prevented me from doing that even earlier.

It was already pointed out at the meeting in the trade-union local that Gompers is an enemy of American Social Democracy. Of course, Legien objected that Gompers is a true revolutionary, who wants to unite the proletarian masses, and that if he seeks to do it in a way different from ours, we have no right to judge him, because that concerns
only the American workers. If comrade Legien received that information from Gompers, he was badly misled, because nothing can be more mistaken than that assertion.

Gompers is not only an opponent of the special form that the socialist movement has assumed in America, but an enemy of the proletarian class struggle in general. In order to learn what his views are, one must not only know what he told to his European friends, but also what he said to his American audience.

It is enough to listen, for instance, to his declarations at the farewell party that was held the day before his departure to Europe. That party itself was characteristic. Next to representatives of the labour organisations there were large numbers of representatives of capitalism and its henchmen, among them the public prosecutor of New York. Before these people Gompers declared that he travelled to Europe in order to study and to see ‘if the methods so much praised over there are really the correct ones’.1

But, he added, he already knew that those methods are false.

‘I must already now say’, he continued raising his voice, ‘that the way in which labor politics is practised in Europe is completely unsatisfactory. I would like to give you an example. Shortly after the congress of our Federation, I got in touch with the different labor organizations and governments of the European countries, and asked them to give me the opportunity to orient myself about their conditions by arranging a meeting of representatives of all the tendencies of the labor movement and the government. Shortly after that I received from Budapest, the capital of Hungary, two letters from representatives of the workers and of the government, who both declared, almost in the same words, that the relations of the workers’ organizations with the government were not such as would make possible a common deliberation or joint work. And this seems to me to be the essential reason why the living standards here are so much better than in Europe.

We in America could always deliberate together (representatives of the workers and of the government) and even this evening we have seen a living example of that. Nobody here is more sincerely welcome by the organized workers than the public prosecutor of New York.

And so it must be. We often disagree, but even without having agreed we always know each other better and afterwards we understand each other better. Why shouldn’t we do that? Don’t we all share the same fatherland? Don’t we all have the same interests, the same common wish to make our people happier, freer and more prosperous?

I don’t know what I’ll see over there. But this much I can say: I know that nothing will persuade me that the fighting disposition of the workers against the government and conversely of the government against the workers can do any good to either side.

1. [Unfortunately Kautsky did not give the source of the farewell party speeches, so the quotations have been retranslated from the German.]
My message to the European brothers will be a message of love, harmony and mutual trust between us and our compatriots.

Here we have the politician Gompers. He overflows with trust for the capitalist compatriots, with the conviction that they want the best for the people because they have the same interests as the proletarians. Political antagonisms are not a product of class contradictions, but of foolishness. If the German workers and bourgeois were as smart as Mr. Gompers, there would be no class struggles in Germany.

Yet one cannot say that this blind confidence follows from the fact that in America the government and the capitalists are especially friendly towards the workers. There is hardly a more unscrupulous and vulgar capitalist class than the American one, and there is hardly a country in which the capitalist class has a more absolute control of the instrument of powers, in which the laws are more shamelessly manipulated (and, when profitable, violated) for the benefit of the capitalists and to the detriment of the workers, than the United States. Nevertheless Gompers is full of trust.

But his harmony mawkishness is not merely an occasional figure of speech to win the approval of the bourgeoisie; it has become the content of his political work. Thanks to it he has been able to become first vice-president of the [National] Civic Federation, a capitalist foundation of the last years, which was called forth by the appearance of American socialism, and that set itself the task of bringing about collaboration between workers and bourgeois. In actual fact it is an organisation of struggle against socialism and the proletarian class struggle, which, thanks to the ample financial means at its disposal, is able to conduct an energetic propaganda.

The Civic Federation is in reality more and more the equivalent for the United States of the German Reichsverband [Imperial League against the Social Democracy]. And it is the vice president of this American Reichsverband that was brought forward to the workers of Berlin on 31 July 1909, as a true revolutionary deserving their warmest sympathy.

How he won that sympathy is characteristic of Mr. Gompers. In his farewell address he had promised, as we have seen, that he would preach to the workers of Europe the same gospel of harmony and trust between capitalists and workers that he peddles in America.

His friends expressed themselves even more forcefully. One of them, J. Cantor, anticipated in the farewell party that ‘it will be easy for Gompers, because he comes to Europe almost as ambassador of the American workers, to revolutionize the labor movement of the old world according to his rational principles and show them over there how far a more sensible leadership could bring them’.

But Gompers has already learned that in Europe he would make a fool of himself with his gospel of harmony and trust, and so he keeps it carefully to himself. When comrade Dittmer's question gave him the

2. [Emil Dittmer (1873–1960), a printer by trade, was a correspondent to the Vorwärts and the Leipziger Volkszeitung. In 1904 he became a member of the Berliner Gewerkschaftskommission and in 1906 the editor of the periodical Gewerkschaft (Trade Union). He also contributed to Die Neue Zeit and Der Kampf, the theoretical organs of the German and Austrian Social-Democratic parties respectively, and taught at the central party school in Berlin. From 1914 to 1933 Dittmer served in the press commission of the Vorwärts, where during the First World War he represented the social-patriotic view of the majority of the Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften.]
opportunity of developing his ‘rational principles’ according to which he was ‘easily’ able ‘to revolutionise the labour movement of the old world’, he by no means seized it eagerly to make propaganda for his convictions, but felt insulted by this intromission in his private affairs. Gompers play his double role as president of the American Federation of Labor and vice-president of the Civic Federation only in America. In Europe he appears exclusively in the role of president of the union federation. He forgot his role as vice-president of the Reichsverband during the crossing.

Mr. Gompers works as socialist-eater only in stages where his claque is a sure one. Caution is the better part of valour.

But why did the vice-president of the American Reichsverband take the trouble of going to the camp of Social Democracy in order to win its approval? He would not have done that if he had not needed it.

Mr. Gompers is well on the way of ruining himself in America. His failures have been of late too great. But he did not tell that to his audience in Berlin. Those failures are also purely ‘private affairs’.

He praises his ‘labor policy’ as if it were to be thanked for the fact that the standard of living in America is higher than in Europe. That is ridiculous humbug. The higher standard of living of the American workers has not been won during the last decades but inherited from their forefathers. It was above all a consequence of the availability of unappropriated lands, from which everyone who wanted to become independent received as much as he needed. They are primarily to be thanked for the fact that in America living standards in general, and those of the wage workers in particular, were far higher than in Europe.

But this superiority, on which Mr. Gompers prides himself so much, is rapidly disappearing.

That is clearly testified to by the complete drying up of the German emigration to America. A few decades ago, a German worker still improved his situation considerably by emigrating to the United States; for that reason many went there to try their luck. Today the superiority of American living standards has become so minimal, that emigration does not pay anymore.

The German worker has, in general, raised his standard of living during the last decades, while that of the American worker has declined. According to the often-mentioned 1896 statistics, the buying power of the American wages stood 4.2 per cent above the average for the decade 1890–99. In 1905 it was only 1.5 per cent above that average, and even that percentage must surely have been lost as a consequence of the crisis.

Precisely during the decade in which the American labour movement was dominated by Mr. Gompers, the upward movement of the American working class reached a standstill.

We know very well that that depended on factors for which Gompers is not accountable. The exhaustion of the reserve of free lands, the influx of masses of workers with lower living standards, the appearance of large-scale industrial enterprises in the South, and, last but not least, the strengthening of the capitalist associations have brought about this result.

But, at all events, it proves that Gompers has no real reason to boast about the superiority of American over European working conditions and to present them before the European workers as the fruits of his policy of harmony and trust.

Mr. Gompers has not created the degrading tendencies of capitalism nowadays so strongly at work in America, but he has done everything possible to pave their way, because his policy of class collaboration condemned the proletariat to complete political impotence.
The proletariat can only acquire political power by uniting in a special political class organisation. Gompers and his men have exerted all their influence to make such organisation impossible. The proletarians must not build a special labour party, but sell their votes to the highest bidder among the bourgeois candidates. Only they should not do that in the vulgar sense of selling their votes for money. They should give them to those bourgeois candidates who make them more promises.

A more ridiculous as well as corrupting and politically demoralising policy for the proletariat is hardly imaginable. Thanks to it there is no democratic industrial land in which the worker is treated with more contempt by the government, and especially by the courts, than America. From year to year, the liberty of action of the American proletariat, which was originally so significant, grows more confined. Never before was that liberty of action as small as it is today. The boycott has been stamped as a crime. When the capitalists wish it, the strike can also be made judicially illusory by a decision of the federal courts. In practice, it was already so even before, because of the injunctions.

The legislation for the protection of the workers is backward and does not make the slightest progress. When some regulation for the benefit of the workers is passed by a legislative assembly on demagogic grounds, the capitalists do not have to fear that it will hurt them, because the courts declare any interference with property rights anti-constitutional, and are therefore able to wreck any labour law – a task to which they apply themselves most diligently.

Recently, the Ohio court nullified a law that forbade nocturnal child labor in the factories. A decision of the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a federal law which made the railroad companies liable for the accidents suffered by their employees at work. In the South of the United States there is still full freedom of exploitation of women and children, and its factories to this day repeat en masse all the infamous and horrible practices of the factory hells of Lancashire in the 1830s and 1840s, that were then stigmatised even by conservative politicians, but which, in the twentieth century, deploy unhindered their murderous drives in the great republic, which is so proud of its working conditions.

A bourgeois philanthropic organ, Charities of New York, published at the beginning of this year an investigation of the working conditions in Pittsburg, the ‘most flourishing’ community in the world, and summed up its results in the following points:

1. An incredible overwork of all the workers, which reached its peak in the twelve-hour shift, seven days a week of the steelworks and the rails factories.

2. Low wages for the vast majority of the workers in the factories, not lower than in other cities, but low in relation to the prices; so low that they are not sufficient for the maintenance of the normal American living standards; wages calculated for unmarried individuals, not for family heads.

3. Even lower wages for women, which for instance in the metal industry, where the percentage of female workers is menacing enough, received only half as much as the unorganised workers in the same enterprises and only a third of the wages of the organised workers.

Finally, the report mentions among the beauties of Pittsburgh the typhus and an enormous number of accidents that cost thousands of lives every year.

And, in addition to all that, the most vicious judicial assassinations as soon as it is a question of putting troublesome proletarians out of the way, such as
Moyer and Haywood,\footnote{[Charles Moyer (1866–1929) was the president of Western Federation of Miners (WFM) from 1902 to 1926. William Dudley ‘Big Bill’ Haywood (1869–1928) was a leader of the Western Federation of Miners and later a founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). A long-time leader of the Socialist Party of America, in January 1913 Haywood was recalled from its National Executive Committee for purportedly advocating violence. Convicted of violating the Espionage and Sedition Acts during the First World War, Haywood escaped to the Soviet Union where he became an outspoken advocate of communism until his death in 1928. In 1905, Haywood and Moyer were charged with taking part in the murder of Frank R. Steunenberg, the former governor of Idaho. Steunenberg was much hated by the trade-union movement for having used federal troops to help break strikes during his period of office. Over a thousand trade unionists and their supporters were rounded up and kept in stockades without trial. James McParland, from the Pinkerton Detective Agency, was hired to investigate the murder. McParland arrested Harry Orchard, a stranger who had been staying at a local hotel where dynamite was found. McParland helped Orchard write a confession where he stated that he had been a contract killer for the WFM, assuring him this would help him get a reduced sentence for the crime. In his statement, Orchard named Haywood and Charles Moyer. He also claimed that a union member from Caldwell, George Pettibone, had also been involved in the plot. These three men were kidnapped in Denver by Pinkerton Detective Agency operatives with the connivance of the governors of both Colorado and Idaho, smuggled back to Idaho for trial, and charged with the murder of Steunenberg. On 3 December 1906 the Supreme Court of the United States, with one dissent, ruled that the union leaders’ arrest and forcible removal from Colorado violated no constitutional rights of the defendants. Charles Darrow, a lawyer who specialized in defending unionists, was employed to defend Haywood, Moyer and Pettibone. The trial took place in Boise, Idaho’s capital. It emerged that Harry Orchard already had a motive for killing Steunenberg, blaming the governor of Idaho for destroying his chances of making a fortune from a business he had started in the mining industry. On 29 July 1907, the jury acquitted Haywood. In January 1908 Moyer was also declared not guilty in and the charges against Pettibone were withdrawn.]} that have sure enough committed the crime of placing less trust in the government than Mr. Samuel Gompers.

The German trade unionists are not unaware of all this. The irony of fate wanted that only recently a German trade-union organ hold these facts precisely against me. In my book \textit{The Road to Power}, I referred to the decline of American wages and remarked:

No working class enjoys greater liberties than the American. None is so ‘practical’ in its politics, freer from all revolutionary theories that might distract its attention from the detail work of improving its condition.\footnote{[Kautsky, \textit{The Road to Power}, Chapter VIII, available at: \url{<http://www.marx.org/archive/kautsky/1909/power/ch08.htm>}]}

The \textit{Grundstein} remarked on this:

What kind of liberties do the American trade unions have then? They have free suffrage, the right of assembly and association, the freedom to hold demonstrations, and moreover the ‘freedom’ of injunctions. The practice of the courts, corrupted by trust money,
to put down the union activities with injunctions is surely known all over the world. – So much for the ‘realistic’ policy [Realpolitik] of the American workers. They insist in renouncing to their own political representation. Since when has that been called a realistic policy? That is certainly not a revolutionary, but a servile ideology.  

The realistic policy of Mr. Gompers is also an ideology; indeed not a revolutionary one, but a servile ideology. Thus writes, not the evil Vorwärts, but a quite ‘rational’ trade-union organ. It meant by that to play its trump card against me, but I agree with its argument completely. However, what became now of Legien’s ‘true revolutionary’? The American workers themselves, despite their bad political schooling, begin to open their eyes to Gompers’s servile ideology, and are beginning to become ripe for socialism. Gompers, whom Legien praises so much because he united the workers, did not recoil, in order to retain his power, from splitting the American labour movement. So, for instance, in 1907 he let the 40,000-strong Western Federation of Miners be expelled from the American Federation of Labor, because it was too ‘soaked’ with socialist elements.

But such things alone were not enough to master the growing rebellion. Gompers had to achieve a great political success, and so he decided to use all the political power of the American Federation of Labor to strike a big blow at the presidential elections of 1908.

He drew up a programme of four points and turned with it to the two great bourgeois parties, the Republicans, the party of the great capitalists, and the Democrats, the party of the small capitalists and of all possible social quacks, led by the charlatan Bryan. Without in any way having been authorised by his organisation to do so, he promised its support to the party that would accept his four points.

Those four demands were the ‘regulation’ of judicial injunctions, that made any strike impossible; a law that would expressly define the trade unions as organisations, in order for them not to fall under the anti-trust law definition of a ‘conspiracy to restrict trade’; further expansion of the
eight-hour day, which already since 1868 has been compulsory for [federal] public employees, to private enterprises working for the government (by no means the eight-hour day as the normal workday for all the workers); and finally a federal employers' liability act.

One cannot be more moderate; not even a law securing the right to organise boycotts, which are always forbidden by the courts, was demanded. The four demands themselves prove how wretched the situation of the American workers has become, for all the political freedom. The court have even dared in practice to declare trade-union organisation illegal; so for instance in Ohio the glass workers' union was declared a 'trust' and ordered to break it up!

But despite all the moderation, and the enormous power of two million votes which the American Federation of Labor commands, Gompers had no luck. The Republicans dared to reject him with contempt. Bryan was more clever and polite; he expressed his sympathy for Gompers's demands, without expressly committing himself to fulfill them. That was enough for Gompers to set to work for Bryan with ardent zeal, to commit himself and the American Federation of Labor, in complete disregard of any 'neutrality', to support Bryan's candidacy, and to fight against the socialist candidate Debs8 using all kinds of lies and slanders, as befits a vice-president of the Reichsverband.

Election day came, and showed that the 'result' of all this 'positive work' was a crushing defeat. The electoral support of the American Federation of Labor had failed completely; it had been torn asunder politically during the electoral campaign, instead of joining its votes to Bryan's.

It turned out that the benefit of the endorsement of Bryan's candidacy by the leader of the American Federation of Labor was null, that the workers whistled at Gompers's electoral speeches, that the American Federation of Labor does not represent a factor of the slightest importance in the elections, despite its two million members.

The workers can only exert political power in their own party. Only through it their action receives consistency and force. The 'tail-ending' policy [Schwanzpolitik], as people call the policy of supporting bourgeois candidates over there, engenders in the ranks of the workers political indolence, dullness and confusion; their votes scatter themselves, cancel each other out, and cease to have any effect.

So great and so evident was the disgrace caused by Gompers's tactic [of 'rewarding

8. [Eugene V. Debs (1855–1926), a fireman by trade, was a founding member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and, in 1893, one of the founders and the first president of the American Railway Union (ARU), one of the first industrial unions in the United States. In 1894, he was jailed for his role in a strike against the Chicago Pullman Palace Car Company. While in jail, future Socialist Congressman Victor Berger introduced him to socialism. After his release from prison Debs helped launch the Social-Democratic Party, which in 1901 became the Socialist Party of America. He ran as presidential candidate on the Socialist ticket in 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920, when he received 913,664 votes while serving a prison sentence for his opposition to World War I. Debs was released on 25 December 1921 and died five years later at the age of 70.]
friends and punishing enemies'] in the presidential elections of last year that it seriously affected his position.

That would have come immediately to light if he had not had the luck of becoming a 'martyr' precisely at that time.

He was not just the vice-president of the Civic Federation but also, though progressively less so, the president of the American Federation of Labor, and, as such, he came into conflict with the courts, despite all the harmony.

After the elections, in December 1908, the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia condemned him to a year of prison, because in the periodical *American Federationist*, issued by the American Federation of Labor, had appeared a boycott note! Yet another indication of the practical results of Gompers's 'trust'.

The immediate effect of the sentence was to silence all criticism of Gompers in the ranks of the fighting proletariat. Even the socialists, whom he has just attacked so sharply, declared their support for him in his conflict with the courts.

But this martyr halo could not last long, the more so since the courts opportunely remembered how useful Gompers's 'trust' is for the ruling classes. The Court of Appeals declared in March [1909] that the boycott is indeed illegal, but not the note. It declared Gompers free. It is improbable that the Supreme Court will overturn that sentence. Gompers will not be locked up and will not become a martyr. What then?

It was high time to bolster up his reputation, and so Gompers recalled his international duties, which up to now had worried him very little.

He speculated about the strong internationalist feeling of the European proletarians and their scarce acquaintance with American matters. If he abandoned his role as vice-president of the Reichsverband in America and came just as president of the powerful union federation, he would be welcomed with general enthusiasm. This enthusiasm, which was intended for the class organisations of the American proletariat, he can counterfeit after his return to America into an exultant support for his own policy. What was meant as moral support for the proletarian class struggle he will be able to exploit as moral support for the crippling of the class struggle through the idea of harmony of interests between capital and labour. What was said to stimulate the emancipation struggle will help to discredit the American Social Democrats, by allowing Gompers to point out that they are isolated in the world, that

9. [On 22 March 1907, the AFL Executive Council voted to place the Bucks Stove and Range Co. on its 'We Don't Patronise' list. The background to this decision was a strike organised by the International Brotherhood of Foundry Employees after the company attempted to increase the working hours of its employees. The president of Bucks Stove and Range Co. was J.W. Van Cleave, who was also the president of the National Association of Manufacturers and a notorious enemy of organised labour. After the boycott note was published in the *American Federationist*, the company secured from Judge Gould of the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia an injunction against the boycott, which also prohibited all officers and members of the AFL to make any public reference to it. The AFL removed the Bucks Stove and Range Co. from its 'We Don't Patronise' list, but the effects of the injunction were discussed in the pages of the *American Federationist* and in speeches by AFL officers. On the ground of these publications and statements, shortly after the general elections of 1908 Gompers, John Mitchell, and Frank Morrison, President, Vice-President and Secretary respectively of the AFL, were sentenced by Judge Wright to jail terms ranging from one year to six months.]
the Social Democrats of other countries celebrated him and his policy, without a voice of protest, thus disavowing American Social Democracy.

In short, Gompers duped the European workers in order to keep up the appearances that he needs in order to continue duping the American workers.

Should Gompers experience once again the need to present himself to the German workers, now the comrades know where they stand.

I do not advise, as I said, to treat Gompers impolitely. If he really wants to study, he should be given every opportunity to do so. If he wants to establish organisational relations between the American and European unions, he should be dealt with as representative of an allied power, without worrying about his personality.

But if he wants to carry out propaganda and ‘enlightenment’ work for his method, the comrades should listen to him quietly, but not keep silent if someone wants to know the details about the American Reichsverband and its vice-president.

If Mr. Gompers really wants to revolutionise the labour movement of the old world according to his rational principles, he must do it publicly.

But the comrades must always remember, when dealing with him, that every hand they lift to applaud Gompers will be used as a slap in the face of our American sister party, which has no more dangerous and poisonous enemy than Samuel Gompers.

Translated by Daniel Gaido
Review Articles


The Difficult Encounter with Materialism

Introduction

During the 1990s, after the death of Louis Althusser in 1990, a large number of his until-then unpublished texts started to appear in posthumous editions, first in their French original and then in various translations. These editions revealed the full extent of Althusser’s work, as they included texts from earlier phases of his theoretical trajectory, such as his early texts with strong Hegelian influences. The texts also provided new insights into well-known aspects of Althusser’s intervention; such as the struggle against theoretical humanism, the relation between Marxism and psychoanalysis, the theory of ideology as part of a larger theory of social reproduction. Furthermore, they illustrated aspects which were not fully revealed during his lifetime, such as his interest in Machiavelli, as well as revealing unknown aspects of Althusser’s work, such as the full extent of his appreciation of the crisis in Marxism and his elaborations on the topic of a *materialism of the encounter* or an *aleatory materialism*. *Philosophy of the Encounter* presents these relatively unknown aspects of Althusser’s work. If the seminal books of the 1960s marked the first moment of Althusser’s intervention, that of an effort to provide an original scientific philosophy for Marxism, and the texts of the late 1960s and early 1970s the second moment, that of theoretical self-criticism and correction, here we are dealing with the third and unfinished moment: that of trying to find a philosophical and political way to cope with the crisis of Marxism and the Communist movement.

1. The writer wishes to thank Stathis Kouvelakis, Tasos Betzelos and Myrina Kalaitzi for their comments on earlier versions of this text.
1. Confronting the full extent of the crisis of Marxism (‘Marx in his Limits’)

1.1. Althusser’s difficult relation with the Communist movement

‘Marx in his Limits’, the longer text in the book, represents Althusser’s effort to provide theoretical support for his shorter ‘crisis of Marxism’ interventions in 1977 and 1978, and his opposition to ‘Eurocommunist’ political positions in the West European Communist movement, including the abandonment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which was removed from party statutes, and the adoption of a strategy of transition to socialism via parliamentary-democratic means. Elements of these positions could be found in his published interventions, such as the emphatic declaration of the crisis of Marxism in the *Il Manifesto* 1977 conference, especially concerning the theory of the state and the theory of the revolutionary party7 – a point which he took up in other texts of the same period as well8 – the recognition of strong influences of Hegelian dialectics in the order of exposition of Marx’s *Capital*,9 and the criticism of the politics of the French Communist Party.10 But what was missing until the posthumous edition of ‘Marx in his Limits’ (1994), was a more thoroughgoing theoretical basis for these positions and a more critical balance sheet of the history of Marxism.

It is also important to note the political and theoretical conjuncture of the period. The 1970s were marked by a rise in popular struggles and mass movements, including the victory of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement, mass workers’ struggles in Western Europe, and the emergence of new social movements. At the same time, the reformulation of the strategy of the main Western-European Communist Parties, which followed the missed opportunities of 1968 (for the French Communist Party) and 1968–73 (for the Italian Communist Party)11 – despite the optimism shared by many of their supporters – did not bring about either a transformation of social unrest into political rupture or a left-wing government. On the contrary, they paved the way for the emergence of the social-democratic parties as leading forces of the Left and the crisis of once powerful Communist parties. At the same time, these deficiencies of left-wing strategy facilitated the neoliberal and neoconservative backlash of the early 1980s and the general counter-offensive of the bourgeoisie against post-WWII workers’ gains.

In order to understand the extent of Althusser’s criticism of Communist politics in the 1970s, we have to bear in mind that political considerations and an effort to rectify political and ideological deviations were, from the beginning, determinant in Althusser’s theoretical interventions, something testified by the political and theoretical ‘autobiography’ which serves as a preface to *For Marx*,12 by the turmoil caused within the PCF by his

---

philosophical interventions, and also by relevant references in *L'Avenir dure longtemps*. Althusser's intervention in the 1960s was a theoretical strategy for a political rectification of the Party's line.

The problem was that the simple opposition between an erroneous political line and a solid proletarian base, which marks Althusser's apprehension of the PCF in the 1960s, could not account for the profound crisis of strategy. To be exact, it could not account for the absence of a revolutionary strategy and the complex interplay of political, social and ideological factors, which led to its absence. In fact, the PCF was faced at the same time with a crisis of political tactics (the non-articulation of everyday struggles and broader anticapitalist political objectives), the lack of a revolutionary strategy (the inadequacy of Soviet-style 'socialism'), and a rupture in the necessary dialectic of theory and practice – of general political and ideological orientation, on one hand, and the experiences of the masses themselves, on the other. Theoretical rectification could not substitute for the necessary political and ideological rupture and the equally necessary emergence of new political forms. And this is why an effort to rectify the theoretical core of the Party's ideology could not automatically lead to a policy change.

In a sense, the whole of Althusser's effort can be described as a theoretical confrontation with the contradictions of Communist strategy. In the 1960–5 texts, the emphasis was on the possibility of reformulating a Marxist philosophy capable of providing guarantees against humanist and economist deviations (and, consequently, against rightist political deviations). This was a philosophy already existing, albeit in a 'practical' form, in the mature work of Marx, which, according to Althusser, was, at the same time, the textual evidence of an epistemological break – the emergence of a new science – and a major philosophical advance which provided its own protocols of a theory of theoretical practice', a scientific philosophy of scientificity. In Althusser's theoretical self-criticism, from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, this notion of an already-existing Marxist philosophy is discarded along with any possibility of a scientific philosophy, in favour of a new theorisation of *materialist philosophical interventions* that would bring forward the scientific and political potential of Marxist historical materialism. But even this new definition of philosophical intervention presupposed the possibility of a scientific theoretical core which once (re)discovered would help the re-foundation of Communist strategy. From the late 1970s onwards, the contradiction is located by Althusser in the very core of Marxist theory and its original formulation in the work of Marx; there are idealistic influences, deviations, lacunae, in the theory of value, the theory of the state, the theory of the party and, generally, the

13. The whole controversy led to a special session of the Central Committee in Argenteuil in 1966. On this subject see Geerlandt 1978.
15. Althusser 2005a; Althusser and Balibar 1990.
17. In this sense, Marxist philosophy as such is not to be extracted, as already existing in practical form, but constructed. This is implied by the reference in *Lenin and Philosophy* that philosophy is a 'long day behind the sciences' (Althusser 1971, p. 41). In a 1984 letter to Mauricio Malamud, Althusser talks about a fabrication: 'we fabricated for Marx, really and truly fabricated, the philosophy that he lacked: this rational, coherent philosophy' (Althusser 2006, p. 210).
superstructures. Full acceptance of these contradictions and of their political consequences is the only possible way out, and Althusser chose a more openly political tone in his interventions. The tragic event of 1980, the subsequent isolation of Althusser and his inability (both objective and subjective) to intervene publicly, put an early end to this effort.

1.2. Locating the contradictions in the theoretical core of Marxism

‘Marx in His Limits’ starts with an emphasis on the liberating effects that a full appreciation of the extent of the crisis in Marxism can have, especially since there is still the strength of the popular movements. ‘The crisis of Marxism, for perhaps the first time in its history, can today become the beginning of its liberation, hence of its rebirth and transformation’ (p. 12).

Althusser insists on the internal relation between Marxism and the workers’ movement, contrary to Kautsky’s position that the socialist consciousness can be introduced to the workers’ movement from without. It was exactly Marx’s political position within the workers’ movement, his adoption of the class perspective of the proletariat that guided his theoretical work: ‘Marx’s thought was formed and developed not outside the workers’ movement, but within the existing workers’ movement, on the political basis provided by that movement’ (pp. 32–3).

Despite this relation, strong elements of idealism remained in all of Marx’s work, including the texts of his theoretical maturity. The first aspect of this idealism lies in an idea of a ‘philosophy of history, of an Origin and an End’ (p. 36), which can be recognised in Marx’s necessary historical succession of modes of production and the depiction of communism as a mode of production without production relations and with perfect transparency of social relations. More important are the idealistic formulae that Marx uses in the order of exposition in the first volume of Capital.18 Althusser believes that Marx was still thinking within a Hegelian conception of the beginning of a science, trying to deduce all the elements of the capitalist mode of production from the abstraction of value and thus leaving outside of the main order of exposition important elements of a theory of capitalist exploitation: ‘the productivity of labour in all its forms; labour power as something other than a simple commodity; and, quite simply, the history of conditions under which capitalism arose’ (p. 39).

According to Althusser, the true materialist potential of Capital lies in exactly these chapters (on the working day, the labour process, and especially primitive accumulation), which are outside the main order of exposition. This idealistic conception of a science led Marx to mistakes such as his effort to deduce prices from values, and Althusser even refers to a neo-Ricardian such as Sraffa in a very positive way (p. 40), in sharp contrast to Althusser’s own formulations in Reading ‘Capital’ about the break that separates Marx and Ricardo.19

18. Althusser’s critical stance against the first Part of Capital had already been evident by his advice to readers to skip the first part when reading Volume I of Capital for the first time (Althusser 1971, p. 88).
Equally in contrast to earlier formulations is his treatment of the introduction to the *Grundrisse*.\(^{20}\) In the 1960s interventions, especially those concerning the *theory of the theoretical practice*, this text by Marx was considered emblematic of Marx's anti-empiricism, and Althusser interpreted its insistence that science proceeds from the abstract to the concrete as a support for his claim that knowledge of a concrete object is the result of a complex process of theoretical transformations.\(^{21}\) In 1978, he considers the passage from the abstract to the concrete to be heavily influenced by a Hegelian conception of science, which led to an ‘arithmetical presentation [Darstellung] of surplus-value’ (p. 43), which leaves out all these social and political practices and processes that actually constitute capitalist exploitation. This stress on idealist elements in the theoretical core of Marx’s *Capital*, marks a sharp contrast with Althusser’s earlier interpretation of *Capital* as a more or less accomplished break with idealism.

1.3. *The absence of a theory of the superstructures*

‘Marx in His Limits’ mainly deals with what Althusser considers the central deficiency in the history of Marxist theory: the absence of a theory of the superstructures, of the state, ideology and politics. He describes this absence as an ‘absolute limit’ (p. 54).\(^{22}\) Althusser’s key effort is to present the state as separate from the base, as an ‘instrument’ and a special ‘machine’, a position which, in his opinion, was the result of Marx’s break with earlier conceptions of the state, such as the natural-law theorists’ grounding of the state on mercantile law, the Hegelian identification of state and reason, and Feuerbach’s theory of alienation. Althusser’s effort is from the beginning overtly political, and he explicitly sets up ‘Eurocommunist’ positions as the main target. The main thrust of the Eurocommunist reformulation of left-wing strategy was the emphasis on gaining state power (via parliamentary elections) in order to use the capitalist state (considered not only class-neutral, but also pre-embodiment aspects of popular interests in its function) in order to better the condition of the popular masses and to establish forms of regulation of the economy. Therefore, the dictatorship of the proletariat had to be abandoned, along with a more radical conception of class politics. Even left-wing Eurocommunism, with its emphasis on popular movements and ruptures,\(^{23}\) consented to the possibility of using existing state apparatus, a possible reading for example of Poulantzas’s theory of the state being transversed by social struggles.\(^{24}\)

So, Althusser embarks on a two-front assault: against the French (and Italian) Communist mainstream’s acceptance of the state’s neutrality and even usefulness\(^{25}\) and, at the same time, against the more left-wing version of Eurocommunism.\(^{26}\) This is why Althusser

---

22. It is on the basis of this absence that Althusser tries to explain Marx’s inability to intervene more radically in the workings of the German Social-Democratic Party.
25. For a presentation of the general aspects of the debate, see Goshgarian 2006.
26. Especially since important proponents of left-wing Eurocommunism were initially influenced by Althusser, such as Poulantzas and Christine Buci-Glucksman. For an open endorsement of a left-wing Eurocommunist position by Poulantzas and his criticism of Althusser’s
defends the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat. He insists that, despite certain references of Lenin to proletarian dictatorship as ‘dictatorial’ governance or ‘government by decree’, the full meaning of the dictatorship of the proletariat is that ‘the class domination of the proletariat can only designate the whole set of economic, political and ideological forms by means of which the proletariat has to impose its politics on the old dominant exploiting class’ (p. 90). The notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat is presented as the theoretical foundation of a more general theory of class domination and a more specific theory of socialism as a period of intense class struggles and profound social transformation.

Althusser took up a position ‘against the current’, trying to insist on the possibility of treating the state as an instrument and as a special ‘machine’. He argues that the notion of ‘instrument’ refers to the separation of the state from class struggle, which is necessary in order for the state to effectively intervene in the class struggle, both against the struggle of the popular classes and against the divisions within the bourgeoisie: ‘the state is indeed “separate”, but so that it can be a class state’ (p. 78). According to Althusser, Marx’s well-known reference in the third volume of *Capital* to the specific form of the extraction of surplus-labour as the ‘hidden basis’ of state forms, however important it may be as a reference to the relation of the state to productive relations, is unsatisfactory as a theoretical solution. First, it seems to refer to a direct deduction from productive relations, a position which cannot account for the complexity of the state. Secondly, it does not refer to the state’s role in reproduction.28

Althusser insists that Marx and Lenin had very good reasons to speak of the state as apparatus and machine: ‘[t]he state is a machine in the full, precise sense of that term’ (p. 105). The state is a machine in the sense that it is a complex set of material apparatuses which transform the force of the violence of the class struggle, the excess force of the dominant class which marks class domination, into legal, state power.

> [T]he whole hinterworld of the confrontation of forces and violence, the worst forms of violence of class struggle, disappear in their one and only resultant: the Force of the dominant class, which does not even appear as what it is – the excess of its own force over the force of the dominated classes – but as force tout court. And it is this Force or Violence which is subsequently transformed into power by the state-machinery. (p. 109.)

Because of this class character of the state apparatuses and their policies, the fact that large proportions of the state’s personnel come from the popular classes, does not alter the class character of the state apparatuses, especially those involved in the direct application of physical force, and therefore any hopes on possible mass movements of the state personnel are fundamentally misplaced.

---

late 1970s positions see Poulantzas 1979. See also Buci-Glucksmann 1979. Even though Balibar had undertaken the burden of opposing the abandonment of the dictatorship of the proletariat (Balibar 1977), he later distanced himself from Althusser’s later positions on the state (Balibar 1979).


28. On the importance accorded by Althusser to the reproduction of the social conditions of productions as a crucial aspect of social reality, see Althusser 1995.
A consequence of this class character of the state is the relevance of Marx and Lenin’s insistence on the necessity of the destruction of the state, the need to ‘destroy the forms of domination and subordination in all state apparatuses, and, simultaneously, the forms of the division of labour between the various apparatuses’ (p. 106). The state is not some sort of ‘neutral’ mechanism or arbitrator between social classes, nor is it some sort of socially useful ‘public service’. Althusser defines the very notion of public service as a form of ideological mystification of the role of the state in the reproduction of the conditions of exploitation, contrary to the prevailing Eurocommunist tendency to emphasise the ‘positive’ aspects of the existing state functions.

Althusser then proceeds to an attack on the notion of commodity fetishism. He thinks that Marx makes a double theoretical mistake in his treatment of fetishism. First, he claims that Marx’s opposition between an illusory appearance of social relations as relations between things and a possible transparency of social relations as relations between persons is just a restatement of the obvious fact that ‘these commodity relations have not always existed’ (p. 129). Secondly, he believes that Marx fell into a theoretical short circuit, because he tried to explain the theoretical ideologies, the illusions of ‘economists’, by attaching them to the commodities themselves, and not to the totality of capitalist social relations and contradictions. According to Althusser, Marx’s choice to begin Capital by the abstraction of value meant that he had to ‘bracket’ the realities and complexities of capitalist exploitation (p. 131). Althusser rejects any notion of a spontaneous ideology arising out of commodity exchange. It is not possible to conceive ideological effects, such as ‘fetishism’, without turning to the broader workings of dominant bourgeois ideology and the role of the state in the formation and reproduction of these ideological elements (see p. 134). The absolute limit on Marx’s thinking on ideology is that ideologies have a ‘material existence in apparatuses that are tendentially linked to the state’ (p. 138).

A criticism of Gramsci’s views takes up the last part of the text. The motivations are not only theoretical, but also political. Reference to Gramsci had become a theoretical cornerstone of Eurocommunist politics. Both the strategy of envisioning broad social alliances around the peaceful and democratic transition to socialism, and the assumption that the Left could be culturally and ‘morally’ hegemonic in civil society before becoming politically dominant were presented as an application of Gramsci’s positions. This was also important for proponents of left-wing Eurocommunism as well, such as Christine Buci-Glucksman.

This was not the first time that Althusser had taken a critical position on Gramsci’s views. He also expressed his criticism of Gramsci’s historicism in Reading ‘Capital’. But, this time, the target of his criticism was the notion of hegemony. According to Althusser, there

---

29. It was in this way that the PCI tried to justify its inability and even unwillingness to proceed with major political ruptures, despite its strength and the escalation of social antagonism, especially the full implementation of the ‘historical compromise’ line, actually the acceptance in advance of the impossibility of revolutionary change in Italy, something exemplified by the change in tone in Berlinguer’s texts during the 1970s. (Berlinguer 1977.)


are many ambiguities in the very notion of hegemony and the way Gramsci tends to inscribe it, both in the social base and the superstructures, and then in the state and ‘civil society’. Althusser thinks that this all-encompassing notion of hegemony may leave room for various interpretations of Gramsci’s thinking (both right- and left-wing). At same time, it does not explain either the relation of hegemony to production as a material basis, or the backing of hegemonic apparatuses by the coercive force of the state. As a result, this leads to a mystification of the nature of the state as a ‘special machine’. This can have important political repercussions and can lead to reformist tendencies, either in the form of the substitution of ideology by ‘culture’, which entails the abandonment of the notion of ideological class struggle, or in the form of the ‘autonomy of politics’ thesis, the basis of a political turn toward ‘national’ parliamentary politics (and not movements and struggles).

Althusser’s partial conclusion is that this means that there is another absolute limit in Marxist thought: the inability to think politics and the role of the party in politics: ‘[Marx and Lenin] have never given us . . . even the rudiments of an analysis responding to the question: just what might politics be?’ (p. 150).

1.4. A theory of crisis or a theory in crisis?

There is no doubt that ‘Marx in His Limits’ is an important text and its publication offers great insight in the development of Althusser’s thinking. First of all it includes a welcome emphasis on the contradictory character of Marxist theory and on the fact that class struggles and contradictions are internalised in it, as a result of the uneven character of its emergence, which itself was the outcome of a complex and overdetermined process of ideological struggles. This bringing forward of the contradictions at the very core of Marxist theory, this acceptance that the problem is not only extracting the ‘correct’ theoretical core, but also dealing with contradictions and influences by the dominant theoretical ideologies, presents a form of theoretical self-criticism more profound than the simple rejection of ‘theoreticism’, and offers the possibility of thinking theory as an instance of the class struggle. The insistence on the internal relation of Marxist theory to the workers’ movement offers the possibility of reconceptualising the dialectics of theory and political practice within the workers’ movement, explains aspects of the crisis of Marxist theory as above all a crisis of the workers’ movement, and suggests that any true renovation of Marxist theory cannot be accomplished under theoretical isolation, but only in close, ‘organic’ relation to anticapitalist struggles and political projects.

Althusser’s insistence on the state as a special machine is also a useful reminder of aspects of Marx’s thinking on the state. This ‘return to the origins’ of the terminology of machine, as part of a broader conceptual imagery in Marx’s time, helps us understand some of Marx and Lenin’s interventions. It lays enough emphasis on the material character of state apparatuses and their class character, and at same time it maintains the focus on the necessary separation, the relative autonomy of the different instances of the social totality. Althusser avoids both an ‘expressive’ relation between state and economy, as in the case of the German derivationist school, and vulgar Marxism’s conception of the state as a neutral

32. The text is, in fact, unfinished.
33. See for example Hirsch 1978.
instrument. At the same time, it provides a theoretical foundation for Althusser's insistence on keeping the dictatorship of the proletariat as a strategic goal, since it justifies the necessity of a process of destruction of state forms and apparatuses as an integral part of any process of revolutionary change. The insistence on the dictatorship of the proletariat is not only a question of political choice; it is also a theoretical result of the emphasis on the non-neutral character of both the economy and the state.34

Different conceptions of the dictatorship of the proletariat function as testing grounds for particular conceptions of the state and social relations. What we designate as subject to revolutionary change during a period of transition is an index of how we determine the class character of capitalist society; that is, if we see it only in terms of property relations and external relations of domination over otherwise neutral apparatuses and institutions, or if we understand class relations and strategies to pervade all aspects of social life. We must also note that Althusser was also quite correct in his criticism of Eurocommunist politics, since he sensed that the whole strategy of treating existing state forms as part of a socialist strategy would not lead to the transformation of the state. Instead, it would lead to the transformation of left-wing politics and their accommodation to capitalist imperatives which are objectified in the very materiality of state apparatuses, a tendency exemplified by the politics of all left-wing governments in Europe in the early 1980s.

In this sense, we can say that both the choice of texts and the introduction by Goshgarian bring forward the political character of Althusser's intervention. Above all, Althusser tried to think the conditions of a possible reformulation and renovation of Communist politics in terms of a left-wing turn away from all aspects of Communist reformism, offering one of the most powerful criticisms of Eurocommunism, and of the unity-of-the-Left and of the government-of-the-Left strategies. It is true that this effort was uneven and contradictory, especially since Althusser always hesitated to think through the possibility of political and organisational rupture with existing Communist political organisations and tended to underestimate the political importance of more radical left currents. It is also true that his approach tended to simplify the form of the crisis of the Communist movement by opposing the political leaderships on the one hand and the mass movements on the other, underestimating the complexity of the crisis as a combination of retreats in political strategy, uneven outcomes in social struggles, and missed opportunities. Nevertheless, when reading 'Marx in His Limits', one can imagine the repercussions it might have had, if only Althusser had chosen to fully publicise his positions.

On the other hand, there are aspects of Althusser's positions in 'Marx in His Limits' that are more contradictory. The first problem concerns the very notion of the crisis of Marxism. Althusser's theorisation of a contradiction between the crisis of Marxism and the hopeful development of popular struggles is rather simplistic. What is missing from this schema, as Stathis Kouvelakis has suggested,35 is the complex interplay of the crisis of Marxism and the transformation of modern capitalism and an acknowledgment of the extra-theoretical aspects of a theoretical crisis.

34. On the importance of the dictatorship of the proletariat see Bettelheim 1976, pp. 9–55.
35. Kouvelakis 2001 (a translation is found in Kouvelakis 2007). Kouvelakis also refers to Althusser’s ‘amnesia’ as regards previous discussions of a crisis of Marxism (for example the late-nineteenth-century debate) as evidence of this overdetermination of the theoretical crisis by extra-theoretical factors (Kouvelakis 2001, pp. 45–6).
The second problem concerns Althusser’s treatment of the Marxist theory of value. Althusser was one of the first post-WWII Marxist theorists to turn to the theory of value as an important aspect of Marx’s theory, preceding later debates on value theory. Althusser presented Marx’s theory of value as the exemplification of ‘epistemological break’ and offered elements of a materialist epistemological conception of the originality of Marx’s discoveries; even though he tended to consider the break mainly in terms of the introduction of the notion of labour-power and not in terms of the value-form. It is also important to note that in Lire ‘Le Capital’ there were important contributions by Macherey and Rancière on value theory.

There is no doubt that there are strong influences by Hegel in aspects of the formation of Marx’s theory of value, but this was inevitable as Marx was searching for a theoretical vocabulary complex enough to deal with the difficulties of presenting the emergence of the value-form from capitalist social relations of production. But it is exactly this necessary complexity that Althusser tends to underestimate in his effort to think capitalism mainly in terms of capitalist relations of production and not in terms of social forms. This is why he fails to give due attention to the fact that Marx is talking about the capitalist mode of production and not some fictitious commodity production, right from the beginning. In a way, we are dealing with an empiricist effort by Althusser to think in terms of ‘concrete’, ‘tangible’ material class relations, as a complement to his turn towards concrete social movements. But, compared with the anti-empiricism of the texts from the 1960s, this is a theoretical retreat. Let us take for example the ‘transformation’ problem: the problem lies exactly in empiricist efforts to think in terms of a direct and calculable determination of prices from values. The possible way out would be an anti-empiricist conception of the relation between values and prices. This would mean to think of the transformation problem in terms of structural causality, rather than ‘expression’, which is exactly the choice offered by Althusser’s original formulations, instead of choosing an equally empiricist rejection of value altogether.

And this is exactly the problem with Althusser’s rejection of the notion of fetishism. It is true that fetishism has been interpreted as a form of alienation, which is a notion that, as Althusser showed, is alien to the mature theory of Marx. But this is not the actual position of the notion of fetishism in the theoretical architecture of Capital. First of all, the primary form of fetishism is not commodity fetishism but the fetishism of capital, capital as value-creating value. Marx speaks about commodity fetishism mainly because he tries to keep to the strict order of exposition, according to which the notion of capital is to be introduced later on. This fetishism of capital can be viewed as a socially-necessary form of social misrecognition arising at the level of economic practices themselves. It is a misrecognition because it mystifies the mechanisms of capitalist profit, and it is socially-necessary because it is upon this misrecognition that mechanisms such as the formation of the average profit

39. On this, see Milios, Dimoulis and Economakis 2002.
41. Marx 1894, p. 564.
42. On this, see Dimoulis and Milios 2004.
rate and the average rate of interest are based. This can be an important aspect of a possible theory of ideology.

It is also important to note that Rancière’s intervention offers such a possible reading of fetishism as a spontaneously arising form of social misrecognition. Such a reading is not antithetical to a theory of the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and their role in forming and reproducing the dominant ideology, contrary to Balibar’s insistence that a conception of ideology based upon the economic surface and one based upon the role of the state are mutually exclusive.  

I think that the theory of the Ideological State Apparatuses cannot be treated as a theory of the origin of social representations, rituals, and discursive elements that are incorporated in ideological formations; it is a theory of the ways in which these elements are articulated and reproduced, and about the importance of the state in this process. The Ideological State Apparatuses do not produce ideologies; these arise from all aspects of social life: the apparatuses organise ideologies.

This brings us to another problem of ‘Marx in His Limits’, regarding the very notion of the state as a machine. It is true that Althusser offers an interesting presentation of the importance of the notion of the machine in the theoretical imagery of the nineteenth century. It is also true that focus on reproduction offers an important starting point. But the problem of the lack of an adequate articulation of the state with capitalist relations of production and their reproduction remains. If attempts to derive the state from the relations of production in a direct way run the risk of ignoring the relative autonomy of the state, and descriptions of the state as a condensation of social relations might underestimate the importance of the materiality of the state (the state, however transversed by social struggles, is not a contingent outcome of conjunctural conflicts, but a material apparatus), Althusser’s return to the notion of the machine runs the risk of returning to the very functionalist approach he himself criticises.

Despite the importance or even usefulness of Althusser’s political conclusions, the text does not manage to offer a theoretical breakthrough in state theory, thus reproducing the elements of the crisis in Marxist theory which it set out to transcend. Poulantzas’s later work, despite any reservations and criticisms one might have towards his political positions and his endorsement of a ‘democratic road to socialism’, represented a real theoretical advance in his attempt to reflect on the relation of the materiality of state apparatuses to the capitalist relations of production; for example, in his emphasis on the specifically capitalist relation between economic exploitation and extra-economic coercion, in his referring not to ‘levels’ or ‘instances’ but to distinct economic, political and ideological relations, in his treatment of the economic role of the state and its role in organising and shaping the strategy of the dominant bloc, and in his emphasis on the material aspects of consensus-building. On the contrary, ‘Marx in His Limits ’ does not offer a more precise study of the articulation of the state with the relations of production, apart from schematic references to the state’s role in reproduction. One might say that Althusser is here primarily concerned with providing theoretical justification for his political position, rather than making theoretical advances which would also help answer political questions.

43. Balibar 1993, pp. 76–7. It is also worth noting that, in the 1970s, it was again Balibar who insisted that a theory of fetishism as a spontaneously arising social misrecognition is incompatible with a theory of the ISAs (Balibar 1974, p. 204–26).

44. Poulantzas 1978.
The same goes for Althusser’s rejection of the notion of hegemony. Undoubtedly, there are many contradictions in the development of the notion by Gramsci and problems arising out of Gramsci’s use of the vocabulary of idealist and historicist philosophy. After all, we are dealing with a work-in-progress, an attempt to confront new problems in original ways. But the fact remains that the notion of hegemony remains indispensable. First, it combines both the ‘negative’ repressive aspects of the state and the more ‘positive’ moment of helping the formation of power blocs. Secondly, it comprises all the ideological, political, organisational and economic aspects of the state. Thirdly, it describes state interventions which aim not only at coercing the oppressed or guaranteeing their ideological consent, but also at forming (and disorganising) social alliances and turning class interests into collective political strategies and projects. It was in this sense that Gramsci tried to think the specificity of politics from a Marxist perspective, a fact that Althusser misperceived as ‘historicism’. And, of course, despite Althusser’s refusal, the influence of Gramsci on the notion of Ideological State Apparatuses is undeniable. In ‘Marx in His Limits’, Althusser seems to think mainly in terms of answering deviations and ‘bending the stick to the other side’, and not in terms of providing a more comprehensive theory of the state, regarding especially its broader political and economic functions. One might say that it is Althusser that reduces the state to the combination of repressive force and ideological consent that he considers to be the main problem with Gramsci’s formulations.

In this sense, it is no surprise that the text ends with a reference to politics, as this is the crucial question and the crucial contradiction. Although fully aware and duly critical of the problems and shortcomings of mainstream Communist politics, Althusser is incapable of truly formulating an alternative form of politics and, in the process, he abandons important aspects of his earlier theoretical advances in favour of a more empiricist and sometimes functionalist approach. We could describe it as not only a thinking of crisis, but also a thinking in crisis.

2. The search for a new materialism

2.1. The genealogy of aleatory materialism

The rest of the book comprises texts that refer to what Althusser defined as a new conception of materialism, which he called aleatory materialism or materialism of the encounter. All of these texts were written after the tragic events of 1980, during Althusser’s period of isolation and public silence, and most of them bear the mark of his difficult personal situation, tormented by serious health problems and periodic relapses into depression. They include extracts of a larger text written in 1982 which received the title ‘The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter’ by the French editors, an ‘interview’ he gave to F. Navarro, a Mexican philosopher, letters and discussions with Althusser (published...
in Spanish in 1988 although not in French), \(^{48}\) parts of Althusser's correspondence on the Navarro ‘interview’ and other smaller texts. These texts, along with Althusser's autobiography\(^ {49}\) represent the main part of Althusser’s post-1980 production.

Althusser sets out from the beginning to bring forward what he considers to be an ‘almost completely unknown materialist tradition in the history of philosophy: the ““materialism” . . . of the rain, the swerve, the encounter, the take [prise]’ (p. 167), a materialism of the encounter that had been ‘interpreted, reversed and perverted into an idealism of freedom’ (p. 168). This tradition is presented and explained in the form of a philosophical genealogy. The first figure is that of Epicurus. Althusser is fascinated by the image of the Epicurean atoms moving in parallel directions in the void, leading a ‘phantom existence’ (p. 169) until the moment of the clinamen – the infinitesimal swerve that marks the beginning of the making of the world.\(^ {50}\) Even though all the elements existed before the swerve, there is no formation of the world, no Meaning or Cause before it, the ‘Swerve was originary’ (p. 168).

Epicurus is presented as the archetypal figure of a radically anti-teleological philosophical stance:\(^ {51}\) the formation of the world is in itself purely accidental, any possibility of meaning, constant relations between things and causal relations is posterior to the contingent encounter. The second figure that is included in this genealogy of the materialism of the encounter is Heidegger. Althusser (p. 170, 261) refers with admiration to Heidegger’s phrase *Es gibt* – ‘there is’, ‘this is what is given’ – as a rejection of questions of origin.\(^ {52}\)

Althusser then turns to Machiavelli as representing an important moment in the history of the materialism of the encounter. The importance accorded by Althusser to Machiavelli is well known, owing especially to the publication of his unpublished manuscript and course notes on Machiavelli.\(^ {53}\) According to Althusser, the importance of the encounter can be found in the way Machiavelli describes the necessary encounter between a leader and a region in order to accomplish the project of Italian national unity and the equally necessary encounter between *fortuna* and *virtù* in the Prince himself. This encounter may or may not take place in the void of the existing political situation; a void that Althusser describes as a ‘philosophical void’ in the sense of a radical absence of any original Cause or necessity (p. 173).

---

50. On this notion, which comes from Lucretius's presentation of Epicurean philosophy in the *De rerum Natura*, see Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 46–52. It is also worth noting that although Althusser insists on distinguishing his reading of Epicurus from an ‘idealist of freedom’, the importance of freedom in the Epicurean swerve over the element of necessity in Democritus has been an important aspect of the history of Epicurean notions, including Marx’s reading of Epicurean philosophy in his doctoral dissertation (Marx 1841). On this subject see also Suchting 2004, p. 11.
51. ‘This is the negation of all teleology’. Althusser 2006, p. 260.
52. The phrase is from *Being and Time* and Heidegger himself comments upon it in a passage from the ‘Letter on Humanism’ (Heidegger 1994, p. 238): ‘In *Being and Time* (p. 212) we purposely and cautiously say, *il y a l’Être, there is, it gives (“es gibt”) Being. *Il y a* translates “it gives” imprecisely, for “it” here “gives” is Being itself. The “gives” names the essence of Being that is giving granting its truth. The selfgiving into the open, along with the open region itself, is Being itself’.
Machiavelli is presented as the representative of a practical philosophy of the emergence of new political forms out of the inherently contingent and aleatory encounter of already-existing elements, and at same time of the philosophy of the political gesture as constitutive aspect of this encounter. The same tone can be found also in Machiavelli and Us54 and in the text on Machiavelli that was part of the material for L’Avenir dure longtemps.55 If Althusser turned to Machiavelli in the 1970s in an effort to rethink the possibility of new political forms, now in his effort to come in terms with the recognition of the crisis of the Communist movement – in this sense repeating Gramsci’s use of the Prince as an allegory for the emergence of a new conception of the party – he turns to Machiavelli as the representative of the non-teleological nature of any political and social practice.

This notion of the void is very important in all of Althusser’s later writings.56 There is a certain oscillation in Althusser’s treatment of the notion. On the one hand, Althusser tends to treat the notion of the void as a reference to the absence of any philosophical object: ‘[a philosophy of the void] begins by evacuating all philosophical problems, hence by refusing to assign itself any “object” whatever’.57 This brings us back to Althusser’s redefinition of philosophy as having no object58 and to his reference to the ‘void of the distance taken’ in Lenin and Philosophy,59 as the description of the way philosophical interventions, although deprived of an object in the sense of the sciences, can have real effects because of their retracing of the line of demarcation between materialism and idealism, something that Alain Badiou has described as philosophy not being ‘a cognitive appropriation of singular objects, but more an act of thought’.60

On the other hand, a more ‘ontological’ conception of the void emerges in these texts, revealed by Althusser’s understanding of the void pre-existing the formation of worlds in Epicurus, by his reading of Machiavelli and the possibility of the Italian national unity, by his return to Pascal’s effort to elevate the void to the status of philosophical concept,61 and by his position that the void must be at the centre of any materialist philosophy.62 This notion of the void can be related to another important part of later Althusser’s imagery, the margin or the interstice,63 which, according to Althusser, is exactly where the possibility of

54. Althusser 1999. It is also worth noting that Althusser, during the rereading in 1986 of the original manuscript from the 1970s, introduced many references to aleatory materialism and even replaced a reference to the dialectic with ‘sequence of events’ (p. 85). On this point see also Elliott 1999, p. xvi.
56. On the importance of the void in Althusser’s theoretical trajectory, see Matheron 1997.
59. Althusser 1971, p. 62 (the original translation uses emptiness instead of void).
60. Badiou 1993, p. 34.
61. Contrary to traditional philosophical historiography, Althusser also considers Spinoza to be a thinker of the void (Althusser 2006, p. 178). François Matheron, in an editorial note (Althusser 2006, p. 204) refers to a 1982 paper by Macherey (included in Macherey 1992) as supporting the same ‘paradoxical’ position. I think that Macherey is, in fact, more cautious and also stresses the differences between Pascal and Spinoza as regards the notion of the void.
62. On this notion of the void as the centre of any ‘grand philosophy’, see Althusser 2005b.
63. Which reminds one of Marx’s references to trading nations of ancient times living in the intermediate worlds of the universe (Marx 1894, p. 225) or usury living in the space between worlds (Marx 1894, p. 412).
alternatives and new social and political forms arises, with communist relations existing in the interstices of imperialism. The margin and the interstice is also where theoretical and social forms exist which are not conditioned by class struggle: ‘not everything in life is class struggle’. The other important figure in Althusser’s genealogy of aleatory materialism is Spinoza. The reference to Spinoza as an important philosophical ‘detour’ and as an ally in the attempt to delineate an alternative non-metaphysical materialism was an integral part of Althusser’s interventions from the 1960s onwards. But now, especially in the ‘Underground Current’, he chooses Spinoza’s notion of parallelism as his contribution to the tradition of aleatory materialism: ‘[t]he fact that they are parallel, that here everything is an effect of parallelism, recalls Epicurus’ rain’ (p. 177). This is a rather strange theoretical choice, since parallelism in Spinoza is not an ontological proposition on the emergence of the world (such as Epicurus’s rain of the atoms) and has much more to do with the relation between thought and reality (in fact, the relation between thought and reality as part of the same reality or ontological level, and the rejection of any form of dualism), and with the fact that the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.

In fact, the very notion of ‘parallelism’ comes from Leibniz, who tried to incorporate Spinoza to his own dualistic perspective. It seems as if Althusser is, at this point, trying to fit Spinoza into the whole imagery of the encounter, something made evident by his linking of the formation of ‘common notions’ to the idea of the encounter. Furthermore, Althusser takes a rather ambiguous position concerning imagination as the first kind of knowledge. Instead of considering it the prototype of a theory of ideology, as he emphatically did elsewhere, he tends to view it as the only way to come in terms with the world in its dispersed and non-totalised character. And, on a more general level, one is tempted to note that this effort to include Spinoza in the genealogy of a philosophy of the aleatory and the contingent comes in sharp contrast to Spinoza’s rejection of the notion of contingency, and his insistence that things appear as contingent because of inadequate knowledge. On this point, and in order to render Althusser some justice, we must say that some of his comments have great theoretical merit, such as his insistence on the gap separating Spinoza and any traditional theory of knowledge or traditional metaphysics in general and on Spinoza’s rejection of any theory of the cogito. These points are also taken up in the fragment on Spinoza which was included in the second edition of L’Avenir dure longtemps.

---

64. Althusser 1994; Althusser 2005b.
68. Spinoza 1954, p. 121.
70. An important aspect of Spinoza’s second kind of knowledge (Spinoza 1954, pp. 157–60).
72. ‘[Spinoza] not only turns his back on all theories of knowledge, but also clears a path… for the recognition of the “world” as unique totality that is not totalized, but experienced in its dispersion, and experienced as a “given” into which we are thrown’ (p. 179).
73. Spinoza 1954, p. 95 and 100.
The same effort to form a philosophical genealogy of the materialism of the encounter is also evident in Althusser’s treatment of Hobbes and Rousseau. His reference to Hobbes is more reserved, but Althusser insists that Hobbes had arrived at the ‘aleatory constitution of a world’ (p. 183). Concerning Rousseau, especially the second Discourse, Althusser treats the social contract as a form of a constitutive encounter prior to which there was no society at all.

There are more figures included in this philosophical genealogy. Althusser makes references to Nietzsche (pp. 218, 273), without substantiating them, Derrida, and Wittgenstein. Regarding the latter, he seemed to be fascinated by the first phrase of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus especially in its German original – Der Welt ist alles, war der Fall is – and he argued that, along with the Heideggerian es gibt, it offers the possibility of thinking the world in terms of encounters (pp. 190–1).

In a way, in these texts we are dealing with a reformulation of idealism. Whereas, in Althusser’s texts from the 1960s, idealism was presented mainly in the form of the variations of empiricism and historicism (the latter being viewed as a variation of an empiricist conception of the theoretical object having the same – historical – qualities of the real object), here, idealism is above all equated with all forms of teleological thinking, all forms of a philosophy of the Origin and the End. As Althusser puts it, ‘[w]e can recognize idealism, I think, by the fact that it is haunted by a single question which divides into two, since the principle of reason bears not only on the origin but also on the end’ (p. 217). This emphasis on the break with any form of teleological thinking is made even more evident by the recurring metaphor of the materialist philosopher catching a moving train without knowing where it comes from or where it is going (p. 290).

2.2. A philosophy of the encounter

This brings us to Althusser’s effort to think of the encounter as the basis of an alternative materialist conception of history and social reality. Although it is only in these later texts that the notion of the encounter becomes the dominant concept or metaphor, there are references to it in earlier texts by Althusser, especially in a 1966 letter to R. Diatkine where he tries to reformulate Marx’s notion of the combination of the different elements that became part of the capitalist mode of production, an encounter and a

---

75. ‘[In Hobbes] the “hold” of the atomized individuals was not of the same nature or as powerful as in Epicurus and Machiavelli’ (p. 183).
76. On Althusser’s preoccupation with Rousseau see also Althusser 1972 and 1998c and Althusser 2006. On a more general level, we must bear in mind that Althusser in the 1950s thought about writing a doctoral thesis [grande thèse] on the political philosophy of the eighteenth century and a minor thesis on Rousseau’s Second Discourse (Althusser 1998b, p. 201), wrote a book on Montesquieu (Althusser 1972), and prepared numerous courses on classical political philosophy (Althusser 2006).
77. There are only references in his correspondence to his reading Nietzsche (p. 226) and a letter in which Althusser writes approvingly of Nietzsche’s critique of any philosophy of substance (pp. 235–6).
78. For a reading of Althusser’s later writings that stresses the importance of this reference to Wittgenstein, see Suchting 2004.
79. See also Althusser 2005a, p. 186.
combination that themselves had no genetic relation to the feudal mode of production. A similar reference to the encounter is also present in Balibar's contribution to Reading 'Capital' and his discussion of the question of the transition to capitalism, where he refers to the encounter between 'elements that have different and independent origins'. But it is only in these later texts that the encounter becomes the basis of a whole reformulation of materialist philosophy.

The first principle is the primacy of the encounter over being; the primacy of the encounter over form and order. The second is that there are encounters only between series of beings that are themselves the results of series of causes. Althusser refers here to Cournot who had tried to present 'chance' as the encounter between two independent causal series. The third principle is that 'every encounter is aleatory, not only in its origins (nothing ever guarantees an encounter), but also in its effects' (p. 193). Althusser insists that the aleatory nature of every encounter is its possibility not to have taken place and that the possible effects of any encounter cannot be prefigured. This requires a new thinking of the relation between necessity and contingency: 'instead of thinking of contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception to it, we must think necessity as the becoming necessary of the encounter of contingencies' (pp. 193–4).

What we have here is the rejection by Althusser of any form of teleological thinking and teleological explanation. We can discern causal series and determinism, but only after the fact has been accomplished, not prior to it, we can work on them only backwards, in the same way that in biology we can trace the evolutionary path of a species only towards the past, with future evolutions depending upon chance mutations. According to Althusser, there is no meaning to history, in the sense of a teleological conception, there is meaning in history in the sense of the results of each encounter. This meaning comes only after the encounter 'has taken hold' (p. 195) and it is only on this basis that we can try to provide explanations and even think in terms of laws and regularities, provided that we keep in mind the element of surprise in history, of new encounters taking hold (p. 196).
An emphasis on the singular, the concrete and the factual supplement this rejection of teleology. Althusser insists that, in history and social reality, we can only find constants, as the result of accomplished encounters, and not laws (p. 278). There are even positive references to Hume and the construction of general concepts out of singular facts, cases and events, a reference that runs contrary to the anti-empiricist emphasis in Althusser's texts from the 1960s, where the trajectory from the concrete to the abstract is considered the essence of empiricism. Althusser combines this atomistic turn to the singular case, with a conception of history based on the distinction between History \([\text{Historie}]\), the history of teleological conceptions, and living history in the present \([\text{Geschichte}]\), which has nothing to do with laws in the sense of the natural sciences (see pp. 263–4). This return to the singular case, the fact, the event is one of the most important aspects of Althusser's later writings, in sharp contrast to the emphasis on structures and structural relations of his earlier writings. On this basis, Althusser tends to reject any notion of the dialectic in his later writings. He considers it ‘more than dubious . . . harmful’ and proposes the replacement of dialectical materialism with aleatory materialism (p. 242).

In order to provide an example of how the encounter works, Althusser turns once again to the problem of the transition to capitalism. Althusser thinks that Marx and Engels oscillate between two different conceptions of the mode of production, one that is essentialist and presents history as a whole with an end that reproduces its elements, and a more aleatory conception according to which ‘every mode of production comprises elements that are independent of each other’ (p. 199). In this sense, the encounter refers to the ways different historical elements, practices, even social groups, which had their own independent histories, without any predestination to become part of the capitalist mode of production, had to encounter and combine each other, in a process that might or might not have taken place. The decisive encounter is the one Marx mentions in Capital between ‘owners of money’ and the ‘free labourers’ stripped of anything but their labour-power. Althusser thinks that there is no point in thinking of the bourgeoisie as the result of the decay and decline of the feudal mode of production, because this leads to a ‘schema of dialectical production again, a contrary, producing its contraries’ (p. 201) and a conception of the bourgeoisie as the element that will provide the necessary unity of the totality.

86. Althusser thinks that the mistake made by Popper in his criticism of Marxism and psychoanalysis is that he neglected this distinction and that both Marxism and psychoanalysis belong to the realm of Geschichte (p. 264). But, in a curious twist, this statement by Althusser actually reproduces the main point of Popper’s criticism against Marx, namely that there can be no scientific explanation or prediction in history exactly because it is different from the object of the natural sciences! (See Popper 1986).
88. Marx 1887, p. 448.
89. ‘And it is no accident that the theory of the bourgeoisie as a form of antagonistic disintegration of the feudal mode of production is consistent with the philosophically inspired conception of the mode of production. In this conception the bourgeoisie is indeed nothing other than the element predestined to unify all the other elements of the mode of production’ (p. 202). Althusser also insists on not treating the French Revolution as a ‘capitalist’ revolution and refers approvingly to Furet’s ‘revisionist’ reading of the French Revolution (pp. 237–8).
It is rather interesting that Althusser in his conception of the encounter does not reject the notion of the *structure*. On the contrary, he insists that it is this aspect of the mode of production, the existence of a specific structure that imposes a unity on the elements which have been combined. In the case of the capitalist mode of production, this structure is the *structure of exploitation* (p. 203).

The last important aspect of the aleatory materialism texts concerns the redefinition of philosophy. Althusser here mainly follows the line he originated in the 1976 lecture on the transformation of philosophy. According to this schema, traditional philosophy assigned itself the task of speaking the Truth and it is in this sense that philosophy plays an important part in the formation of dominant ideologies (pp. 286–7), acting as a theoretical laboratory for the dominant ideologies (p. 287). Althusser also elaborates on the subject of the struggle between idealism and materialism as constitutive of philosophy. He insists that every philosophy is tendentially materialist or idealist, at the same time incorporating elements of the opposite tendency, because, in the course of the philosophical battle, each philosophy tries to encircle and capture some of the positions of its opponent, and, as a result, incorporates them.

This relation between philosophy and the mechanisms of ideological hegemony means that every philosophy in its traditional form is inherently idealistic, and that every ‘materialism’ that is pronounced as a philosophical system, as a system of philosophical truths, is also essentially idealist (p. 272). On the contrary, what is opened as a theoretical possibility by Marxism is not another philosophy but a new *practice of philosophy*, a ‘denunciation of philosophy produced as “philosophy”’ (p. 275). The result of the importance of practices and the primacy of practice over theory is the affirmation that philosophy does indeed have an *outside*. But one must be careful not to see Practice as a substitute for Truth inside a philosophical system, the materialist practice of philosophy being fundamentally asymmetrical to idealist philosophical systems.

---

90. On the original formulation of the notion of ‘structure in dominance’, see Althusser 2005a, pp. 200–16.
93. The same point is also taken up in *Elements of Self-Criticism* (Althusser 1976b, p. 142–50). In a letter to F. Navarro, Althusser also refers to Raymond’s book (Raymond 1973) approving the latter’s emphasis on the existence of elements of idealism and materialism in every great philosophy (Althusser 2006, p. 222). He also makes a reference to Macherey as having been the first to have stated that there are idealist and materialist elements in all philosophy, possibly thinking of Macherey’s article on the history of philosophy as a struggle of tendencies (Macherey 1999, pp. 35–73).
95. ‘Practice is not a substitute for Truth for the purposes of an unshakeable philosophy; on the contrary, it is what shakes philosophy to its foundations – whether in the form of the “variable” cause of matter or in that of class struggle – which philosophy has never been able to master’ (p. 275).
2.3. An Althusserian Kehre?

Althusser's later texts have been presented as providing elements of a major theoretical turn, an Althusserian Kehre as Toni Negri has described them, in an article96 which represents the most powerful effort to describe these texts as marking Althusser's passage to a postmodern and post-Communist theoretical and political perspective. According to Negri, in these texts Althusser moves away from his previous structuralist effort and embarks in the quest for a new philosophical and political subjectivity which does away with all forms of dialectics. In a time of a postmodern totalisation of power, there is no room for dialectical contradictions in social reality, only the possibility of new social and productive forms emerging at the margins and interstices of existing social order. Negri insists that these new social forms necessarily take the form of aleatory ruptures, and, instead of a negative philosophy of structures and ‘processes without subjects’, we need a positive philosophy of the resistance and creativity of singular social bodies.

In a similar way, Yann Moulier Boutang has insisted that Althusser, faced with the crisis of Marxism in the 1970s, chose to abandon the theoretical apparatus of historical materialism and any conception of a science of history dealing with modes of production and their succession and forms of transition in favour of a logic of the singular case and of a notion of the political practice as aleatory encounter, in an effort to rethink the possibility of revolutionary politics.97 Ichida and Matheron argue that the notion of the aleatory which Althusser introduces in his later writings has to be interpreted as non-dialectical; in the sense of the abandonment of a conception of politics based on the relation between a dialectical order of exposition and the order of things.98 They also insist that Althusser’s aim in his reformulation of materialism was to think the terms of that political and theoretical subjectivity (and not of a ‘process without subject’) which is necessary for any radical beginning. This is also linked to Matheron’s proposition that one of the main preoccupations of Althusser, in all his work, had been an effort to define politics in a new way.99

In their reading of Althusser, Callari and Ruccio link aleatory materialism and the possibility of a postmodern Marxism and postmodern politics of the multiple and heterogeneous subjects and identities.100 In a more negative manner, the same emphasis on the later writings as a theoretical turn marks the assessment by Lucien Sève that Althusser tends toward a non-dialectical and non-materialist nominalism and Pierre Raymond’s description of the contradictory and uneven character of the theoretical imagery of aleatory materialism.101 André Tosel chooses a more balanced position, at the same time trying to stress an element of continuity in Althusser, basically in his effort to think communism in a non-ideological mode ‘remaining until his death a communist philosopher’, and the open questions that mark the formulations of aleatory materialism.102

G.M. Goshgarian’s Introduction to the Philosophy of the Encounter stresses the element of continuity in Althusser’s work, tracing the notion of the encounter in all of Althusser’s

98. Ichida and Matheron 2005.
100. Callari and Ruccio 1996.
mature work, beginning with the book on Montesquieu (especially with regard to the rejection of any question of origin) and later in the reformulation of materialist dialectics in the 1960s, until its emergence as part of the new practice of philosophy, envisaged as an integral part of a political and theoretical strategy to counter right-wing tendencies and the crisis in the Communist movement. According to Goshgarian, Althusser's rethinking in the 1970s of the crisis of Communist politics and the non-accomplishment of socialism in the USSR already includes the basic premise of aleatory materialism that an encounter might not take place, or that it might not last. Similarly, he treats Althusser's insistence on the primacy of class struggle over the contending classes, a basic premise of his works in the 1970s, as analogous to his later insistence on the primacy of the encounter over the forms to which it gives birth (p. xlv). Consequently, Goshgarian insists that only by reading the texts on aleatory materialism can we understand the philosophical perspective of Althusser's political battles in the late 1970s.

2.4. The texts on aleatory materialism as an effort to rethink the possibility of a communist philosophy

In my opinion, the answer to the question of the continuity of aleatory materialism in relation to Althusser's previous positions depends upon how one interprets his later writings. This is why I wish to offer a critical appraisal of these writings, their merits, their contradictions and shortcomings and then return to the question of their position in Althusser's theoretical trajectory.

First of all, it is necessary to stress the political character of these texts, not in the sense of a reference to the political conjuncture, but as an effort to think the philosophical conditions of a renovation of communist politics. Despite the tragic elements in Althusser's personal situation in the 1980s and his refusal (or sense of inability) to engage in any form of public

---

103. Althusser 1972. For Goshgarian's reading of the book on Montesquieu as the emergence of the philosophy of the encounter see especially pp. xxx–xxxv. In my opinion, Goshgarian is right as regards the emergence of elements of Althusser's materialist and anti-historicist positions in the Montesquieu book. Take, for example, Althusser's insistence on not confusing the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French bourgeoisie with the capitalist class: 'the gravest danger confronting the historian of the seventeenth and even of the eighteenth century, at least of its first half, is to project onto the “bourgeoisie” of this period the image of the later bourgeoisie which made the Revolution, and of the bourgeoisie which emerged from the Revolution. The true modern bourgeoisie, which transformed the previous economic and social order from top to bottom, is the *industrial* bourgeoisie, with its mass-production economy, concentrating entirely on profit subsequently reinvested in production. But in its generality this bourgeoisie was unknown to the eighteenth century; the bourgeoisie of that period was quite different: in its most advanced elements it was essentially dependent on the *mercantile economy* (Althusser 1972, p. 99). Nevertheless, only through projecting the later notion of the encounter upon the earlier texts can we say that there is continuity with the texts on aleatory materialism. *Montesquieu, Politics and History*, can be better read as a first expression of the search for a break with historical teleology and for a materialist conception of historical explanation in the line of the 1960–5 texts.

104. Most references by Althusser in concrete political situations are either descriptive or efforts to return to his theoretical preoccupations, especially the assessment of the extent of the crisis of the Communist movement. See for example Althusser 1994, pp. 508–26.
intervention, it is obvious that he remained a communist in philosophy and that he tried to think the philosophical and theoretical aspects of revolutionary social and political practices, in sharp contrast to the theoretical and political anti-communism that marked other apprehensions of the crisis of Marxism, from the *nouveaux philosophes* onwards. In this sense, it is significant that this political character of Althusser’s intervention is highlighted with its full force thanks to the selection of texts included in the *Philosophy of the Encounter* and, primarily, to Goshgarian’s introduction. Althusser’s effort to rethink materialism does not originate from a general disillusionment with working-class politics and Marxism, but, on the contrary, from an effort to provide a left-wing alternative to Communist politics, based on the centrality of the class struggles and the continuing relevance of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The second important aspect of Althusser’s later writings concerns his effort to provide the definition of a new materialist practice of philosophy. One of the most fruitful elements of Althusser’s theoretical intervention was his effort to think philosophy as a specific form of textual practice. His successive redefinitions of philosophy after the abandonment of any possibility of a ‘theory of theoretical practice’, the importance attached to the political character of philosophical interventions, his distinction between scientific propositions and philosophical positions and his general emphasis on philosophy not having an object in the sense of the sciences, his linking of philosophy, ideology and the class struggle to the definition of philosophy as ‘class struggle in theory in the last instance’; all these elements attest to a theoretical effort to think philosophy as both inescapable (the interconnection of ideological class struggle and theoretical practices leads inevitably to philosophical conflicts) and necessary (we have to intervene in a specifically philosophical way if we want to battle the influences of dominant ideologies both in the theoretical and the political field). The same goes with his insistence to rethink in an original way the recurring opposition between idealism and materialism, internalised in any philosophical intervention, as the specific form of the effects of class antagonism on the theoretical plane. In light of the above, Althusser’s references to a new materialist practice of philosophy, radically asymmetrical and even incommensurable with any form of idealism, a practice that can only work as an intervention, an effort to change the balance of forces in the theoretical and political practices, and in no way as a philosophical system, have to be considered as the starting points for any critical evaluation of the possibility of a materialist philosophy.

105. And this is very welcome, especially in comparison to the tendency of some of Althusser’s French editors of posthumous editions to treat aspects of Althusser’s philosophy and politics as expressions of a somehow dated conception of Marxism and left-wing politics. See, for example, Sintomer 1998.


110. Fredric Jameson has also described materialism in similar terms: ‘Rather than conceiving of materialism as a systematic philosophy it would seem possible and perhaps more desirable to think of it as a polemic stance, designed to organise various anti-idealist campaigns’, Jameson 1997, p. 36. On the same point of the materialist philosophy being possible only as a materialist practice of philosophy and not as a materialist philosophical system, see Macherey 1999, pp. 35–73.
Another merit of the texts on aleatory materialism concerns the evolution of Althusser's anti-essentialist and anti-teleological conception of the transition between different modes of production. This is the importance, in my opinion, of the notion of the encounter, leaving aside for the moment the more general 'ontological' use Althusser makes of the encounter as a philosophical metaphor. The transition to the capitalist mode of production remains an open question and there have been many efforts to theorise it, from Soviet Marxism's insistence on the forces of production as the principal aspect of historical development, to more recent attempts to present the emergence of specifically social-property relations in England as the essential aspect of the transition to capitalism. All these perspectives tend to view a certain aspect or element as playing the part of the self-development of an essence that marks the emergence of capitalism as the solution of the historical contradictions of feudalism.

The problem is that it is very difficult to bring all the elements which are present in the expanded reproduction of the capitalist mode of production in the same essentialist historical narrative and treat them as aspects of the relation between an essence and its expressions. The emergence of English 'agrarian capitalism', the first truly capitalist form of production, the development of Italian banking and credit practices (themselves having to do more with risk-taking and handling of foreign trade costs than with a demand to obtain some part of the total capitalistically extracted surplus-value), the emergence of the absolutist state and the unified, centralised territorial state (as opposed to the feudal fragmentation of territory and political authority), the emergence of 'bourgeois' culture and mentality as a result of the development of cities as administrative centres; these were not predestined to be part of the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production, even though this is what effectively took place. The notion of the encounter can help us see the crucial theoretical difference between the transition to a mode of production and its reproduction. In this reading, the notion of the encounter marks a break with any form of historical metaphysics and does not preclude the structured character of the social totality. There is nothing contingent in the articulation of these elements as aspects of the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. On the contrary, the only way to account for this reproduction is the emergence of capitalist relations of production as a structure in dominance and to assign causal primacy to the relations of production. This causal primacy holds also for the transition itself: only under the dynamics of the emerging capitalist forms of exploitation and the social forces that came along could this combination have taken place. To Althusser's warning, against any form of historical teleology, that the encounter might not have taken place, we must add the materialist insistence on the possibility of historical explanation: the encounter could not have taken place without the emergence of capitalist social forms.

In light of the above, we can say that there are elements of a common problematic in 'Marx in His Limits' and the texts on aleatory materialism. The effort to rethink the theoretical preconditions of communist politics and the search for a non-teleological form of materialism were at the centre of his thinking before and after 1980. And, in this sense, the editorial choice to publish both 'Marx in His Limits' and the texts on aleatory materialism in the same volume is more than justified.

2.5. **Contradictions of aleatory materialism**

The first problem concerns Althusser’s use of philosophical metaphors to a greater extent than his earlier writings. It is true that metaphors are in a way an essential aspect of philosophy,\(^{114}\) and are consistent with the difference in theoretical status between philosophy and scientific theory that Althusser proposed. But this turn towards a more metaphorical and even poetic thinking can also be considered a retreat compared to Althusser’s own insistence that the relation between Marxist philosophy and historical materialism as a science of history, results in materialist philosophy having a better awareness of its theoretical status and purpose.\(^{115}\) Although Althusser gave up early any notion of a philosophical science, the fact remains that he proposed a reformulation of philosophical interventions (and thus vocabulary) that took into account historical materialism as a theoretical revolution.\(^{116}\) There are also open questions concerning Althusser’s genealogy of aleatory materialism: apart from the specific problems already discussed, the lack of satisfactory explanation of what is included in this genealogy (especially philosophical ontologies traditionally considered alien to Marxist materialism such as Heidegger’s) and what is excluded (a large part of Marx’s own writings) is problematic.\(^{117}\)

The second problem concerns Althusser’s effort in his later writings to rethink the possibility of transformative and emancipatory political practice, the possibility of a radical commencement and the emergence of new political and social forms. This results in radical aporiae and a difficulty to present a theory of the political. For the most part, Althusser does not turn to his original formulations of a materialist conception of the conjuncture in a structured and overdetermined social totality as the starting point of a theory of the political practice, conceived as a complex combination of knowledge of the field and the balance of forces and of transformative intervention. On the contrary, he tends towards a conception of the solitary and unstable political gesture that more often than not fails to bring around the desired encounter and leaves no other choice apart from either some form of voluntarist decisionism or just waiting for the unexpected (which can be the inverse version of a messianic or millenarian conception of revolutionary politics). If Althusser’s theoretical trajectory can also be read – amongst other possible readings – as an effort to provide a non-historicist and non-idealist interpretation of Marx’s suggestion (in the third Thesis on Feuerbach) that *revolutionary practice* [revolutionäre Praxis] is the key for a materialist conception of theory, then Althusser’s final movement seems a theoretical retreat to a pre-Marxist conception of practice.

Althusser’s use of the notion of the void is also contradictory. We have already commented on the void as a metaphor for philosophy’s lack of any object. But there is also the question of the more ontological notion of the void. On the one hand, there is the possibility of reading the recurrence of void in Althusser’s writings as a metaphor for a relational conception of social reality, according to which what exists are fundamentally relations.\(^{118}\)

---

114. On the question of metaphors in Althusser’s later writings, see Suchting 2004.
116. André Tosel has also suggested that, in some of his later writings, Althusser seems to revert to a more traditional function of philosophy, especially in what concerns a philosophical strategy to bring forward a ‘progressive ideology’ (Tosel 2005, pp. 191–2).
117. On the contradictions of Althusser’s genealogy of aleatory materialism, see Tosel 2005.
118. A position also expressed by Macherey (1979, p. 218).
a conception which was at the basis of Althusser's theoretical innovations of the 1960s (social totality as a decentred whole, structural causality, 'absent cause'). On the other hand, in many of his later writings, Althusser tends towards an image of social reality as having the necessary empty spaces (margins or interstices) that enable the emergence of new social forms and new combinations of social elements. But this image of the void has more to do with an Epicurean rain of atoms, where new forms emerge only as swerves ex nihilo, and less with an historical-materialist conception of social emancipation being possible because social relations and structures are inherently contradictory, always amidst uneven processes of reproduction and transformation, and therefore constantly open to change.

And this brings us to another contradictory aspect of Althusser's later writings; namely, his turn towards the singular case, event, and fact. It is true that one can describe aspects of Althusser's materialism as a nominalism\(^\text{119}\) – mainly in the sense of a radical distinction between real objects and theoretical objects – but, in most of his writings, we are dealing with a nominalism of relations, not of 'things'. In these later writings, there are elements of a turn towards a nominalism of singular facts and cases, which, in a sense, is in accordance with the conception of the solitary (and therefore singular) political gesture. This atomistic empiricism is made very evident by his reference to constants and sequences of events and also by his positive appraisal of Hume. It is true that Althusser tries to bring this atomistic conception close to the Marxist notion of the tendential law, but the latter refers to the contradictory co-existence of tendencies and countertendencies as a manifestation of the contradictory nature of social reality\(^\text{120}\) and not to the perception of sequences of relations between singular facts as a result of human imagination and reasoning\(^\text{121}\) – a position quite far from the original conception of Althusser's materialism as anti-empiricism par excellence.

It is this emphasis on the singular case, this search for some tangible form of facticity that is at the basis of Althusser's inability to think, in these later writings, in terms of social forms. We have already commented upon his rejection of the notion of fetishism and, in general, of Marx's elaborations on the value-form. Although Althusser's insistence on the primacy of productive relations over productive forces and on the antagonistic character of class relations was very important and helped the theoretical break with forms of economism and technological determinism – facilitating the recognition of the importance of struggles and movements against the capitalist organisation of production – at the same time, it tended to underestimate the importance of social forms. This emphasis on the antagonistic character of social practices tended to underestimate the fact that class struggle does not take place only within antagonistic class relations but also under the weight of historical social forms that also induce their effects on the class struggle. In this sense, capitalism must be defined not only in terms of capitalist relations of production, but also in terms of the importance of the value-form (as an historically specific result of the hegemony of capitalist relations of production without reference to some form of simple

\(^{119}\) And, in the later works, there are positive references to nominalism. See, for example, p. 265.

\(^{120}\) Marx 1894.

\(^{121}\) This is the difference between a materialist position and Humean empiricism (Hume 1964).
commodity production)\textsuperscript{122} and all the forms of social (mis)recognition and fetishistic representations it brings along, which is exactly the reason for the contradictory complexity of the first volume of Marx's \textit{Capital}, an aspect missed by Althusser.\textsuperscript{123} Althusser not only chooses to ignore this dimension of social reality, but also tends to reject any form of dialectics.

3. Contingent encounter or materialist dialectic?

Perhaps the most important contradiction of Althusser's later writings is his rejection of any notion of dialectics, not only in the sense of a choice of vocabulary (which could have been interpreted as a 'bending of the stick' to the opposite of any form of historical teleology) but also in a more profound sense: Althusser's use of the notion of the encounter (in its more general ontological sense) seems to reject the dialectical character of social contradictions, in the sense that the primacy of the relation over its elements (and of the contradiction over its poles) means that the contradiction is, in a way, internalised in each element of the contradiction in a complex process of mutual determination, each pole of the contradiction being, in a sense, the result of the contradiction itself.\textsuperscript{124} On a more general level, we can say that Althusser's rejection of the notion of the dialectic leads to an underestimation of the 'labour of the negative', not in the sense of a self-development of an historical essence or \textit{Weltgeist}, but as the recognition of the constant effectivity of social antagonism, which constantly prevents social reality from becoming a closed system and creates possibilities of social change. At the same time, this rejection of dialectic can also be read as an underestimation of the complex and uneven character of social contradictions and the way they are articulated and overdetermined. And this is important since, as Althusser himself showed, in his original reformulation of Marxist dialectics in the 1960s and all his theoretical innovations (overdetermination, the novelty of Marxist materialist dialectic, the distinction between different kinds of contradiction), it is exactly this contradictory, uneven and overdetermined character of social reality which also makes possible a 'labour on the "labour of the negative"', that is revolutionary politics as transformative social practice.\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{122} On this reading, see Milios, Dimoulis and Economakis 2002. This is the problem with Bidet's effort to think the relation of capitalist productive relations and the value-form in terms of the articulation of capitalism (capitalist productive relations) as a structure and the market (commodity production and exchange in general) as a meta-structure (Bidet 1990; Bidet 1999).

\textsuperscript{123} And although a great part of recent and important work on the theory of the value-form has been rather Hegelian in its philosophical debts (for example Arthur 2002), I think that only a reworking of these questions in terms of a non-metaphysical and non-historicist materialism such as Althusser's can help push forward Marx's immense theoretical revolution.

\textsuperscript{124} To formulate this point we are in fact applying elements of Balibar's criticism of Foucault (Balibar 1997, pp. 298–9).

\textsuperscript{125} It is also worth noting that the notion of overdetermination is relatively absent in Althusser's later writings.
It is true that, from the beginning, there was a certain tension in Althusser’s conception of the dialectic, depending on whether the emphasis was on conjuncture or structure, a tension Balibar describes as the tension between the more ‘Leninist’ or ‘Machiavellian’ emphasis on the singularity of conjunctures and the more structuralist critique of simple and expressive conceptions of the totality, a difference that Balibar thinks marks the two articles that introduced Althusser’s conception of the dialectic, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’ and ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’. But the fact remains that even this tension was within the scope of the search for a materialist dialectic. In this sense, Althusser’s references in the later writings to constants and sequences of events marks a theoretical retreat compared to his path-breaking earlier effort to rethink, in non-metaphysical ways, contradiction as the basis of a materialist conception of social causality. And, although the search for a refoundation of communist politics and the insistence on a break with any form of teleology is in continuity with his early works, this abandonment of the possibility of a materialist dialectic represents a clear break with his earlier work.

It is in the light of the above that we must choose a critical approach against the very notion of the aleatory. Although Althusser tries to distinguish between the aleatory and the contingent, in many cases he seems to opt for a conception of the chance encounter, an emphasis on historical contingency and surprise, a wait for the unexpected. But, in his return to the contingent, Althusser tends forgets a basic theoretical premise of both Marx and Spinoza, his main theoretical references; namely their conception of the dialectics of freedom and necessity, of freedom as necessity. Social change and the emergence of a just society is not the outcome of a chance encounter, but presupposes the intelligibility of social reality. It is the result of the society being determined and us being able to have knowledge of this determination (especially if we view determinism in the open sense of the contradiction being the basis of social causality) and not indeterminate.

In Spinoza’s terms, freedom is a consequence of an intelligible necessity. In Marx’s terms, it is knowledge of the objective conditions of the class struggle that makes possible the political direction of the class struggle. This is why we must say, using Althusser’s own metaphors, that although a materialist philosopher indeed jumps on a train on the move and she is always already within a particular historical conjuncture, she does not just simply travel along. On the contrary, she tries not only to discern which way the train is going, but how the train moves, what other routes are possible, and finally tries to turn the train towards the direction she thinks best, something that Althusser, faced with a profound political, theoretical and personal crisis, thinks impossible.

But, in order to render justice to Althusser, we can also say that his oscillations are a result of an oscillation which transverses any attempt to formulate a materialist practice of philosophy. On the one hand, we have the effort to bring forward the materiality of the social practices themselves as a rejection of any form of ontological dualism and

126. Balibar 1993a, p. 94.
128. It is worth noting that Slavoj Žižek has suggested that the classical position of freedom as conceived necessity (Hegel 1873 § 147; Engels 1987, p. 129) must be complemented with its ‘reversal’: ‘necessity as (ultimately nothing but) conceived freedom’ (Žižek 1999, p. 44).
any metaphysical beyond; an effort that runs the risk of empiricism, positivism and misrecognition of the mechanisms which produce social phenomena. On the other hand, there is the necessity of criticising ideological misrecognitions, of theoretically producing the real as opposed to the obvious of the ideological surface, an effort that runs the risk of theoreticism and a foundationalist approach to knowledge. In a sense, there is no exit from this oscillation, only the successive bending of the stick to the opposite side. But the question is: towards which side? I think that, although Althusser thought that the main theoretical danger came from a metaphysical conception of the historical possibility of communism, today the key danger comes from neoliberal ideology’s pre-emptive denial of any form of intelligibility of history apart from social reality as an aggregation of individual social transactions. Today, a return to dialectics is more than necessary, for which Althusser’s theoretical adventure, even in its contradictions and failures, remains an indispensable theoretical reference.

Reviewed by Panagiotis Sotiris
Panteion University, Athens
psotiris@otenet.gr

References

—— 1978, Ce qui ne peut plus durer dans le Parti Communiste, Paris: Maspero.

130. A position that led Althusser to a position similar to the one held by non-Marxists such as Foucault and Deleuze that proposed a politics of the singular, the fragmentary, and the nomadic.


—— 1993, La philosophie de Marx, Paris: La Découverte.


The current neoliberal wave of capitalism poses problems for radical theory in a number of ways. The previous Fordist/Keynesian phase had involved an attempt to moderate social struggles through incorporative and bargaining structures. Since the 1970s, such structures have been dismantled globally. A new social authoritarianism has grown up within the bowels of ostensibly liberal-democratic societies. Alongside these changes, the traditional working class of factory workers has been marginalised, at least in the core countries, with flexibility and service-sector work becoming *leitmotifs* of the situation. Theoretically, the predominance of Marxism in radical theory has been challenged by the rise of poststructuralist perspectives. How are these changes to be theorised and responded to?

This article examines these issues with reference to Negri’s recent publication, *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy*. This book is a collection of essays by Antonio Negri from the 1970s, when he was intimately connected to the movements known as *operaismo* and *autonomia*. The title is somewhat misleading; the essays contained here refer only rarely to either democracy or civil war, and while a historian studying the crisis of Italy in the 1970s might certainly make use of these essays as source-material, they are not primarily political commentaries. Rather, they are dense works of Marxist theorising about the structures of postmodern capitalism and the possibilities for revolutionary responses, understood in terms broadly consonant with those of classical Marxism (as opposed to the extensively revised transformative frameworks of most Western Marxisms).

These are basically a *What Is to Be Done?* for the postmodern era. They can and perhaps will be read for many purposes, some more fruitful than others. These texts are vital for locating Negri’s more recent work, useful for examining the history of radical activism, and important as analyses of developments in contemporary capitalism and the state. Indeed, they are perhaps more useful for people interested in transformative politics than Negri’s more recent work; they are certainly more radical, and lack the reformist/liberal inflections of the political agenda of *Empire*. This is not to say that Negri is always right in what he says or that his work from the *autonomia* period is without weaknesses. However, as an exercise in political radicalism, it can be questioned whether Negri’s later trajectories are necessarily for the better.

In these early texts, Negri’s approach is an exercise in Marxist social analysis, from its reliance on an antagonistic model of a revolutionary future as a resolution of a confrontation between adversaries driven by social crises and conditions (rather than as a moment of flight), to the attempt to locate social changes in economic terms and to make sense of them by reference to the law of value, the composition of capital and the conditions of economic crisis. The struggle is not from the margins, which no longer exist; it is to take place at the core of capitalism itself (p. 108). As for Marx, so for Negri, living labour is
social creativity, struggling for freedom against an imposed, alienating system of needs (p. 152). This said, the theory advanced is, in some respects, far from orthodox. It presents the reader with a paradox as to whether to read the theory contained here – and the traditions of autonomia and operaismo more broadly – as ultra-orthodox (as the regular exegetical references to Marx and the conventionally Marxist theoretical vocabulary would suggest), or as a kind of poststructuralism avant la lettre (as the distinct concerns of the text, such as the emphasis on fragmentary power in everyday life and the force of everyday resistance often suggest). Certainly Negri is not a ‘neo-Marxist’ in the usual sense, and happily poses as a defender of orthodoxy against Eurocommunists and other ‘revisionists’; yet his own views, while rooted deeply in Marxism, are highly innovative and not at all what one would expect from a classical Marxist. Even more paradoxically, this is combined with a theoretical rigour and consistency far greater than that shown in Negri’s more recent work (though this too may seem easier to make sense of methodologically once the earlier work is understood).

The apparent contradiction is resolved if the texts are viewed less through a contemporary lens than in their context. Autonomism as a theoretical and political movement stands at the borderline between a period when Marxism dominated European radicalism and a period where decentred struggles become the norm. And, like situationism, it can be viewed as bridging the gap between the two, showing a means by which one discourse of resistance transmuted into another. In this respect, these texts offer vital living record of a moment of discursive transition, for those able and ready to read them in the context of what came before and after. The change runs through the texts themselves, which become more ‘unorthodox’ and poststructuralist as one proceeds through the book. The first text, for instance, is harshly Leninist in its hostility to subcultural resistances and pre-figuration and its preference for a classical vanguard model (pp. 38–9, 47). But, by the time of the next text, the class struggle is taken to include the struggle for individual liberation (p. 112), and by the time of the final essay, everyday resistances outside the workplace are an inherent part of Negri’s project to create a new society made up of ‘diffuse networks of power’ (p. 279), while the vanguard model is criticised as tendentially authoritarian (pp. 283–4).

Despite these changes, Negri never manages to resolve the tension between a desire for a social struggle based on totalities and a desire for fragmented, decentred, directly autonomous exercises of power in everyday life. Throughout his autonomia period, Negri insists on a need for organisation, authority, centralisation and common expression,2 while at the same time as insisting that social movements are diversifying3 and also that they tend to spontaneously unite.4 Even today, as exemplified in his introduction, Negri seeks a ‘political representative of those who are exploited’ (p. xlv), in spite of his Foucauldian/Deleuzian heritage which would deny any such representation. The messianic call for ‘renewal’ (p. 180) is also echoed in his more recent work.

Another way the texts can be read is as a series of engagements with contemporary capitalism, and hence as something politically vital today. The descriptions of the functioning of capitalism are in many ways profound, even prophetic; Negri discusses

---

changes in the world economy which it took the rest of academia another twenty years to recognise – as, for instance, when he writes of the rise of transnational corporations and the resultant crisis of the nation-state (pp. 24, 166–7). He also offers a new framework for conceptualising these changes, offering a theory of what he calls the ‘material constitution’ (as distinct from the formal constitution), which is to say, the basis on which power operates in a particular social composition. In some respects, Negri is perhaps overly prophetic, describing as present facts various historical tendencies which were only realised later. If so, this would mean Negri’s early work is more relevant today than in its own day, while the claims in his recent work may still be ‘premature’, perhaps foreshadowing a type of capitalism which might emerge if the world system recomposes itself from its current crisis.

According to Negri, capitalism is becoming an increasingly irrational system of violent domination both in the workplace and in society as a whole (through the state); a social practice Negri refers to as ‘command’ (pp. 32–3). It becomes increasingly totalitarian or fascistic, reconstructing society as a simulation based on itself. In real subsumption, the collective appears in the form of an analytic whole – indifferent, equivalent and circular (p. 48), an ecstasy of total inclusion. Command becomes ever more fascistic in form, ever more anchored in the simple reproduction of itself, ever more emptied of any rationale other than the reproduction of its own effectiveness.

The reason for this, according to Negri, is that valorisation of capital is no longer possible. The working class, in its recomposition during the Keynesian period, has made it impossible to extract surplus-value directly from the wage relation. As a result, the law of value has ceased to function, surviving only as a mystification – the fantastic idea of capitalist progress and development. Real subsumption, the loss of the boundary between capitalism and the society it exploits, creates a problem for value because there is no outside standpoint from which to measure.

Today’s crisis is that ‘value cannot be reduced to an objective measure’ because of real subsumption, which eliminates mediation, because all directly participate in production. Real subsumption is the realisation of the law of value, but also passes beyond it into mere tautology. The condition of immeasurability means that real subsumption is a permanent crisis of capitalism. The capitalism of real subsumption and command is in crisis due to its non-separation from society and its loss of consent. It deals with the first problem by simulating society:

[Conflict is] deflected… through the automatic micro-functioning of ideology through information systems. This is the normal, ‘everyday’ fascism, whose most noticeable feature is how unnoticeable it is.

5. See Bologna 2005, p. 42.
11. Negri 2003, p. 27.
Legitimation is replaced by information, technocracy and a simulation of participation.\textsuperscript{14} The second contradiction, the permanence and irreversibility of antagonism, is more crucial.

The mystification of society is sustained by command (pp. 78–80). Hence, the crisis of the law of value leads to its modification in form, so that it is reduced to state command (p. 233). Whereas, in the Fordist planner-state, legitimacy was founded on the law of value and ideas of development and productivity, in the crisis-state it becomes simply a matter of command as the basis for legitimacy (p. 214), and the semblance of democracy is replaced by imposed social participation based on violence (p. 221). Command arises from the self-referentiality of the tautological construction of value.\textsuperscript{15} Command involves the exploitation of the whole of social labour without a specific mechanism.\textsuperscript{16} It is linked to ‘the substitution of a fictional reality for an unknowable reality’.\textsuperscript{17}

The state thus ‘frees itself’ from even bourgeois democratic constraints, becoming increasingly arbitrary and despotic and adopting a ‘monstrous role as the technical organ of domination’ (p. 5). As Negri puts it,

\begin{quote}
State-restructuring increasingly becomes an indiscriminate succession of acts of control, a precise technical apparatus which has lost all measure, all internal reference points, all coherent internal logic. (p. 245.)
\end{quote}

The state gets a new, expanded role; its coercion is strengthened, and relations of obligation are diffused (p. 82). In everyday life, the ‘intensification and extension of state command’ leads to ‘the arrogance of the state, the disintegration of the rights to liberty, the preventative extension and hardening of repression’.\textsuperscript{18} A new state-form emerges, the ‘crisis-state’, which depends on ‘an organic capacity-necessity of producing crises at any moment and any place’.\textsuperscript{19} This leads to a contradiction between ‘closed time’ of legitimate equilibrium and ‘open time’ of constitutivity, multiplicity and antagonism.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{quote}
[Capitalist time has] a necessity of breaking and dissolving every value, so as to reconstruct it only as circular function of command… destroying every productivity of the system that is not reproduction of command and of the possibility of terror. (p. 75.)
\end{quote}

In its attempts to regulate social labour across the entire social space, the state often relies on legal and penal repression because of the diffusion of labour and the working day, turning the welfare state into a tool of repression or production and constructing an internal warfare state.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{14} Negri 2003, pp. 90, 111.
\bibitem{15} Negri 2003, p. 27.
\bibitem{17} Negri 2003, p. 39.
\bibitem{18} Negri 2003, p. 83.
\bibitem{19} Negri 1996a, p. 164.
\bibitem{20} Negri 2003, p. 42.
\end{thebibliography}
Negri thus provides an account of the very arbitrary and despotic state of which he later becomes a victim, and understands clearly the logic driving ‘anti-terror’ laws and the raft of other repressive measures (from ASBOs, Italy’s ‘terrorism’ laws, and the threat of ID cards in Britain, to ‘quality of life’ laws, the Patriot Act and the wave of mass imprisonment in America) which have replaced the welfare state as the state’s main field of activity. Negri links mystification closely to violence and arbitrary power, pointing to an interesting possible line of research – for Negri, mystification has to be imposed socially by means of violence, so that these become two sides of the same coin; mystification becomes ‘bad conscience and mystified will’, and mystified will expresses itself as ‘repression’ and ‘terrorism’ as the only ways in which it can impose itself (p. 257). This insight could form the basis for further research on the relationship between oppressive social relations and the beliefs and attachments of dominant groups.

The state thus becomes a terrible force of arbitrary power and violence. It does so, however, without producing the Eurocommunist ‘autonomy of the political’ which Negri derides. Rather, as a result of the decline of civil society as an autonomous sphere, the autonomy of the state has been reduced to the point of non-existence (p. 141). Thus, while it operates more and more aggressively, it does so in ways which fit capitalist dominance very precisely. The state and civil society are fused in the form of social production, the illusion of equality is lost even as an illusion, and the state loses its autonomy and becomes a direct and conscious agent of capitalist domination and despotism (pp. 208–9). ‘[F]rom the capitalist point of view, the state carries on the class struggle directly’, and the working class ‘recognises in the state its direct adversary, its essential enemy’ (p. 140). In the face of the breakdown of synchrony of capitalist and working-class reproduction and the obsolescence of capitalism in relation to the development of productive forces, capital can dream of self-sufficiency only on the basis of an arbitrary ‘criteria of indifference’ (p. 246).

With mediation increasingly eliminated, class oppression, antagonism and resistance become more direct and clear. A radical antagonism between incommensurable social forces and logics is now the defining feature of the struggle between capitalism (and the state) on the one hand, and the socialised worker on the other. This antagonism is ‘not given in forms that can in any way be recuperated within identity’; it is irreducible and insoluble. The proletarian subject is reborn in antagonistic terms. The breakdown of measures of value and the imposition of arbitrary command mean there is no possibility of regulated principles or a negotiated settlement. The relationship between the proletariat and the state becomes a relation of war. This antagonism is entirely the result of the requirements of exploitation. Hence,

when the whole of life becomes production, capitalist time measures only that which it directly commands. And socialised labour-power tends to unloose itself

---

from command, insofar as it proposes a life-alternative – and thus projects a different time for its own existence, both in the present and in the future.28

Two opposite temporal codes are pitted against one another – command and liberation,29 social co-operation and command,30 multiplicity against the One of command which tends to become nothingness.31

Pluralism within the proletarian matrix thus translates into a dualism between this matrix and the capitalist/command matrix.32 The capitalist reduction of complexity to tautological equivalence leads to crisis as it clashes with plurality in social life and in production.33 In this structural situation of radical antagonism, dual power thus becomes the normal situation.34 The state now becomes central to capitalist social organisation.

The state bloc must take apart every potentially hostile social aggregation and reassemble it according to capital’s overall planned schema of functioning. (p. 141.)

The capitalist response to working-class sabotage also has the effect of intensifying the state’s repression, so that ‘capitalism’s state-system becomes ferocious, monstrous, and irrational’ (p. 242). There is thus an ever-present danger that capitalism will suppress spaces of autonomy and thereby preserve itself (p. 164).

Even the economy is restructured by command. Thus, capital seeks workers’ subsumption within capitalist command as an alternative to paid labour (p. 185). Command is combined with divide-and-rule so as ‘to render the workers’ struggle incommunicable and the socialised workers’ struggle headless’ (p. 138). Capital restructures labour so it is socialised, tertiarised and flexibilised, in order to undermine the wage rigidity and organisation of mass (factory) workers (pp. 142–3). Co-management and corporatism are central in the establishment of command (pp. 186–7), which is thus identified as not simply a negative relation of violence but also a positive arrangement of social space.

Another part of the system is ‘political income’ or patronage (pp. 251–2). Capitalism also seeks a new form of social composition based on automation and energy policy. This is, for Negri, a reinforcement of command, especially in the forms of nuclear power, nuclear terror and the vulnerability of energy systems (pp. 263–5). Because technological development is now itself simply an extension of command, capitalism is no longer progressive in the sense of developing the productive forces, and communism can no longer be conceived as an extension of capitalist development, becoming instead a matter of separation (pp. 268–9). Indeed, the accumulated time of machines is well-suited to command,35 and the nuclear state is the realisation of command at its most terroristic and wasteful.36

Negri’s approach makes sense through the prism of class composition, though this is only clear when *Books for Burning* is read alongside other *autonomia*-period works. Negri treats Marxism primarily as a theory of struggle as the driving force of history.37 A class composition is the combination of characteristics making up labour-power and the working class at a particular time.38

Labour is the basis of all creativity, change and affirmativity in social life. It is the basis of every society,39 pre-existing and driving political and social antagonisms,40 and, indeed, is the essence both of capital and of humanity. In his later works, labour is transformed into affect, *potenza*, and the power to act.41

The process of class composition is taken by Negri to be irreversible and progressive, leading to increases in the intensity of co-operation, the potentiality and productive capacity of labour, the socialisation of labour, the spread of abstract labour and the threat posed to the ruling class.42 Labour or the multitude constitutes itself as a social agent,43 and social changes are always driven by the working-class struggle to re-appropriate44 and to make capitalism conditional.45

Command and capital, in contrast, is a reactive, destructive, negative logic; it needs productive labour, but only so as to nullify it.46 However, resistance comes primarily from within the system, at its productive core, certainly not from marginal spaces.47 Capitalism comes into crisis whenever labour-power transmutes into the working class as a subject, because this subject is incompatible with command.48 It is in the ambiguous position of being in favour of the structural changes arising through class recomposition, but opposing the subjective attitudes engendered by these changes.49

This account is applied by Negri to explain the transition to neoliberalism. At the root of the crisis of Keynesianism and the rise of neoliberalism was the ‘irreversible emergence’ of a new class composition.50 Keynesianism went into crisis due to increases in the demands of the working class due to its increasing political composition.51 The working class has ‘internalized at a social level its refusal to be a commodity’.52 Socialised labour-power, with its needs and its mobility, makes it impossible to transform it into a commodity or to extract a surplus via wages.53 In this way, working-class struggle is at the origin of the

transition to neoliberalism, in which capitalism is forced to accept and to try to work with working-class mobility.

At the root of the crisis is the emergence of a new kind of working-class subjectivity. A series of autonomous, spontaneous working-class actions revealed a tactical intelligence contrary to the incorporation of the class in the social-democratic project. These new struggles attacked fixed capital and the status of work, and included new strategies of the kind Negri would later term exodus – absenteeism, mobility, socialisation of workplace struggles and so on. According to Negri, these struggles epitomise a ‘spontaneous negation of the nature of the working-class as labour-power’ (p. 205).

The main tendencies of worker resistance Negri identifies are self-valorisation, sabotage, refusal of work, and appropriation. Though distinct, these concepts all refer to a similar modality of resistance – workers in everyday life take back their lives from capitalist control by asserting their autonomy and acting to undermine the mechanisms of command. Class self-valorisation is about refusing capitalist recomposition by insisting on one’s separateness from it, and from the corporate labour-movement organs which are a part of it.

I am other – as is the movement of that collective practice within which I am included. I belong to the other workers’ movement… I have the sense of having situated myself at the extreme limit of meaning in a political class debate. (p. 237.)

One’s relation to capitalist development as a totality thus becomes a relation of sabotage and destructuring (p. 238). This is a proletarian counter-power, not a struggle against power (p. 235). Nevertheless, there is no translatability between capitalist domination and working-class resistance (p. 238).

Even at this relatively early stage, Negri is convinced that the rise of complex, networked forms of work is a progressive social factor. Hence, for Negri, ‘[q]ualified, complex, co-operative, technico-scientific labour reveals itself to us as collectively constituted real time’, which is also negative labour versus capital (p. 125). In other words, Negri is still committed to viewing the working class as constituted at present, in labour as productive activity, as the source of radical action and revolution. This leads to a certain ambiguity, since the forms of revolt are mainly those of what autonomists term ‘refusal of work’.

Negri tries to argue that this refusal in fact expresses the creativity of labour. Hence, the only existing labour which approximates the concreteness of capital is the labour expressed in the refusal of work. Productive rationality is thus a struggle against work in its capitalist form. Productive co-operation may at first present itself as refusal – the refusal of work as the basis of complexification. The proletariat is thus engaged in a ‘negative labour of self-valorisation’. This negative labour is labour in antagonism with command, expressing and containing a potential abundance and a desire for life. It expresses use-value as the

57. Negri 2003, p. 73.
liberation of time from exploitation, and liberation as ‘non-work’, as the ‘liberation of time from the conditions of exploitation’, from measure and command.

Self-valorisation is expressed in sabotage as a positivity establishing itself through separation (p. 259). The mistake of reformism, according to Negri, is that it misrecognises working-class self-valorisation as being a part of capitalist restructuring (for instance, of national development), when in fact it is a matter of destructuring (p. 253). Negri’s text would be livelier if the empirical examples of this praxis (from ‘autoreduction’ of prices through shoplifting and fare-dodging, to wildcat strikes, ‘sickies’, and machine-breaking in the factories) were discussed and demonstrated more directly. Indeed, the English-language material on autonomism is lacking greatly from the fact that the theory is mostly translated but the empirical material remains unavailable, making the theory seem more abstract and detached than was actually the case. For this reason, Negri’s discussion may seem abstract and speculative to many readers, but it is referring indirectly to a very concrete set of social practices which might not even be categorised as resistances aside from the framework used here. Basically, Negri is establishing a theory of the micropolitics of everyday life as a form of class struggle.

Negri goes a long way in conceptualising the political significance of such everyday resistance, which he sees as transmuting into a resistance against the logic of command itself (p. 33). Workers are now (or were in the 1970s) directly struggling for radical goals such as the destruction of the capitalist state and the extinction of reformism (p. 163), revealing themselves to be capable of immediacy at the very time the capitalists could recognise themselves only through the mediation of the state (p. 173). Class struggle now opens up the possibility of a qualitative leap to communism, because it directly takes the form of ‘an antagonistic reappropriation of the productive forces’ (pp. 152–3). ‘Possible consciousness and immediate satisfaction today contain, in themselves, the revolution’ (p. 153).

This revolution is to be a general struggle against capitalist power. ‘Communism is the construction of an armed workers’ society that extinguishes the power of the state by destroying it’ (p. 156). It is to take the form of direct reappropriation by workers (p. 157). In concrete terms, this means constructing autonomous spaces of rebellion.

The spaces opened up in the war between bosses and workers are new and singular: they are liberated spaces where material seized from the enemy gets rearranged, transformed into new offensive weapons, and accumulated as a wealth that destroys the enemy. (p. 200.)

Working-class self-valorisation accumulates in ways which enrich and modify class composition (p. 217), constructing working-class autonomy as a counter-force opposed to capitalist and state command.

This struggle triggers a social crisis. There is a ‘collapse of the very legitimacy of the state to guarantee the reproduction of capital’ (p. 162).

The capitalist world reveals itself to us for what it is: once a machine for grinding out surplus-value, it has now become a net thrown down to block the workers' sabotage.... [T]he more the form of domination perfects itself, the emptier it becomes; the more the workers' refusal grows, the more full it is of rationality and value. (p. 285.)

The crisis of the 1970s is thus viewed as not simply an economic crisis in a narrow sense, nor as a crisis of legitimacy on the Eurocommunist model. It is conceived as a crisis driven by social conflicts and class struggle, and one which is apparently without end. Crisis is institutionalised in the form of the ‘crisis-state’, and capitalist restructuring takes an increasingly desperate and arbitrary form. Crisis thus becomes a normal, not exceptional, social form (what Negri is later to call a permanent state of exception). In other words, crisis has become a permanent feature of the state and of capitalism, answerable not in the form of resolution but only in the form of resistance and overthrow.

According to Negri, the radical potentiality of the proletariat, and its current practices of refusal of work, is based on the possibility it embodies to produce co-operatively, free from command. Negative labour reaches towards but is not yet quite communism; it will become communism only when it has its own form of production. Revolution comes into being where real subsumption is achieved. The negation of command emerges as multiple tendencies opposed to it. It is based on reimposing the reality principle, the reassertion of the structural contradiction against its functional distortions in capitalist managerial theory and practice.

On this account, a ‘communist perspective’ is one which ‘anticipates a communist future’. Today, Negri argues, communism means the extension of this ‘proletarian institutionality’, which is practically emerging in struggle, seeking its own order and values.

The concept of proletariat is becoming an institutional reality. Not lifeless, but living.... An institutionality, thus, which seeks order and a systematization of its own values and with a ‘centripetal impulse’.

The proletariat presents itself as the sole rationality and ‘institutionality’. This vision of institutional change implies the formation of a new social order, and veers towards a repressive collectivism founded on the realisation of a human ‘essence’ as worker. Hence, social liberation is also the liberation of ‘productive forces’, even against the ‘fetters’ of

64. Negri 2003, p. 120.
70. Negri 2003, p. 95.
individuality. Negri criticises theorists such as Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze for downplaying the collective dimension and seeking instead lines of flight and the destruction of the unity of the system. The construction of a single alternative system, ‘communism’, is central to Negri’s project.

For Negri, the role of revolutionary organisation is to engage with, express or develop tendencies immanent in the class struggle and the class composition of society. A revolutionary organisation or ‘party’ cannot, Negri insists, play a representative role (p. 109), nor can it be a managerial body or a special violent body. Instead, violence must be simply a part of self-valorisation, not something special (pp. 283–4), and the organs of direct workers’ power are given a crucial position which the party is not to usurp. Nevertheless, the party has a crucial role for Negri.

The state is the party of capital, and similarly, the party is the anti-state of the working class (p. 215). Its role in these texts is to organise working-class counter-violence in order to prevent the everyday resistances from being suppressed by means of command (p. 88) and, hence, to ‘open spaces for the growth of workers’ power’ (p. 97). Its role is ‘rupturing capitalist restructuring, command, and stabilisation’ (p. 156), and defending the frontiers of self-valorisation (p. 276). It is thus not a party in the classical Leninist or social-democratic sense, though it is still far closer to these models than would fit comfortably with new social movements which are increasingly based on network models, circles of affinity, and a refusal of ‘organisational’ forms. In many ways, however, these movements – or at least the more militant among them – have taken on the very tasks Negri assigns to the party. The functions Negri identifies for the ‘party’ are certainly important, given the role of state power, but it is not clear that a ‘party’ – as distinct from a network of resistances – is necessary to carry out these functions.

These essays, carrying as they do a strange meld of several theories and the impact of events, are not without substantial weaknesses. One problem with the texts, arising from their residual economism, is that Negri massively exaggerates the degree and intensity of working-class radicalism. Negri has enormous faith in the power of class composition to produce a corresponding ‘consciousness’, or even to produce subjectivity without ‘consciousness’. He implies that everyday acts of refusal are motivated by a thoroughly anticapitalist, or even communist, awareness, and that they are escalating into a confrontation with capitalism itself. He thus underestimates the extent of continued reactive attachments on the part of the exploited and excluded, and the extent to which these can be mobilised around issues of ‘crime’, the ‘anti-social’, ‘terrorism’, immigration, and social disorder to recuperate much of the working class into the project of command, so that, far from viewing the state as a direct adversary, workers attach themselves to the state as a bulwark against disorder and a guarantor of their in-group identities and attachments. Today, it is often the worker, in the role of ‘decent hard-working citizen’, who is at the forefront of the war against oppressed minorities, the precariat, and the ‘underclass’ of socially-excluded.

There is a limit to how far Negri can be criticised for failing to foresee this development, but it renders his work unduly optimistic about the possibility of social change, and leads him to put too much faith in social groups which are extensively integrated into capitalist discourse on an interior level. This renders revolutionary theory and practice more difficult than Negri imagined, throwing up a whole set of problems regarding the rearticulation of desires and attachments, as well as throwing doubt on the continued emphasis on the working class as revolutionary agent.

Furthermore, while Negri's discussion of separation implies an emphasis on dimensions of flight, his theory places an excessive emphasis on the moment of rupture thereby ignoring the discursive and articulatory subversions and ambiguities which construct the possibility of flight at the level of subjectivity. By locating flight in a schema retaining aspects of historical teleology, Negri downplays or ignores the importance of the active construction of revolutionary subjectivities, as well as the multiplicity of projects which can emerge from the negation of a specific system of oppression. Indeed, the ‘middle level’ of the ethico-political – the articulation of existential and libidinal nodes into political and ideological movements – is almost entirely absent from Negri's account, which short-circuits between politics and class composition without considering the complex questions of identity-formation, ‘common sense’, libidinal microfascism, populism, epistemological privilege, and all the other socio-cultural issues which prevent the direct translation of class structures into political subjectivities.

A second problem is that the residual Leninism of Negri's project leads to an avoidance of difficult questions about postrevolutionary societies and a continued faith in the possibility and desirability of a single, centripetal social system with its own singular ‘order’ and ‘values’. This leads to the usual self-contradictions one can expect from vanguardism. For instance, Negri announces the refusal of work at the same time as insisting that everyone must work in a postrevolutionary society (p. 271), an inconsistent position excused in typically Hegelian terms as a ‘necessary contradiction’ (p. 278). This inspired fellow autonomist Sergio Bologna to denounce Negri as not really a theoretician of the refusal of work.

Similarly, Negri insists on class dictatorship and a form of social power based on exclusion of enemies, also including an imposition of ‘recognition of the centrality of productive labour’ on reformist workers (p. 261). That the workers who resist work today would do so also in a communist society, and that they may not see the point in a revolution which continues (albeit ‘transitionally’) the very social forms they resist, does not occur to Negri. The difficulty here is that Negri is constructing an arborescent structure with a central pole,

75. Sergio Bologna, however, was aware of these pressures, writing at the same time and within the same political framework. In ‘Crisis of the Crisis-State’, Negri does recognise the rise of anti-crime and related discourses and appears to locate them in the internal management of the system. Bologna 1977, pp. 184–5. This would imply that workers drawn into such ideologies are not displaying working-class subjectivity, which appears only in differentiated actions. If this is what Negri is suggesting, it is basically a repetition of the common sense/good sense dichotomy in Gramsci, but supplemented with a naïve assumption that the structural forces of class composition will win out over ideological decomposition.

76. See my discussions of this issue in Robinson 2004.

which runs contrary to the logic of refusal and multiplicity of the very social movements he seeks to channel. Similarly, he has little sense of the ways in which discourses of state power become self-preserving and expansive, and in which exclusionary discourses construct reactive forms of desire which resist their own overcoming. He shares the naïve faith of early Marxists that the valour, correctness, and historical destiny of workers and/or the party will guarantee against disaster and against the reproduction of the present out of the new future. This unreflexiveness about his own discourse throws a shadow over his revolutionary problematic.

Both of these kinds of problems reflect an underlying difficulty with the kind of theory deployed here, which rests on heavy ontological assumptions about the nature of social discourses (for instance, that these discourses form a totality, and that productive forces have a certain structural primacy within this totality). Negri's ontological assumptions are often a barrier to asking such concrete questions, serving as a convenient bridge over problems in his arguments. For instance, if the radicalism of the working class is guaranteed by its status as the bearer of living labour, if its existence as 'collective substance' gives it its own temporality and institutionality as Negri claims, it is easy to read such a position into its actions, without asking too many questions about the actual motivations for these actions.

Negri also underestimates the extent to which his political agenda of autonomous spaces is prefigured in earlier struggles: for example, the hush-arbors organised by slaves, Resistenz in Nazi Germany, resistance to the Stalinist dictatorship, and medieval millenarian movements reacting against feudal and clerical power. This problematises Negri's historical periodisation and exceptionalism, and suggests that he is discussing strategies of resistance common to many social movements, not a new outgrowth of the latest stage of capitalism.78

In these regards, Negri's work would have benefited from an earlier and more comprehensive turn to Foucault. By this I mean that the Foucauldian approach to history, with multiple turns and no single linear path, and with multiple resistances rather than a single revolutionary subject, has more affinity to the multiplicity of social struggles than the unitarising framework deployed by Negri. Even with his turn to Foucault (and Deleuze) in his more recent work, Negri still has not adopted this aspect of their critique of the kind of theory of history he proposes. Richard Day, quoting Colin Ward quoting Paul Goodman states: 'A free society cannot be the substitution of a “new order” for the old order; it is the extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of social life'.79 This is also the path increasingly followed by Negri's fellow autonomist John Holloway.

Negri's account of postmodern capitalism mirrors that of Jean Baudrillard in The Mirror of Production. The similarities – simulation, information, arbitrary command, hypostasis, radical antagonism – serve to highlight a crucial difference: while Baudrillard's critique attacks the imposition of the primacy of production as such, Negri persists in assuming this primacy, and hence in locating transformative agency within the system and denying the possibility of effective marginal or external agency. Negri may well be wrong that antagonism arises within the production logic of the system.

Oppositional formations often operate instead in terms of gift-economy, subsistence, ludic practices, and other forms which escape the problematic of ‘production’. In the periphery, indigenous resistance linked to non-capitalist value-systems, and sometimes non-capitalist local economies, is becoming increasingly important. For many anticapitalist critics, including insurrectionists such as Crisso and Odoteo and Alfredo Bonanno (whose work shows some parallels with Negri’s autonomist writings even while denouncing the more recent Negri), as well as for radical ecologists, post-left anarchists and indigenous movements, the reduction of life to labour and production is an even more basic alienation and repression than the subsequent exploitation of this labour in the system. Similarly, for Negri’s erstwhile collaborator Guattari, the repressed force is not labour but desire, and there is a need to re-singularise, to increase diversity, rather than to subsume singularities in an overall system (The Three Ecologies). Resistance to subsumption in the categories of labour and production seems a far more viable motive for refusal of work and autonomist types of resistance than the rather upside-down idea that refusing to work is really a kind of work.

The assumption of a progressive character to successive waves of composition, restructuring and recomposition, even to the point where deskilling comes to seem progressive, leads to the twin problems of implicit cheerleading for what may in fact be capitalist forms, and an unrealistic optimism about the effects of social changes. This persistent Marxian teleology operates as something of a deus ex machina as regards questions of the source of future transformative agency and overcoming problems of psychological and ideological integration.

Another problem is that the focus is very narrow. Negri is theorising struggle against specifically Italian capitalist relations, which are either taken as an exclusive referent or taken to be representative of global capitalism as a whole. But certain claims of Negri’s do not hold up outside (at most) a Western context. For instance, the elimination of mediation and the near-total capitalist dominance of social space are typical of Western capitalist societies, but do not accurately depict capitalist control at the global periphery, where a fusion with non-capitalist social forms is often still a precondition for capitalist operation.

In ‘Value and Affect’, Negri goes as far as to assert that while global inequality has increased, the periphery has lost its specificity as capital reabsorbs spaces of autonomous use-value. Indeed, Bologna questions whether the account is adequate even to Italy, where mediations such as the Historic Compromise had not, at the time, died out. Similarly, the theory of political income would have to be extended and deepened to make sense of the complex, often ethno-religious, forms of patronage used to sustain capitalism in much of the global periphery.

The relocation of primary resource-extraction and manufacture to newly industrialising and semi-peripheral countries is largely absent from the account of socio-economic changes. And the energy crisis obviously has very different effects for producing countries than those which are mainly consumers. The absence of an international dimension and a resultant Eurocentric perspective haunt these essays, giving an impression of a partial view which claims totality. This also has implications for issues of resistance, since Negri’s political prescriptions arise from his descriptions of class composition. For instance, the emphasis on

resisting at the core, the supposed destruction of margins, the dismissal of mediations and partial resistances, are largely inapplicable in a peripheral context, and thus, are based on misunderstandings of capitalism and its others – for instance, as regards the relationship between capitalism, subsistence and petty-commodity economies in some peripheral countries, which continues to allow capital to exploit labour at below reproduction costs. In pursuing theoretical totalisation, Negri neglects the periphery and ends up with a Eurocentric resistance strategy.

Nevertheless, there is a lot to be learned from these texts, especially for those interested in understanding and resisting the peculiar contemporary fusion of capital and the state and the increasingly arbitrary and despotic forms of state power today. From the earlier Negri of the autonomist period to the later Negri of *Empire* and *Multitude*, a number of changes can be discerned. To begin with, the thesis of radical antagonism is seriously blunted, if not dropped entirely. This is clear from Negri’s later discussions of his prolegomena on time, in which he rejects this idea as too reductive and explicitly disconnects from the idea of opposing an enemy. Without this trope, Negri’s post-Marxism becomes correspondingly more Hegelian and reformist.

The recent Negri has become increasingly concerned with the idea that capitalism itself is made up of networks, differences and autonomy; while these may be still at root attributed to class/multitude composition, they suggest Negri has veered away from his earlier insistence on the oppositional potential of such phenomena against the reductive logic of systemic command. Similarly, command, terror and totalitarianism, so important to the autonomist-era Negri, are played down in his recent work, to the point where Guantanamo Bay appears as no more than an aberration. Meanwhile, the problematic aspects of his earlier theory – the assumptions of spontaneous unity, the insistence on the internality of resistance, the denial of actualities of mediation and syncretism – are taken to greater lengths.

The importance of everyday refusals and sabotage in preventing the forcible subordination of the whole of society into an overarching apparatus of control is one of the most central lessons of these texts. So too is the awareness that the internal structures of the dominant social forms themselves tend towards disastrous developments happening in the state and in its relation with society. Hence, Negri is right to conclude that responses to these developments cannot take the form of a re-affirmation of earlier, less vicious state-forms or of a more progressive model of capitalist development, but must involve autonomy, separation, and the potential for revolutionary change to overhaul or overthrow the very discourses which construct domination. These insights – shining clearly in *Books for Burning*, sadly weakened by the time of *Empire*, yet utterly relevant and vital for the present – are crucial for resisting a present based on domination. It is here above all that the importance of these texts resides.

Reviewed by Andrew Robinson
University of Nottingham
ldxnr1@yahoo.com

References


Although the struggle over working-time plays a key role in Marxist political economy, little has been written on the contemporary transformation of working hours from a Marxist perspective. Instead, the question of working hours has been largely left to Weberian and neoclassical scholars. While the first perceives the development of working hours primarily as a dependent variable of technological progress and the continuous improvement of productivity, the second explains differences in working hours exclusively by variations in income. By doing so, both approaches fail to make sense of the advancement of working-time in the last fifty years and the last twenty years more specifically.

Obviously, working hours have not fallen automatically with growing productivity, as capital forced workers to put in persistently long and, in part, even rising working hours while investing in new and labour-saving technology. From an historical perspective, moreover, earnings (and hence consumption) tended to increase faster than working hours decreased, while, during certain periods, both declined and increased simultaneously (as, for example, in the second half of the 1990s in the United States, when a short-term recovery in wages was accompanied by a surge in working hours). Less dogmatic scholars have attempted to explain these paradoxes through the individualisation and diversification of working hours in postmodern and knowledge-based societies, as well as through the impact of consumerism and consumer cultures that demand excessive working hours and the destruction of natural resources. But these attempts too have no explanation for the substantial differences of average working hours between countries and sectors, and the similar pressures workers are exposed to independently of their individual jobs and consumer preferences.

The neoliberal surge in working hours

In Modern Times, Ancient Hours – Working Lives in the Twenty-First Century, Pietro Basso radically questions such interpretations and instead argues in a traditional Marxist manner that the length of the working day is determined by class and social struggles, not by technological progress and life styles. At the centre of his argument stands the important insight that the substantial rise of working hours in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s is not a specific North-American phenomenon, as argued by Juliet Schor and others. Instead, the extension of working-time is the result of the appearance and spread of neoliberalism that followed the crisis of postwar capitalism in the 1970s. Consequently, the adoption of neoliberal policies in the European Union will most likely lead to a similar extension of working hours in Europe, if European trade-union organisations and working-class parties are not able to withstand the neoliberal offensive. It is important to note that Basso came to this conclusion in 1998 (when his book was initially published in Italian) – the same year the first part of the 35-hour legislation was introduced in France and most commentators were stressing French and European distinctiveness in the maintenance of a certain level of class consciousness.

Since 1998, the situation has changed: the conservative government coming into power in France in 2002 not only introduced permanent exceptions to the 35-hour week for establishments with fewer than 20 employees; but, in March 2005, the government passed a new bill that further eroded the 35-hour standard, after some of the positive aspects of the reduced working week had already faded due to increasing working-time flexibility, which was also part of the 35-hour deal. Among other things, the bill introduced the possibility to work beyond the statutory overtime quota set at 220 hours a year. It also removed the cap on working days that can be accumulated in working-time accounts and abandoned the obligation to balance these accounts after a certain period of time. Instead, these days can now be cashed in. For managerial staff, moreover, the possibility of ‘buying out’ free time goes even further: managerial staff can now choose between the additional days off granted by the 35-hour law and extra-payments.

The effects of this reform are clear: the result will be a creeping working-time expansion. Not surprisingly, the French employers’ confederation welcomed the changes, which were passed against massive protests, including hundreds of thousands workers and supporters rallying at several occasions in the streets of Paris and other large cities in the weeks before the adoption. The employers’ confederation has lobbied intensively to get rid of the 35-hour ever since its introduction in 1998. In the wake of consistently high unemployment, which had increased for very different reasons, including the continuous austerity policies applied on the national and European level, the employers' confederation nevertheless had some success in spreading the neoliberal argument that the 35-hour week costs jobs because investors move away. A particularly cynical slogan launched by the employers' confederation in this struggle was ‘time for myself, a job for someone else’.

The same argument – shorter working hours costs jobs instead of creating new employment – has also dominated a debate on the adequate length of the working day in Germany in summer 2004. The discussion started when Siemens publicly announced that it will relocate plants to Eastern Europe, where working hours are longer and wages are lower. In Germany, the once powerful metalworkers’ union IG Metall had won a stepwise introduction of the 35-hour week by a militant strike wave in the mid-1980s. Yet, in this case too, the union had to make significant concessions with regard to working-time flexibility. As a result, Germany has highly flexible working-time regulations on a company-by-company basis, allowing employers to avoid the payment of overtime supplements. Moreover, the 35-hour week was limited to the metal and printing sectors and did not apply to white-collar workers. As a sign of growing weakness, IG Metall failed to extend the 35-hour week to Eastern Germany. In 2003, a strike to force employers to adopt the Western-German standard more than a decade after reunification failed, partly due to the lack of support by East-German workers, who were anxious not to lose their jobs. In the Siemens case, 4,000 workers in Western Germany were threatened with unemployment.

In the ensuing public debate, employer representatives and conservative opinion leaders argued that shorter working hours cost jobs because they make Germany uncompetitive on

2. Information on the 35-hour week reform is mainly drawn from EIROnline 2005a; EIROnline 2005b; EIROnline 2005c.
the world market. The argument put the union in a very critical position, as they had to explain to their members why it was important to stick to a 35-hour week and abstain from working longer to keep jobs. Ultimately, IG Metall gave in and offered a temporary exemption from the collective agreement. Until June 2006 employees in the two plants can work 40 hours a week.5

The debate quickly diffused from Germany to neighbouring Austria, where working hours in the metal sector never fall beyond 38.5 hours per week. Yet the problem is that, when the Germans start to work 40 hours a week, less-developed countries or countries with a lack of national capital such as Austria, but even more so with the new member states, have to work 44 or 46 hours to attract foreign investment. If we look at these developments, Basso was clearly ahead of the times when he stated that ‘there is a growing trend towards the lengthening, intensification and variability of the working-time of wage labour’ (p. 183).

**Historical developments and theoretical interpretations**

Against postmodern interpretations of the recent surge in working hours, Basso insists that

> [d]ealing with working-time means, in fact, dealing with the capitalist social system as a whole…. So, indeed, to get to the bottom of this trend…. one has to go back to the ‘old’ questions that are reputed, vainly, to have had their day. Questions such as the nature of the process of capitalist production as production of profit; the commodity-character of labour-power its peculiarity of being the only commodity that adds value; surplus value. (p. 19; italics in original.)

By removing the few but not insignificant concessions won by the working classes and their representatives during the postwar period, neoliberalism reveals the essential character and contradictions of capitalist society, including the continuous struggle over surplus labour time. From this perspective, neoliberalism is not simply a false development or a historical lapse as presented in much of the current critical literature on globalisation. Instead, it is a re-instatement and extension of basic capitalist rules and principles – including, most notably, the rule of the (world) market and the principle of profitability. As Basso notes:

> [I]t is the entire phase stretching from 1975 to 1989 and not just a part of the 1980s (1983–87) that is distinguished by an attack on the reduction of working hours won by the labour struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. And this attack, which is not due to transitory ‘perversions’ but rather to fundamental contradictions of capitalist society, found expression not only in the renewed lengthening of de facto hours, but also in other processes that are usually reputed – quite wrongly – to be ‘neutral’, such as the restructuring and maximum flexibilization of working hours. (p. 47.)

---

5. The two plants which have produced mobile phones for Siemens were shortly afterwards sold to BenQ from Taiwan. The German subsidiary which ran the production has meanwhile filed bankruptcy and most workers have been laid off.
Yet there is reason to take Basso’s argument even further as the current assault not only centres on the lengthening and flexibilisation of the working day. As the fight for shorter working hours in the postwar period took various forms – including the introduction of overtime limits, extended holidays and paid vacation, special-leave schemes as well as the reduction of the retirement age – the neoliberal counter-attack affects all these dimensions, aiming to profoundly change the general terms of the reproduction of the working class.

Although Basso deals with the fundamental contradictions of surplus-value production at several occasions in the book, the book has no explicit chapter on the Marxist labour theory of value. The author, instead, presents Marxist positions and arguments mainly by criticising mainstream accounts and, especially, Weberian interpretations of the development of working-time (neoclassical accounts are hardly mentioned). In particular, Basso takes great length to refute the widespread assumption that falling working hours are the result of growing productivity – a view that is shared by such prominent scholars as John Maynard Keynes and Paul Samuelson.

By pointing to historical data, Basso shows that the fall in working hours was ‘not the least bit systematic – that is, linear’ (p. 45). Instead, the reduction of working hours happened in waves that can hardly be explained by increases in productivity – rather, as Basso also shows, they can be explained by class struggles and insurgencies:

In point of fact, the working-time of industrial employees fell more sharply precisely in the historical phase (1870–1950) in which the growth of productivity was (relatively) less; and, vice versa, it has remained semi-stagnant in the period (1950–81 and beyond) in which the growth of labour productivity has been greatest (even if at a certain point it slowed down). (p. 32.)

His critique also holds if calculations are based on more detailed data. According to data drawn from Angus Maddison’s *The World Economy – A Millennial Perspective*, the majority of developed capitalist countries saw the greatest fall in working hours between 1913 and 1950, while the same countries experienced the utmost growth in productivity between 1950 and 1973. However, the inadequacy of the Weberian thesis becomes even more apparent if recent developments in the United States are taken into account.

The US simultaneously experienced a surge in working hours and a rise in productivity in the second half of the 1990s. Because of higher productivity, Americans could be expected to work less than Europeans do. Yet the opposite is the case: US workers on average put in more than 300 hours per year more than their French and German peers. Hence Basso hits the nerve when he asks:

How shall one explain the fact that in the past half-century… labour productivity has more than doubled in the United States while working hours have grown somewhat longer, not shorter? (p. 103.)

As already mentioned, Basso does not deal with neoclassical accounts that explain differences in working hours by variations in income. The reason may be that contemporary debates

---

on working-time reductions are dominated by Weberian rather than neoclassical theories.\textsuperscript{8} This does not mean, however, that the neoclassical explanation is not important. One of the 2004 Nobel-Prize laureates in economics, Edward Prescott, has recently argued that differences in average national working hours can solely be explained by differences in tax levels.\textsuperscript{9} Perhaps more problematic is that Basso himself occasionally (and, presumably, unknowingly) adapts a neoclassical view, when he, for example, argues that the recent surge in working hours in the US is partly due to decreasing wages.

To combat the stagnation or the fall in real wages, to cope with family debts… to drive out the unexpected spectre of downward mobility, an ever greater number of US workers are forced to bear an increase in the sweat, weight and length of working-time. (p. 36.)

The more accurate presentation of the argumentation would be that both the fall in wages and the rise in working hours are the result of a shift in the balance of class power and labour’s growing difficulties to confront capitalist exploitation. Personal debts and loans, moreover, play a particularly important role in neoliberal capitalism, because they allow capital to keep wages down while at the same time postponing the effects of this restriction, which creates its own problems and pitfalls with respect to the realisation of surplus-value in the sphere of exchange.

These minor objections, however, far from undermine Basso’s general conclusion. He correctly notes that while productivity and density of labour has multiplied… the length of the working day and working week has remained (almost)… unchanged in the United States and Japan, and has diminished only slightly in Europe. (p. 54.)

This does not mean, however, that the situation has not changed in the last thirty years: ‘while companies did make some concessions to organised labour in the 1960s and 1970s, after the crisis of 1974 they did everything possible to take back what they have given’ (Ibid.).

In his view, moreover, Reaganism (in the sphere of political economy) and Toyota-ism (in the area of corporate organisation) further amplified the contradiction between the rise in the productivity and intensity of labour and the persistently long and even growing working hours. In light of recent discussions on the affordability of the welfare system and the extension of the retirement age, it cannot be stressed enough that labour today produces the same amount of goods and services with a fraction of the time it needed at the beginning of the so-called affluent society. As Basso notes:

\textsuperscript{8} Good examples are the debates that predated the introduction of the French 35-hour week in 1998/2000. Several sympathetic social scientists stressed the positive effects working-time reduction would have for the competitiveness of the French economy because it would force French industry to improve efficiency and to invest in labour-saving technology.

\textsuperscript{9} Prescott 2004.
labour productivity has doubled since 1948. Workers in the US now produce in less than six months as much as they could produce in a year in 1948 – which means that, abstractly speaking, their working-time could have been halved without altering that standard of production (and consumption) which half a century ago was taken as a point of reference by the entire world. (p. 15.)

Welfare, hence, is not a question of affordability – it is a question of ownership of surplus labour.

**Working-time and production patterns**

Even if he stresses the connection between longer working hours and neoliberalism, Basso does not reduce the transformation of working-time to changes in economic policies ('Reganism'). He also points to changes in the mode of production which, in his view, demand an extension of working hours. He subsumes the manifold and complex changes that altered production systems since the 1970s under the term 'Toyota-ism'. The Toyota production system, in Basso's view, entails an increase in individual working hours because of its 'fundamental operative criterion . . . production with the least possible manpower' (p. 60). As he further explains, 'in Toyotaism management deliberately employs fewer workers in the production process than the number considered indispensable, in order to guarantee the highest possible level of tension in the workforce' (p. 61). Further constraints are created by the introduction of just-in-time delivery systems. These constraints and the suffocating pace give rise not only to overtime demanded by the company, but also to forms of 'voluntary and unpaid overtime'. Together with increasing time spent on commuting to work – this, again, a result of neoliberal restructuring and skyrocketing prices for houses and unaffordable rents in urban centres – overall working hours easily amount to ten hours a day (p. 66).

Although Basso's overall picture of the changes in the mode of production is confirmed by much of the critical literature on lean production systems, on a closer view there are, nevertheless, some minor inconsistencies in his argument. First, the intensification of work in 'lean' workplaces must be distinguished from the extension of working hours (following Marx's differentiation between the augmentation of absolute and relative surplus-value). Based on data from the Toyota's NUMMI plant in Freemont, California, Basso notes:

> The average number of seconds worked per minute jumped from 45 to about 57, and the rate of absenteeism was slashed from the 20 to 25 per cent from the old plant to between 3 and 4 per cent – which means that real hours rose overall by 40 per cent, without taking into account the further lengthening of hours intrinsic to Toyotaism. (p. 64; italics added.)

Yet, while there is an intrinsic trend to intensification following from the lean-production imperative to reduce unproductive time to the shortest possible extent, and, related to this objective, there is also a need for a certain flexibility in the length and distribution of working hours,10 the application of overtime is only one way of improving flexibility – one

---

10. The need for greater working-time flexibility also results from a change in the dominant mode of (relative) surplus maximisation: whereas, in traditional Fordist mass production systems,
that is especially popular in Japan and North America and, to a lesser degree, also in the United Kingdom. Other possibilities to boost flexibility include the introduction of additional shifts, averaging periods and time accounts, or the deployment of agency workers. Which strategy prevails depends not least on the existing working-time regulations and on labour's response to the request for greater flexibility. It is not an accident that many of the newly created 'lean' factories in the South-West US are not unionised.

Because class struggles are settled locally or nationally and respective institutions are developed, institutions do matter, even if Basso is correct to emphasise that the law of value or the pressure to increase working hours is the same everywhere. The author gives a short account of working-time struggles in Germany, France and Italy, but without detailed information on national peculiarities and institutional differences in the three countries investigated. Yet, even if the law of accumulation is the same everywhere, capitalism in general and neoliberalism in particular nevertheless depend on consent and legitimacy that can only be obtained at the national level and in nationally-specific class and social compromises. There is an obvious conflict between the logic of accumulation and the logic of legitimation. The important question is, therefore, how neoliberalism as a general pattern of surplus maximisation is reproduced in different national contexts, including different frameworks of working-time regulation. As Gregory Albo has pointed out:

> [t]heorizing the variations of the 'new capitalism' is . . . a two-fold project . . . On the one hand, the determinant patterns of exploitation, distribution and reproduction need to be examined and theorised in their own right for this phase of capitalism . . . . On the other hand, specific histories, places and class conflicts need to be explored as concrete cases of the modalities, social relations and class struggles of the 'new capitalism'. This is the project of mapping the varieties of neoliberalism, as institutionalized in states, in particular sectors and in specific workplaces and communities.  

The emphasis on the variety and distinctiveness of struggles and their translation into specific forms of working-time regulations is also important because capital's 'hunger for surplus labour' takes multiple forms, including the extension and intensification of working-time, and cannot be reduced to the appropriation of relative surplus-value and hence to the state of technological progress of certain countries or sectors. It is only through class resistance that capital is forced to invest in new and labour-saving technology and in the advancement of the means of production. For capital there is always an alternative way of extending the amount of surplus-labour: increasing working hours and extending working lives. Neoliberalism, from this perspective, should be understood as appropriation of class capacities and not only as amplification of general tendencies inherent in overall capitalist development. Neoliberalism, in other words, is a new form of social rule that cannot be analysed separately from struggles and strategies of resistance. And, as a new

---

form of social rule, it has, as we will discuss below, a lasting impact on the organisation of everyday life.

**Marketisation and flexibilisation**

But, again, these are only minor objections that do not disprove Basso's general line of argument. The only major shortcoming of the book is the author's account of the service economy. In Basso's view, there is no service-sector distinctiveness:

> [T]he question we are asking is this: is the social figure that represents the vast majority of the 'service world' – namely the common worker supplying abstract labour – so very different, so much more protected and more satisfied, than the industrial workers, as certain mythical portrayals of that world seem to suggest? On both counts the answer is no. (p. 127; italics in original.)

Yet, even if Basso is correct to subject false and unrealistic expectations related to the rise of the service economy to critique, this does not mean that there are not a number of specific constraints resulting from the distinctive nature of service-sector work.¹⁴

One important difference is that many services are delivered in direct and repeated interaction with the customer. In these cases, the working-time of service producers is to a large degree dependent on the time preferences of service users, whereas, in the auto industry, working shifts are set independently from the personal time schedules of the automobile purchasers. As a result, service-sector employers seek to adjust the working-time of their employees as exactly as possible to varying operating hours and variations in demand. This, in turn, demands particularly flexible working hours. In this perspective, part-time work is the most important source of flexibility because, in most countries, part-time hours can instantly be extended to the limit of standard working hours without an obligation of overtime payments.¹⁵ It is therefore not an accident that the service sector in most countries is characterised by an above-average percentage of part-time employment – and many women, for different reasons, depend on part-time jobs.¹⁶

The high percentage of part-time work in services is the reason why average working hours in services are usually shorter than in production. The adoption of neoliberalism, therefore, not only effects a lengthening of the working day as asserted by Basso. It also results in accelerating inequalities in the individual distribution of working hours. Inequalities increase between those with employment and those without, between men and women, and between those working in production and those labouring in services. Neo-Weberians often misinterpret growing inequality as the result of increasing individualisation and the diversification of lifestyles in postmodern societies.

Given that the service sector accounts for more than two-thirds of total economic activities in most of the developed capitalist countries, the emphasis on Toyota-ism or lean

---

¹⁴. For an informative description of the various features of the distinctiveness of service-sector work see Bosch and Lehndorff 2005.

¹⁵. In some countries, moreover, part-time workers are not entitled to fringe benefits.

¹⁶. One reason is the lack of affordable childcare facilities.
production systems which exclusively focus on modifications in the production sector, is too limited to grasp the full scale of change in the neoliberal mode of production. An alternative and, in my view, more accurate concept to describe the manifold constraints that result from the contemporary re-organisation of work in production as well as services is the notion of marketisation.

For working-time, marketisation means that working hours are increasingly subjugated to market constraints and, because markets, by definition, are not predictable, this means that working hours must necessarily become more flexible. While, in the production sector, marketisation is realised by the introduction of internal cost- and profit centres, the outsourcing of certain functions and activities, as well as the benchmarking of departments and production sites, in services marketisation mainly follows from the establishment of direct and repeated contacts between service producers and service users. Accordingly, it is no longer management, but increasingly the customer that confronts and tells the service worker what she is supposed to do. The human-resource-management literature praises customer-orientation as total customer satisfaction.

As a result of marketisation, it should not be surprising that flexibilisation is the most prevailing trend in the transformation of working-time over the last three decades. Even if Basso on several occasions points to the connection between neoliberalism and the rise of atypical and unsocial working hours, he hardly explains these changes in theoretical terms. The problem, perhaps, is that, to explain the drive towards increasing flexibility, one has to look beyond the traditional labour theory of value and take into account other meaningful contributions in the history of critical political economy. One contribution that is particularly useful for the explanation of capital’s persistent effort to flexibilise working-time is the work of Karl Polanyi.

As a starting point, it is important to remember that the opposite of flexibilisation is standardisation. From the workers’ point of view, standardisation entails an increasing predictability and stability of working-class lives against the risks and insecurities that are associated with the establishment of competitive labour markets. ‘[F]or Polanyi’, as Beverly Silver notes, ‘the extension/deepening of unregulated markets for labor and other fictitious commodities inevitably provokes a corresponding countermovement’. And, she further explains:

\[
\text{[e]ach extension and deepening of the labor market is countered by mobilization to regulate and constrain ‘the market for that factor of production known as labor-power’ through a variety of mechanisms including social legislation, factory laws, unemployment insurance and trade unions.}^{18}
\]

As Polanyi notes, ‘[t]o take labour out of the market means a transformation as radical as was the establishment of a competitive labour market’.\textsuperscript{19}

One of the most important results of this transformation was the establishment of the standard employment relationship and the standard 40-hour working week. The 40-hour working week made working hours gradually independent from short-term market

\textsuperscript{17.} Coutrot 1998, pp. 230–1; Sauer 2005.
\textsuperscript{18.} Silver 2003, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{19.} Polanyi 1957, p. 251.
fluctuations. Even if there were possibilities to depart from the standard within certain limits, employers were nevertheless forced to pay overtime premiums if they wanted their worker to work outside the defined boundaries. Standardisation of working-time, in short, is a way of making working-time gradually independent from market-driven variations in working hours, while flexibilisation is an attempt to subordinate working-time to market constraints. The book makes no reference to the process of marketisation, though Basso implicitly acknowledges that deregulation and the expansion of markets have an important impact on working-time and the employment of labour-power. At a certain point, he notes that

> making industrial relations (and thus working hours) ‘flexible’ means deregulation – breaking – the old rules of the conflictual social compromise between capital and labour that had been in place since World War II, to replace them with new rules… dictated by companies, markets and global regulated work schedules… and all the more so on the demands of workers for a reduction of working hours. (p. 68.)

**The transformation of everyday life**

From this perspective, standardisation is also an expression of relative decommodification, while the establishment of increasingly flexible working hours is an attempt to recommodify labour-power. Hence, the struggle over working-time is not only a struggle over the extent of surplus labour time, but also over the de- and recommodification of labour-power. And neoliberalism, before anything else, is an attempt to push commodification forward:

> The transition from ‘standard’ to ‘variable’ hours is so far from being neutral and advantageous for all the ‘social partners’ that it can be depicted as a ‘pressure to extend working hours to temporal spaces that once were sheltered from work’, as a ‘global colonization of time’ on the part of working time – or, to be more precise, on the part, and to the advantage, of the owners of working time (the colonizers), to the detriment of the sellers of working time (the colonized). (p. 76.)

A reference to Polanyi and the recommodification discourse would have made Basso’s convincing argument about the connection between the rise of neoliberalism, the flexibilisation of working-time and the transformation of everyday life even more powerful.

20. The 40-hour standard working week, however, was a standard that excluded many women with family obligations because they were not able to combine a 40-hour job with unpaid care responsibilities – especially if there were not enough child-care facilities. From this perspective, the extension of part-time work had an emancipatory effect because it allowed women to enter the paid labour market. Yet, as feminists have pointed out, the flexibilisation of working-time creates new problems for the reconciliation of work and family life as flexible hours often contradict with the regular time schedule of schools and kindergartens. Feminists such as Ingrid Kurz-Scherf have therefore repeatedly argued for the introduction of a new working-time standard – the 6-hour day and 30-hour week (Kurz-Scherf and Briel 1987).
In the final section of this review, I want to return to the strongest and most attractive proposition of the book – Basso’s argument that the recent surge in working hours can be explained by the imposition and extension of neoliberalism. As mentioned before, in 1998 when Basso presented his hypothesis in the Italian edition of his book, Europe still seemed to be following a different path in the development of working hours than the United States. Basso’s exceptional achievement is that he asked the right question at a time when (almost) everybody else was blinded by the notion of European distinctiveness. As he put it,

Our question now is this: are the conditions that have made working time heavier and longer in the United States producing the same effect throughout Europe? I think the answer is clearly yes. What we can observe is, at most, a certain delay due to the fact that Europe made great gains in competitiveness on the United States from 1945 to 1975… and also that the European proletariat has (until now) been more combative and better organized than its American counterpart – more capable of resisting the globalizing course of ‘neoliberalism’. However, if we take off our rose-coloured glasses we cannot help but see that the ‘law of the wolves’ – the supreme law of globalized capitalism – is progressively imposing itself in Europe too, even if Europeans like to think they are different. (p. 5.)

Six years later, much of the alleged European distinctiveness had disappeared. As the OECD notes in its 2004 Employment Outlook, while, in the 1970s and 1980s, per capita hours still decreased in the majority of developed capitalist countries, in the 1990s this tendency had changed and a greater number of countries (i.e. 15 out of 26 countries) recorded more or less pronounced rises in per capita hours.

The reversal of the long-term decline in hours per capita in the 1990s was widespread across OECD countries and regions, with only few exceptions still recording significant falls.21

Even worse: in the few countries that refrained from increasing and flexibilising working hours, the European uniqueness came under strong criticism as a major problem responsible for continuously sluggish growth and high unemployment rates in Europe.22

The International Monetary Fund, one of the main agencies that pushed for the worldwide adoption of neoliberal policies, criticised insufficient levels of labour utilisation in a recent report on the state of the European economy:

After three decades of uneven economic performance and persistently high unemployment, there is widespread consensus that Europe’s economic and social model needs to be reformed. Since the early 1970s, the area’s per capita GDP has

22. This is particularly cynical, as most of the recent working-time reductions, including the introduction of the 35-hour week in France, were launched explicitly to fight unemployment, and, while these measures at least showed some effect on the unemployment rate, neoliberals until now have no proof whatsoever that an extension of working hours has created the slightest increase in employment.
remained at 70 percent of the US level, as high labour productivity growth has been neutralized by a secular decline in labour utilization. Making the institutional and regulatory environment more market-friendly – more mindful of individual incentives to work, spend, save, invest, and innovate – is widely perceived as an essential ingredient of any policy package aiming to boost growth, reduce unemployment, and increase the economy’s resilience in the face of shocks.23

Under ‘labour utilisation’ the IMF subsumes such criteria as the average number of hours worked per citizen, the employment rate and the duration of the working life. From a Marxist perspective, labour utilisation, of course, is nothing other than a somewhat nicer expression for capitalist exploitation. As Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin note, the

ability to extract more labour per capita (more family members working, more hours per worker, more intensity per hour) must be understood as an expression of American dominance and goes a long way to explain the US-European GDP gap.24

What is also the result of imperialism and inter-capitalist rivalry has a strong impact on the everyday-life of workers and citizens that suffer from rapidly deteriorating working and living conditions.

The extension and flexibilisation of working hours resulting from more than three decades of neoliberal restructuring is only one side of the coin, however. The simultaneous cutting of welfare expenditure and the dismantling of the public pension system makes it increasingly difficult for workers and citizens to pursue any activities that do not directly relate to capitalist accumulation. As Basso notes with a certain bitterness:

[w]ith the naturalization of the market, the contradictions experienced by the workers are minimized. For neoliberalism, it is natural that ‘free enterprise’ and the ‘competitive order’ infinitely elevates the living conditions of all ‘open’ societies and of all their members, workers included. It is equally natural that, in given conjunctures, these conditions, and especially working conditions, grow worse – due to causes extrinsic of the market, of course. In either case, the freeze of hours or the intensification and lengthening of working time are nonproblems, destined to take care of themselves; one has only to leave or restore the full freedom of the market. There is nothing to worry about. But struggling to reduce working time – against the ‘moral imperatives’ of the market – would, indeed, be counterproductive. (p. 185; italics in original.)

Conclusion

In short, the book is a forceful critique of the Weberian account of the development of working-time and a successful attempt to interpret the current transformation of working-time from a Marxist perspective. Basso demonstrates convincingly that the recent surge in

working hours in the US and elsewhere is the result of neoliberal restructuring and not of North-American distinctiveness. By analysing historical data on the development of working hours and labour productivity, Basso also makes clear that there is no clear-cut relationship between the fall in working hours and investment in new and labour-saving technology, whereas there is a strong correlation between the oscillation in class and social struggles and the limitation of working-time. The only major weakness of the book is Basso’s unawareness of the distinctiveness of the service sector and the related inability to adequately theorise capital’s drive to enhance working-time flexibility. However, from reading the book, it becomes very clear that there is no reason for European complacency and that there is no alternative to fighting the neoliberal offensive and struggling for the limitation and decommodification of working-time in whatever form possible.

Reviewed by Christoph Hermann
Working Life Research Centre, and
University of Vienna
hermann@forba.at

References
Komplexität und Emanzipation, Edited by Alex Demirovic, Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2001

Complexity and Emancipation – The Challenge of System Theory

Introduction: The significance of Luhmann’s work through the lenses of Komplexität und Emanzipation

Komplexität und Emanzipation [Complexity and Emancipation] is an edited collection that critically engages with Luhmannian system theory. It deals with various themes, including democracy, social evolution, functional differentiation, ethics, mass culture and the risks associated with technological development. The authors approach Luhmannian theory from various theoretical perspectives, including Gramscian hegemony theory, discourse analysis and an Althusserian symptomatic reading, each alluding to areas of theoretical and analytical potential as well as several shortcomings and deficiencies. This review is an attempt at making a critical evaluation of the book by focusing on key concepts in Luhmann’s social theory, their theoretical and analytical implications in the context of the tradition of critical theory, starting with an assessment of the current significance of Luhmann’s work, politically and theoretically. A brief presentation of Luhmann and the authors of the volume is followed by a critical assessment of the main themes in Luhmann’s work, and how different articles in the book relate to those themes (rather than by a chapter-by-chapter assessment).

What is the significance of Luhmann in the development of social theory in general? As a social theorist of autopoietic systems Niklas Luhmann (1927–98) has been a major reference point in several theoretical debates. In Germany, since the 1980s, his approach has occupied a hegemonic position in the intellectual world, influencing sociological debates and research in terms of new topics, objects of study, and theoretical engagements. One can look to his critique of the Enlightenment as a sociological programme during the 1970s and 1980s – Luhmann redefined sociological enlightenment as a form of criticism of sociological knowledge and of sociological methods – as well as at the sociological debates on the problem of social exclusion that he initiated in the 1990s, when he introduced the concept of exclusion to describe precarious life circumstances. Even in the field of media, he made a great impact: a large number of media analysts and columnists refer to system theory in their writings. What is behind the impressive success of the social theory of autopoietic systems in Germany? What are the components of this approach that made it a main point of reference?

One possible explanation for the resonance of system theory is offered in the chapter written by Alex Demirovic, namely its insights into the way in which social systems operate. According to Habermas, Demirovic points out, it was the ‘instrumental activism’ and ‘conservatism’ of system theory that attracted many radical intellectuals and political activists (p. 24). But although Demirovic does not deny this, he argues that it cannot fully explain Luhmann’s impact. Drawing upon Stichweh, he points to system theory’s ability to analyse ‘reality’ (ibid.), so that when, for example, Luhmann differentiates a subsystem from others, he assumes that this differentiation is also made by the actors in the field.
Thus, Luhmann’s approach is a theoretically conducted analysis of historical differentiation which occurs in the social reality. Luhmann’s system theory can be described as a ‘phenomenological reconstruction of the everyday knowledge about the society’.¹

In her essay ‘Der Schatten der Wahrheit’ (‘The Shadow of Society’), Hannelore Bublitz compares Luhmann’s system theory with Foucault’s discourse theory. She argues that the two theorists share not only a view of non-teleological development, but also the idea of contingency in society and history, as well as the method of deconstruction and radical anti-essentialism. Christoph Görg, on the other hand, argues in his article ‘Risiko Gesellschaft: Naturverhältnisse in der Theorie Luhmanns’ (‘Risk Society: Affairs of Nature in Luhmann’s Theory’), that Luhmann’s theory shows the neoliberal regulation of society at the level of administrative techniques (in the sense of Foucauldian governmentality), implying that a critical review of Luhmann’s theory can contribute to a better understanding of society in the post-Fordist era (p. 258).

Luhmann’s system theory is one of the most innovative and comprehensive approaches to social theory in its attempt to formulate a grand theory of general social systems by conceptualising society as a whole. Moreover, by introducing the concept of world society, he took processes of global transformation into account, and avoided vision of a society as a closed entity. In his sociological system theory, the borders of the society are not identical with the borders of the nation-state.²

Though the significance of Luhmann is thus recognised by the contributors to Komplexität und Emanzipation, their perspectives, inevitably, make for critical readings. The editor, Alex Demirovic, is a social and political critic in the tradition of critical theory in Germany, and is interested in the analysis of highly developed capitalist economic systems.³ He became known in academic circles in Germany on the publication of his book Nicos Poulantzas, an investigation of that theorist’s contributions to Marxism and state theory.⁴ In Demokratie und Herrschaft [Democracy and Domination],⁵ Demirovic asserted the necessity to shift the focus of analysis from abstract theories to real societal and class relations in order to understand the relation between (political and social) domination and democracy, and suggested that it is not norms and projects justified by theories of democracy, but social struggles and people’s determination to support democratic ideas, which contribute to real emancipation. Among the other notable contributors are sociologist Hannelore Bublitz, who works mainly on poststructuralist social and discourse theory;⁶ Hans-Jürgen Bieling who works on social theory, political theory, international political economy and European integration;⁷ Daniel Barben who works mainly on political theory, political sociology and

---

2. Luhmann 1997. Thinking society and state as congruent was labelled by Smith as ‘methodological nationalism’: Smith 1979, p. 191.
3. Demirovic is not only a critical theorist and lecturer in sociology but also an engaged intellectual; he is involved in social movements and in the media as a commentator on politics and current affairs.
scientific, technological and environment sociology; and Christoph Görg whose research is on global environmental politics, transformation of statehood and forms of regulation.

The theory of social systems and critical theory

Niklas Luhmann published comprehensive works such as *Soziale Systeme* [Social Systems] and *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* [The Society of Society], as well as books and essays of socio-political analysis and assessments of contemporary social problems, such as *Beobachtungen der Moderne* [Observations on Modernity], *Politische Theorie im Wohlfahrtsstaat* [Political Theory in the Welfare State] and *Macht* [Power]. In these shorter texts, he did not hesitate to polemicise against the tradition of critical theory that includes Marx, Adorno and others such as Habermas. He also fiercely criticised the welfare state and certain theoretical tendencies such as ‘moralising the social’. Why, then, deal with Luhmannian system theory? One answer would be to suggest that the theory of autopoietic systems in a sense represents the Zeitgeist. Demirovic argues that a critical engagement with Luhmann's theory remains valid for the purpose of developing critical social theory (p. 22). Elsewhere, he argues – in reference to Stefan Breuer – that Luhmann's system theory can be read as an adequate description of the current state of social relations which are completely reified (p. 26). Nevertheless, in both his chapters in this book, Demirovic concentrates more on the theoretical shortcomings of Luhmannian system theory, rather than on its benefits. He thus cannot justify his claim of an affirmative reading. Although his criticisms are legitimate, I would argue that it is possible to derive more positive insights from Luhmann's work. Analysis of Luhmann's system theory and the debates around his basic themes can be further legitimised by remembering that Marx and other critical theorists like Gramsci, Benjamin, Polanyi or Adorno also engaged with social analyses of their times. I would suggest that we can read Luhmann's theory in the way Marx once read the works of David Ricardo or Adam Smith, namely as up-to-date analyses of the current capitalist economic system and of a market-based society. Furthermore, a critical reading of Luhmann's system theory could be fruitful because of its relevance in current sociological debates, not only in terms of his focus on social exclusion, but also for his important contribution to debates on the problem of identity-building and modernity. Starting from Luhmann's social theory, for example, sociologists like Armin Nassehi and Rudolf Stichweh have advanced the discussion on identity-building and the problem of social as well as symbolic discrimination against strangers.

However, it cannot be denied that Luhmann's theory is in many respects an antithesis of historical materialism, and of critical theory more broadly. Daniel Barben argues (pp. 101–47) that Marx's critique of political economy as elaborated in *Capital* poses a

hidden subtext, or, more precisely, a contra-text, in Luhmann’s theory. According to Barben, a symptomatic reading shows how Luhmann disagrees implicitly with Marx’s political economy (p. 107).

Another difference between historical materialism and Luhmannian system theory is the significance of the economic subsystem. Luhmann’s starting point was originally that stratified societies were characterised by the dominance of politics. The transformation to functional differentiation as the primary form of differentiation marks at the same time a transformation to the primacy of economy. But later, in *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft* [The Economy of Society], Luhmann argues that functionally differentiated modern societies are characterised by a horizontal co-equality. This marks a departure from the tradition of political economy, in that it introduces a conception of society as differentiated into many equal subsystems. From this point of view, economics and politics are subsystems among others, bearing neither primacy nor a specific status.

Luhmann defines payment as the unit act of economy. In doing so, he replaces the factor of labour with the concept of codification of communication. The theoretical consequence of this is, as he states, that ‘[a]n understanding of economy which assesses payments as basic operations of an economic system, can address everything which acts as a basic concept of economic theory – for instance production, exchange, allocation, capital, labour force – as derivative issues.’ Daniel Barben shows that, in using formula like property-money-property, Luhmann comes relatively close to Marx. As every reader of Marx’s *Capital* will know, the form of circulation which Marx used to distinguish precapitalist economies from the capitalist one is commodity-money-commodity, as opposed to money-commodity-money (p. 127). However, Luhmann goes on to argue that, in modern times, this formula should be replaced by the formula: money-property-money. Having pointed out disagreements between the theory of social systems and critical theory, I now move to discuss the hypothesis of functional differentiation.

### Modernisation as functional differentiation

In Luhmannian system theory, the process of modernisation embodies the transition from a hierarchical society; that is, from a bipolar society differentiated into social strata (upper class versus underclass, nobility versus the people), into a society which is differentiated functionally. Luhmann conceptualises both modernity and modern society through functional differentiation.20 This concept is a favoured target for criticism, as it is in *Komplexität und Emanzipation*. Demirovic insists that an emancipatory theory has to reject the idea of functional differentiation for elementary materialist reasons. He argues that there are social groups who practice lifestyles that spread across functional subsystems and who profit from and therefore support them. The idea of functional differentiation

---

20. See for example Lambrecht et al. 1998 who criticise Luhmann’s theory of modernity because it ‘evokes linearity and irreversibility’ (pp. 40–1).
helps to defend the politics of certain groups against critique, and allows them to appear as unchallengeable: it obscures the relation between politics and economics, legal systems and economics, politics and legal systems, culture and economics, and so on (p. 18). Demirovic sees Luhmann as substituting the concept of functional differentiation for the concept of division of labour. This results in neglecting such questions as: why do some forms of social work increase? To what extent are they useful for social life? Or how are individuals forced to do certain forms of work (p. 28)? The concept of the division of labour leads to questions on the significance and function of certain social practices. From this perspective, the autonomy of a field of action is created through social struggles carried out by social actors (p. 29). However, by substituting the concept of functional differentiation, Luhmann intends to make clear that there exists no common scheme of differentiation for individual functional systems (p. 30). Demirovic rightly supports the argument that the concept of autopoiesis refers to the idea of self-determination. One consequence of such a view is a 'phobic banishment' of the assumption of heteronomy from the analysis (p. 39).

However, by expounding the problem of social exclusion Luhmann arbitrarily reverts back to the primacy of economic relations. In his analyses on the function of systems and organisations he emphasises that in the medium of communication [Kommunikationsmedium] money is of particular importance. On this, Demirovic refers to criticisms formulated by the German scholar Richard Münch. According to Münch\textsuperscript{21} the differentiation of the economy in modern times is simply the institutionalisation of certain arrangements determined by social struggles. From this point of view, the concept of differentiation does not simply describe historical processes, but contains ideological dimensions; that is, it itself plays a part of the means of social struggle (p. 31).

The idea of functional differentiation generates problems in terms of the analysis and interpretation of social transformations, and also in the interpretation and analysis of the economic relations and organisational structures of capitalist economics. This is because the idea of autopoiesis is enmeshed with the idea of functional differentiation. Bieling argues (pp. 149–75) that, from the point of view of a critical social theory, there is no need for the concept of autopoiesis, and that the idea of functional differentiation has to be modified. His point of reference is the concept of symbolically generalised medium of communication [symbolisch generalisiertes Kommunikationsmedium]. According to Luhmann, money, power and justice are of extreme importance. Moreover, organisations are dependent on money and organisational work. Furthermore, function systems are also dependent on organisations (p. 162). Putting things in this way, then, there is no reason to neglect the idea of the dominance or, more precisely, the specificity of the logic of economics. As Bieling states, this can be read as accepting (latently) the dominance of economy. Thus it does not make sense to insist further on the assumption of autopoiesis or of co-equality, as well as on the assumption of autonomy of subsystems. Luhmann's adherence to the concept of autopoiesis and to the primacy of functional differentiation does not allow the analysis of organisations as entities of social reproduction of the capitalist mode of socialisation, which is characterised and mediated by crises, contradictions and conflicts (p. 163).

Bieling also objects to the assumption that strategies of power and dominance, as well as social hierarchies in organisations, are determined only by their functionality. He argues that tendencies towards independence, as can be observed in structures of dominance in

\textsuperscript{21} Demirovic quotes Münch 1991.
organisations, cannot be neglected. He insists that some actors have an obvious interest in protecting existing structures of dominance, which has nothing to do with functional requirements (p. 170). Bieling draws the conclusion that the idea of the primacy of functional differentiation plays a crucial part in jeopardising the critical potentials of the system-theoretical analysis of organisations in functionally differentiated societies (p. 171).

In his second essay, ‘Complexity and Democracy’, Demirovic discusses several consequences of Luhmann’s substitution of the concept of division of labour with that of functional differentiation. According to Demirovic, it has far-reaching theoretical as well as analytical consequences. Whereas critical social theory is able to use the notion of division of labour to analyse and illuminate social processes, the concept of functional differentiation remains always underdetermined. Processes of differentiation are conceived as independent from the agency of social actors in the social field and as only being able to react to internal problems and to the self-generated environment of a certain subsystem. Again, Luhmann displays an inconsistency. He describes these processes variously as if they were dependent on the power and acceptance of social actors; or as if they were obliged to maintain their agency and to take into account system-specific communications; or as if the contemporary forms of differentiation are reproduced through the actions and the experiences of social actors. Read in this way, the functional differentiation is alterable by social actors. Demirovic argues that, at this point, it is possible to join the idea of functional differentiation with the idea of democratisation and the managing of the process of differentiation. Theoretical approaches in this direction have been taken, according to Demirovic, by social theoreticians such as Claus Offe and Hans Joas (p. 233).  

In his chapter, Daniel Barben alludes to two phenomena that contradict the idea of functional differentiation. On the one hand, he mentions the differentiation of lifestyles, which can be seen as ‘stratificational’ similarities among actors, such as leading politicians, capitalist managers and prominent members of culture; on the other hand, he notes forms of social structuring which are based neither on individuals nor social systems (p. 112). Barben goes on: ‘Despite empirical evidence (or despite their relevance in sociological debates) social structuring, like groups, does not have any significance in Luhmann’s theory’ (ibid.).

The economy of society

Against the Luhmannian claim that the economy is merely a subsystem among others, the main argument of the tradition of critical theory, from Marx to Lukács and Gramsci to Adorno, is that, in capitalist modernity, the economic subsystem becomes more and more dominant in relation to other social spheres, and that therefore the logic of economics gradually colonises the whole society. Another point of disagreement, beyond the fact that Luhmann considers the fundamental act of the economy as payment, is that he bases his theory of economic subsystem on the axiom of scarcity. He states explicitly that ‘formally, every economic act orientates itself towards scarcity’. However, by this he does not mean...

---

23. Luhmann 1988, p. 64.
real scarcity, but rather an artificial one encoded through money in a highly commercialised economy. According to Barben, acknowledging the ‘language of prices’ as the main functional logic of economy leads to two consequences: on the one hand, it prevents us from discussing the connection of economics to relations of exploitation of surplus-value; on the other hand, it downgrades critique to a subordinated position (p. 126).

Elsewhere, Barben states that there is a noticeable agreement between Luhmann’s characterisation of market-oriented order and Hayek’s order of market. However there is a significant difference that must be stressed here: Luhmann did not suggest, unlike Hayek, that the spontaneity of the market order creates welfare, economic equilibrium or solutions to ecological problems. Barben mentions that Luhmann avoids neoliberal illusions regarding the difference between system-rationality and the rationality of action that is restricted by the former. However, he argues that Luhmann does share some political options and theoretical deficiencies with the supporters of neoliberal market philosophy. He rejects the necessity and indeed the very possibility of the political and juridical steering of the economic subsystem (p. 137). Barben argues, in contrast, that there is a significant body of empirical evidence that contradicts the idea that intervention and regulation in the economic system is destructive. Moreover, he suggests correctly that modern societies have been always regulated, even those dominated by neoliberal policies (p. 142). He concludes his reflections with the suggestion that Luhmann’s sociologically inflated conception of enlightenment is a critical apology for existing relations, which is unable to contribute to an understanding of social and economic processes (ibid.).

The politics of society

Demirovic rebukes Luhmann for subsuming democracy under complexity. The idea of functional differentiation and the conception of society as a complex social system imply the rejection of the political steering of society. Two key concepts are responsible for this reading: complexity and contingency. A society is complex when it exhibits a high rate of relations among different elements and relationships between those elements. An increase of complexity causes an increase of contingency. Contingency signifies a multitude of uncertainties, actors, points of views and/or reference systems. Consequently, it becomes more difficult to subordinate these factors under a common rationality, interest or meta-narrative (p. 218). The question of complexity was also raised by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, according to whom, there is complexity in society due to private property. However, he does not call for a return ‘back to nature’, but for controlling and altering societal complexity. Unlike Luhmann, Rousseau proposes a role for democracy in order to come to terms with complexity.

According to Demirovic, in his social and political theory Luhmann constantly accentuates the intimidating moment of complexity of modern society against a critical theory of democracy. Democracy is, from Luhmann’s point of view, only a structural element of the subsystem of politics; a free choice of the life-circumstances [Lebensverhältnisse] under which people live seems not to be relevant to him (p. 231). Luhmann’s conception of complexity implies an antagonism between it and democracy and he solves this in favour

of complexity. Demirovic raises the question of whether, or to what extent, it is possible to seize complexity in such a way that it is open for a further democratisation (p. 225).

In fact, although Luhmann tried to take the complexity of modern society into account, his social theory is still criticised as being insufficiently complex. For instance, he categorises political communication by the binary code ‘government versus opposition’ and fails therefore to grasp the varieties of political communication in Western democracies. According to Michael T. Greven, ‘[t]his pattern does not suit the entire realm of inter-, trans- and supranational politics or for the politics in inter- and supranational organisations. Who represents then the government and who the opposition in international organisations like the UN or the WTO?’ (p. 210). Greven further criticises Luhmann’s theory for downgrading the significance of consensus in politics as a fundamental component of political decision-making (p. 204). He argues that Luhmann’s system theory of politics cannot be taken as a political theory, because he ignores the level of action in his theory of social systems (p. 207). A theory of politics, whether it defines politics as a system of action (Hannah Arendt), a system of power (Foucault) or a system of order (Hobbes), has to include actors and their motivations. Luhmann’s system theory declares action to an ‘effect of the social’ and therefore fails to discuss the role of actors by, for instance, the process of functional differentiation.25

Concluding remarks: the possibilities and limits of Luhmann’s system theory

Komplexität und Emanzipation offers not only some interesting insights concerning the theory of social systems, but also raises crucial objections to it. However, the contributions are somewhat one-sided. The analyses of the disagreements between Luhmann’s systems theory and the tradition of critical theory is one of the great merits of the collection. Yet some of the theoretical and analytical potential of system theory remains hidden, which is a basic shortcoming of the book. I would like to make two final points regarding this potential. First, conceptualising the market economy as an autopoietic social system has merits as well as disadvantages. As Bob Jessop argues, integrating an economic analysis with arguments of a social theory of autopoietic systems allows for a more sophisticated analysis of the limits to external intervention into the economic subsystem. Viewed from this perspective, the economy appears as an autopoietic subsystem with its own particular communication medium, imperatives and regularities, which cannot be intervened into arbitrarily. This can also be interpreted, as Jessop does, as ‘a necessary corrective to the reductionist temptation in Marxist theorising to see the logic of the capitalist market economy as somehow determinant “in the last instance” of an entire formation’.26 Thus, the autopoietic perspective offers useful suggestions on how the market economy could be governed, or how it could be intervened in it without inflicting its internal operations.

Second, by integrating some arguments of autopoietic systems theory one can gain a more sophisticated analysis of history and social change. In viewing the discourse of modernity from a system-theoretical point of view, one can recognise the contingent character of European modernity. In systems theory, rationality also has a contingent

character. According to Luhmann, the difference in ‘rational versus irrational’ is a result of contingent differentiations and does not have an absolute validity. An aspect that was once signified as irrational and therefore excluded from the discourse of modernity remains latently present and waits for re-entry. Moreover, according to Luhmann, modernity is also characterised by contingency and is by no means monolithic. Taking this perspective, it is no longer possible to identify binary differences (rational versus irrational, modern versus traditional) with geographical differences (East versus West, Orient versus Occident); that is, it is no longer possible to oppose societies through a binary code-system.27 Such societies cannot be differentiated with regard to the existence or non-existence of rationality, but with regard to its degree of complexity.

In summary, the Luhmannian social theory of autopoietic systems contains problems, deficiencies and apologetic aspects. Despite its imperfections, however, it offers many interesting insights and is open to the development of different interpretations. The shortcomings of Komplexität und Emanzipation do not stop it from being worth reading. On the contrary, even though it is characterised by a high level of abstraction and complexity, the book makes Luhmann's social theory accessible and facilitates a critical reading from different perspectives. Not only does it provide a good overview of the theory with respect to the development of Luhmann's approach and the relevant debates, but it also opens up new avenues for thinking about neoliberalism, democracy and society in the current context.

Reviewed by Yaşar Aydin
University of Hamburg
Yasar.Aydin@gmx.de

References

Bublitz, Hannelore, Christine Hanke and Andrea Seier 2000, Der Gesellschaftskörper, Frankfurt: Campus Verlag.


Introduction

Billions of people believe in a God, gods or some form of essentially spiritual reality. Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Buddhism and many other religions have shaped the lives and beliefs of much of humanity for thousands of years. Hegel and Marx both spent years coming to terms with religion, although in different ways. In this book, Alexander Saxton, a noted historian of racism and racist exclusionary movements within the US labour movement and working class, attempts a materialist analysis of religion to ask and attempt to answer a seemingly simple question: can religion and/or religious institutions help humanity save itself from ‘the ecological crises and the impending threat of nuclear/biological warfare’ (p. 23)? This is, of course, a vitally important issue. If religion can do this, then perhaps we should all put our effort, time and brains behind attempts to assist in a grand, last-ditch, decidedly non-Marxist attempt to help religion transcend its differences and work for human solidarity and survival.

Saxton, after a review of human history, concludes that religion is not, however, the answer. Instead, as he sees it, religion expresses national and other parochial interests and loyalties rather than unifying ones. This goes back to the beginning of religion. He sees religion as having begun in the coming-to-consciousness of the fact of death, with belief in the supernatural serving as a way to deal with and translate this fear into an ongoing set of human practices. Religious beliefs and rituals fortified local band or tribal defences against specific ways of dying (attacks by animals or neighbours, crop failure) by strengthening the unity and solidarity of the local group. This gave religiously-fortified bands and tribes a survival advantage (as compared with non-religious bands or tribes) against natural threats and against each other. The argument that this functionality provided an initial and enduring basis for a religiously-based culture is, as he recognises, not original to Saxton. He also recognises, and bases his argument on, the ways in which religion has been incorporated into the ways ruling classes interpret and control peasants, serfs, workers and other labour in agricultural and industrial civilisations. In all these eras, Saxton would add, ruling classes have been based on particular spatial localities, and religion has buttressed the courage and solidarity of armies and thus the ability of rulers to wage war with one other.

In this book, Saxton reviews the history of religion and how it has interacted with human problems and class struggle as a way to grapple with whether religions can now unite as a force to prevent nuclear and ecological disaster. He argues that religion provided a spiritual basis for believing in and observing prohibitions on moral transgression, thereby reinforcing group norms. Much of the book then focuses on the problem of theodicy that this produces – a problem that Saxton sees as particularly thorny for monotheistic religions. This is the question of evil and of how a beneficent God (or gods) could let Evil exist in the world. Saxton spends several chapters reviewing how different religious leaders, philosophers

1. Dale Jacobson, a noted American poet, provided a number of useful criticisms and suggestions about an earlier draft of this review. Alberto Toscano offered a number of helpful suggestions and critiques on behalf of the Historical Materialism editorial board.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2008 DOI: 10.1163/156920608X315329
and thinkers such as Job, Augustine, Dante, and Leibniz have dealt with this problem. He also briefly considers Buddhist and Hindu approaches to the problem of Evil, concluding that this has been a major problem for them too. His chapter on ‘Promethean Readings’ (which includes a section on John Milton) discusses social justice approaches to religion and theodicy, and shows how these provide a challenge to the existing order but also a road back to belief and, often, to political accommodation to continued injustice.

Saxton sees the problem of Evil as having been a key Achilles heel that allowed the agnosticism and atheism of the eighteenth through to twentieth centuries (including the anticlericalism of many thinkers during and after the French Revolution, including Feuerbach, Marx and Engels) to grow in strength. He then describes ways in which Christian and other religious philosophers have sidestepped these and other critiques over the last few decades and helped generate a resurgence of religious belief. After discussing possible ways in which religious forces actually work in society, both today and in the past, he concludes that religion is not the path to surmount the crises of today’s world.

Ronald Takaki is quoted on the back cover of the book as saying: ‘His brilliant and deftly written treatise is a jeremiad of hopeful despair’. I am not sure that Takaki fully captures either what Saxton means or what I would view as the final message of the book. After concluding that religion is not the answer to the human crisis, Saxton says (p. 200):

> Crises that threaten human culture . . . are themselves artefacts of culture and thus might prove more malleable. Defusing them would require that consciousness, *consciously*, take command of the ship. To take command means rejecting every illusion that our species enjoys a privileged track . . . we see how unique and fragile consciousness actually is. It would be a pity, dreaming of magic transformations, to collaborate in destroying the ground of human consciousness. (p. 200.)

And, with this, he concludes the book. This is neither hope nor despair, as I see it. Instead, it is an overly-abstract formulation based in part, as I will argue, on not addressing how we might ‘take command of the ship’ and, as a result, on drawing too narrow a picture of how religion might move towards becoming a force for survival. He asks only whether religion provides a basis for an emerging consensus behind values of ecological sustainability and peace – which he rightly concludes is not a feasible way forward. As I see it, his abstractness stems from his failure to consider whether working-class struggle might be a way out of the current human crisis. He does depict class struggle as having been an important way through which humans have surmounted past crises, and he does include a chapter on the failure of Marxist and workers’ movements to deal adequately with religion – but he does not concretely bring these together to address the question of what is needed now or of how religion might play a part in this. Thus, he fails to discuss whether and how religious movements might contribute to developing effective forms of class struggle and, beyond that, move towards an ecologically conscious socialism if workers do take power. Related to that, he fails to consider the reasons why so many workers, unemployed slum denizens, and others around the world currently embrace fundamentalist religions that embrace apocalyptic visions as well as images of Armageddon-like struggle – and what these reasons might imply for anyone hoping that a workers’ revolutionary movement (which would almost certainly include religious components) might strip massive numbers of supporters from the reactionaries who currently lead them.
The social bases of religious belief

Saxton grapples with the roots of religion primarily by looking to its sources in the questions of death and morality, and thus remains on a fairly abstract level. He discusses Hegel, Feuerbach, Engels, and Marx, and their efforts to relate social structure and social process to religion. He duly cites Marx on religion as the opium of the people, and chides Marx and Engels for ‘their belief that proletarians must necessarily reject religion’ (p. 154). In doing this, however, he fails to see the implications of Marx’s words preceding the ‘opium’ quote, that religion is ‘an inverted consciousness of the world… the general theory of this world… the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions’.²

Saxton similarly fails to grapple with Engels’s words in Anti-Dühring:

All religion, however, is nothing but the phantastic reflection in men’s minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces…. But it is not long before, side by side with the forces of Nature, social forces begin to be active; forces which present themselves to man as equally extraneous and at first equally inexplicable, dominating them with the same apparent necessity, as the forces of Nature themselves… in existing bourgeois society men are dominated by the economic conditions created by themselves, by the means of production which they themselves have produced, as if by an extraneous force. The actual basis of religious reflex action therefore continues to exist, and with it the religious reflex itself.³

Now, Engels here clearly may be expressing a ‘reflection theory of consciousness’ by failing to add that material reality is not simply reflected in consciousness but that humanity as a (divided) collective – humans as classes, oppressed groups, small groups, and individuals – actively interprets and reinterprets its experience and thus reshapes culture. Nonetheless, Engels here sees a truth that Saxton, in his focus on the questions of evil and normative regulation, treats only sketchily – that the specifics of social experience shape (although, I would add, by no means determine) religious belief.

Many other analysts, both Marxist and non-Marxist, have carried the strong part of Engels’s insight forward, usually with much more appreciation of the active role of people and debate in shaping the interpretation of the material forces that get fetishised as spiritual beings. Durkheim, in Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, sees the gods of a clan as being nothing else than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem…. But as a matter of fact, the empire which it holds over conscience is due much less to the physical supremacy of which it has the privilege than to the moral authority with which it is invested.⁴

---

What is essential here, however, is not whether social domination, social solidarity, or the social structuring of moral authority is key to religious beliefs, but, instead, whether social structures and processes in general shape religion.

Guy Swanson, basing himself primarily on Durkheim, conducted two sets of analyses to test whether religious beliefs reflected such social structures. In *The Birth of the Gods*, he used the set of ‘cultures’ described in the Human Relations Area Files to test a number of hypotheses derived from this perspective, and generally found statistical confirmation for the predicted relationships. In *Religion and Regime: A Sociological Account of the Reformation*, he used pre-Reformation social structural variables to predict which specific forms of Christianity came to be in place in different geographical areas of Europe at the end of the Reformation.

Lanternari and Worsley take a different approach. They study millenarian religious movements in a variety of colonised countries or among oppressed racial/ethnic groups in more powerful countries. In doing this, their argument parallels that of Engels in *The Peasant War in Germany*, although with a focus on how colonial oppression shapes the world views and struggles of different groups among the colonised, rather than how class exploitation or subordination shaped the politico-religious struggles of peasants, burghers, and various categories of nobility in Germany. What they show is that religions can be the ideational form of struggles against oppression, and thus that the economic, political and social relationships of subordination and dignity-denial to which the oppressed are subjected sometimes leads them to see salvation in forms of religions of opposition and struggle. In this, they parallel the arguments of Hobsbawm in *Primitive Rebels* – but eschew his view that such beliefs are a preliminary stage that will be supplanted by the more developed outlook of secular class struggle.

Saxton himself sees Marx and Engels, and many Marxists since, as having incorporated such experiences as ‘ideologies that are shaped by ruling class interests and efforts’. He then goes on to say that what is needed – but is not adequately expressed by Marx and Engels – is a ‘secular (materialist) account of the origin of religion separate from the origin of ideology’. Saxton suggests that such a secular explanation should take stock of particular historical circumstances like colonial régimes or imported slavery, but ‘perhaps more importantly, it would situate religion in the earliest stages of human development, before the division of labor and the advent of class society’ (pp. 159–60). I would suggest that, as Saxton accurately expresses, many Marxists have emphasised the side of Marxism that sees

---

5. Swanson 1964.
6. See <http://www.yale.edu/hraf>. In the 1930s, behavioural scientists at Yale’s Institute of Human Relations started to develop a classification of cultural information by subject, providing quick access to research materials. HRAF grew out of these efforts. Today, HRAF provides fully-indexed electronic collections on the World Wide Web. HRAF has two electronic collections: the eHRAF Collection of Ethnography and the eHRAF Collection of Archaeology. Availability of HRAF collections is limited to members of the HRAF consortium.
7. Swanson 1967.
religion as an ideology shaped by the ruling class. Nonetheless, the basis for a Marxist theory of religion as based on the daily life experiences of workers, peasants and other members of society is present in the work of Marx and Engels that were quoted above, when they are combined with Marxist approaches to alienation and commodification, and thus with the processes by which powerlessness and uncertainty come to be realities in the lives of workers and others. These processes lead to religious beliefs organically out of experience, and are thus not simply ruling-class-manipulated ideologies (although rulers do try, often successfully, to manipulate them).

Now, what does this have to do with the current crisis of humanity and the world? Simply put, it means that the crisis, and people’s daily experience with how the crisis is manifested in their lives, is interpreted by billions of people through religious perspectives. In part, this may be due to the defeat of secular leftist political forces and interpretations across much of the globe. Nonetheless, what is clear is that people who are driven off their ancestral land and forced into the slums of Nairobi, Port Au Prince, Beijing, Calcutta, Buenos Aires, or Manila by market forces or by the rising waters of a dam built on the orders of commissars or corporate executives do not lose their capacity and need for interpretation and understanding. They seek to understand why these things happen, and they seek to understand what reasons there are for hope and useful action. Often, their interpretation takes religious forms in which the hostile social forces that destroyed their former lives are interpreted in Manichean terms as evil spiritual forces – and hope becomes embodied in spiritual terms as a coming Armageddon pitting the forces of God, Allah or whatever against the Satanic forces that are seeking to dominate the world. These efforts to understand, and thus to shape, their fates can move in a variety of directions, always shaped by their specific circumstances and sometimes shaped by which charismatic leaders become widely visible to them. Those potential leaders who are reactionary – such as Pat Robertson or Khomeini – are more likely to gain visibility because they can attract support from reactionary rich men who seek to enforce patriarchal norms and preserve and extend the ‘rights of property’.

Such apocalyptic religious interpretations can win the loyalties of slum-dwellers, of workers with ever-lengthening workdays and ever-shrinking real incomes, of members of disrespected and oppressed nations, and of people trying desperately to stay on their farms while the ecological bases of agriculture are destroyed by global warming or polluted waters. Since these forms of religion have trouble ameliorating peoples’ lives, however, they are vulnerable to being supplanted by more left-wing struggle religions such as the ones exemplified by the Freedom Movement in some areas of the US South in the early 1960s or the base communities of liberation theology in Latin America in the 1980s.

Thus, whereas Saxton sees the inability of religions to unite around a consensus of sustainability and peace as reason for despair, I would suggest that a movement of struggle from below, containing both secular and religious workers and other poor and oppressed people, offers a realistic hope for human survival. Again, I will not belabour this argument, since others have devoted entire papers in this journal, to say nothing of books and their lives, making the point that class struggle is feasible, necessary and valuable. I would point out that such class struggles need not be secular, but are most likely to contain a mixture of

secular and religious movements. This was the case in the Russian Revolution, in the American civil-rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s (which provided me with my first experiences with social activism when I was still in high school), in the movements in Poland in the early 1980s, and in many other struggles as well. This has been well described by Siegel, whose discussion of the participation of religious groups in Latin-American revolutionary movements is particularly valuable.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{After the ‘revolution’}

What is the likely fate of religion if and when workers oust capitalism and start to build a new world? Will religion simply wither away? Fear that this will happen, or that religion will be forcibly suppressed, has motivated many workers and others to oppose the Left over the years (see Chapter 11, especially pp. 156–9).

A Marxist interpretation that is consistent with the argument whereby ‘religion will wither away’ is easy to construct. If, as Marx argued (and Engels, as quoted above, ‘reflected on’), religious belief stems from human helplessness and uncertainty before natural forces like wolves and hurricanes, or the economic storms of depression, inflation, and capricious bosses, then the creation of a socialist world might be expected to erode the uncertainties on which religion feeds. As humanity comes increasingly to make economic and environmental decisions for human reasons transparently discussed and decided on, this should decrease uncertainty and thus erode religion. Siegel’s argument essentially takes this form.\textsuperscript{15}

This viewpoint, however, jumps over many years of postrevolutionary struggles and adjustments, and also fails to consider whether the future society might generate additional uncertainties and solidarities that might be interpreted in religious form. As I have argued elsewhere,\textsuperscript{16} the period after the revolution will hardly be one of certainty and predictability. It will be a period of serious and perhaps conflictual debates over how to cope with the crippling ravages to the environment that capitalism has left us with, the savage inequalities across and within nations, and the best way to put workers and others in control of our own destiny. Even for the more organised and powerful workers, uncertainty about the outcomes of policy struggles as well as over what they will lead to when implemented is likely to feed the anxious feelings of powerlessness and the need for meaning in the face of mortality that Engels and others have viewed as wellsprings of religiosity. For those who oppose the new society, and perhaps those non-workers who become institutionally marginalised from systems of workers’ decision-making such as workers’ councils, the sense of domination and uncertainty may be even stronger.

Furthermore, belief systems and cultures have their own persistence. Billions of people who grew up thinking that spiritual reality is supreme will not become unbelievers overnight, and will furthermore seek to pass these beliefs on to their children and grandchildren. Depending on the history of struggles that lead to the ousting of capitalism, religion may gain impetus in localities where religious forces were prominent in (or even

\textsuperscript{14} Siegel 2005, Chapter 10.
\textsuperscript{15} Siegel 2005, pp. 267–8.
dominated) the revolutionary movement. Here, religious beliefs could become deeply embedded as the ideas that led to liberation. Of course, this would not immunise them from withering in the very long run if uncertainty and domination disappear from human experience – but it would certainly tend to increase religion’s longevity.

But will uncertainty and the need for meaning vanish? One hopes that the success of socialism will lead to the abolition of economic and ecological uncertainty and domination of the kind we face today. At the very least, we can hope that it will end the current high probability of human extinction and, in the medium run, reduce or eliminate many other forms of domination or uncertainty. In doing so, it will remove many of the extraneous and inexplicable natural and social forces that Engels discussed as forming the ‘actual basis of religious reflex action’. But, as Marx wrote,17 the revolution will merely end the pre-history of humanity and usher in its true history. This means many things – but salient among them is that people will have the time to pursue art and other activities. This new way of life is likely to have its own uncertainties and forms of domination. For example, a young musician might take up the violin as a major interest – only to find ten years later that musical fads have made violin music passé. To the degree that artistic pursuits become major foci of people’s lives, this type of ‘extraneous and inexplicable’ uncertainty and lack of control might well feed into religiosity in ways parallel to those Engels discussed. Furthermore, the mystery of death and what, if anything, comes afterwards is not one that is definitively soluble, and as Saxton argues, coming to terms with mortality has been another wellspring of religious belief.

Finally, it is my belief, and the belief of most socialists, that the coming society will be much more solidaristic and caring than anything humanity has previously experienced. If this turns out to be true, then the ideas of Swanson, Marx and Engels suggest that any remaining religions should reflect this to a degree – which might suggest that they would be religions of unity and caring rather than of conquest and divisiveness.

Reviewed by Samuel R. Friedman
Friedman@ndri.org

References

Davis, Mike 2006, Planet of Slums, New York: Verso.


Innovation


Marx discusses both particular inventions and the broader evolution of the means and relations of production, as well as their ‘revolutionising’ or ‘transformative’ effects. However, while Capital Volume Two often mentions ‘renewal’, the specific concept of innovation only enters Marxist discourse in the context of twentieth-century debates over the existence and the character of long-term economic fluctuations, often referred to as Kondratieff cycles (which may encompass several ‘normal’ capitalist cycles of expansion and contraction). ‘Innovation’, seen as the condition for a new phase of long-term expansion, refers here to the complex of changes whereby a technological invention (be it a product or a process) is absorbed into current business practices. The development of innovations is, in this perspective, a routine aspect of capitalist development as a whole. For Marx and his successors, by contrast, the genesis and refinement of inventions not only includes this dimension (along with whatever short-run cyclical impact it might have), but is also linked to the possibility of epochal changes – if not in the entire mode of production, at least in its scope, its historically specific traits, and its ripeness for supersession.

1. Marx’s treatment of capitalist technology focuses above all on its objective of increasing productivity (i.e., output per unit of labour-time). In the critique of political economy, the development of productive forces is related to competition between individual capitalists. Individually, these capitalists continuously introduce more production methods and means of labour, in order to attain competitive advantages in the form of extra profit. Competitive pressure forces competitors to follow, thus regularly generating new standards of production. Nevertheless, innovations are not successfully introduced under all circumstances. If the additional costs for the implementation of improved machinery become greater than the wages saved by means of such machinery, the replacement of existing means of production becomes uneconomic from the perspective of capital. One can thus find the most advanced and the most primitive technologies applied simultaneously (MECW 35, 374 et sqq.) – if not in immediate proximity to one another, at least within the same regional or global economic order.

The actual innovations that Marx describes fall into two broad categories, corresponding roughly to our distinction between the routine and the epoch-making (depending on whether they do or do not ‘modify the general technique of production’ (Mandel 1980, 42)), but with a clear understanding that the two types are interdependent. Thus the steam engine, as an ‘invention’, dated from the late seventeenth century, but did not, in its original form, ‘give rise to any industrial revolution. It was, on the contrary, the invention of machines that made a revolution in the form of steam engines necessary’ (MECW 35, 375 et sq.). This complex evolution does not diminish the eventual significance of Watt’s later, more sophisticated steam-engine as a ‘prime mover’, and thus as the single innovation that would epitomise capitalist industrialisation. But the links among different categories of innovation are equally crucial, reflecting as they do the enormous pressure that impinges on any phase of
production or distribution that might be stuck at an earlier stage of development. Thus, ‘machine spinning made machine weaving necessary’, and so also did the wider ‘revolution in modes of production of industry and agriculture’ necessitate ‘a revolution . . . if in the means of communication and transport’ (MECW 35, 388 et seq.).

A key question underlying this process is how one should distinguish innovations that serve primarily or exclusively the interests of capital from those which – whether immediately or only potentially – are of benefit to humanity as a whole. This distinction appears implicitly in the Communist Manifesto, which on the one hand speaks of the bourgeoisie’s prodigious technological achievements, but on the other hand refers critically to its ‘constant revolutionising of production’ (MECW 6, 483), with the clear implication that the latter process, marked as it is by ‘everlasting uncertainty and agitation’, disregards human need. In the German Ideology, Marx and Engels declare that the development of the productive forces is the ‘absolutely necessary practical premise’ of communism, ‘because without it want is merely made general, and with destitution the struggle for necessities and all the old shit would necessarily be reproduced’ (MECW 5, 48; trans. modified). The duality between positive and negative aspects of innovation is clearly apparent in Capital. On the one hand, Marx criticises the Luddite movement as reflecting an immature consciousness, in which workers had not yet learned ‘to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital’ (MECW 35, 430); on the other hand, he calls machinery ‘the most powerful weapon for suppressing strikes’, and suggests the importance of studying all those post-1830 inventions whose ‘sole purpose’ was that of ‘supplying capital with weapons against the revolts of the working-class’ (439).

Machinery is thus inescapably stamped, for Marx, by the purpose for which it was devised, but this link does not preclude its having a possible future role shaped by other forces. In this sense, a Marxian approach to innovation necessarily embraces not just new methods of producing goods or delivering services, but also changes in the mode and relations of production. Adapting machinery to such changed conditions might be considered a more advanced form of innovation than that which occurs at the behest of capital; in any case, it implies that the concept of innovation extends to matters of social organisation as well as to those of a narrowly technological nature.

2. Marxian research into technological innovation has by no means confined itself either to the period, or to the geographic core, of capitalist industrialisation (cf., e.g., Needham 1986–95). Such research has offered important correctives to the ideological stereotype which identifies innovation with capitalism and, more specifically, with the ‘heroic’ entrepreneur. In fact, for most of human history, innovation has reflected the work of anonymous peasants, artisans, warriors, and healers (cf. White 1962; Landes 1969, 101). Even under capitalism, the actual work of innovation can only in part be credited to the capitalists themselves, as business firms have drawn heavily on the ‘in kind’ subsidies offered by universities and the state (Hilpert 1992, 7). At the same time, capitalist innovation itself can be understood as a ‘passive revolution’ (Gramsci) against the resistances of the working class. Negri characterises it as ‘a product, a compromise or a response, in short a constraint which derives from workers’ antagonism. […] The more radical the innovation is, the more profound and powerful were the antagonistic proletarian forces, which have determined it, and therefore the more extreme was the force which capital had to put in motion to dominate them. Every innovation is a revolution which failed – but also one which was attempted’ (1992, 80). What is specific to innovation under capitalism, then, is in part this anti-working-class aspect and in part the stimulus arising from competitive pressure, which forces it beyond what might be dictated by need and, in the process, giving it a distinctive and much-debated role in relation to economic trends.

2.1 The debate over the historical role of innovation dates from the early twentieth
century, and took on a significant political dimension in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. The framework of this debate was the hypothesis of ‘long waves’ in capitalist development – an idea which originated in a study of agricultural crises by the Russian Marxist Parvus (A. Helphand), elaborated in a 1901 pamphlet entitled Die Handelskrise und die Gewerkschaften (cf. Mandel 1975, 122 et sqq.). Long-wave theory became permanently associated with the name of N.D. Kondratieff (1892–1938), who formulated a cyclical profile of capitalist development, with turning points (transitions from declining to rising production) situated around 1789, 1849, and 1896 (Kondratiev 1998/1926, 31). Later writers (e.g., Mandel 1980, Sundbo 1998) have added a fourth wave beginning after 1945.

Innovation can be viewed as either endogenous or exogenous to such trends (Rosenberg & Frischtak 1986, 6 et sqq.). In the ‘endogenous’ perspective, which was that of Kondratieff himself (1926, 49 et sqq.), innovation is only one of four sets of phenomena (the others being wars and revolutions, territorial expansion of the world market and increases in the gold supply) that together define the long-term evolution of the capitalist economy. In the contrasting ‘exogenous’ view, set forth by J.A. Schumpeter, the long ‘Kondratieff’ cycles are attributed above all to the impact of certain innovations, with particularly well-defined connections emerging for the ‘second Kondratieff’ (with railroadsation) and the third (with electrification) (Schumpeter 1939, 254 et sqq.). Due to their historical orientation, both variants clashed with the dominant equilibrium theories, which were not able to grasp the dynamic of innovations because of their static conception of the economy. These theories understood competition also as price competition and not as competition over quality, markets and new products.

At the same time, neither Schumpeter nor Kondratieff identified with Marxism. Schumpeter defined the dynamic of capitalist innovation as a ‘process of creative destruction’, which continually revolutionises the economic structure from the inside, destroying the old structure and creating a new one. By implementing radical technical innovations, the capitalist entrepreneur enables long-term boom phases. Schumpeter distinguishes the innovation process into three phases: first there is invention, then innovation in the strict sense of the word (implementation of inventions in the economic process), then diffusion of innovation. Nevertheless, he is unable to uncover the preconditions of a successful process of innovation. His theory invokes a deus ex machina, explaining the accumulated occurrence of innovations with the ultimately contingent appearance of dynamic entrepreneur personalities (Läpple 1987, 65) or ingenious inventors.

Kondratieff, for his part, counterposed his cyclical theory to the view, widely diffused in the Marxism of the time, that capitalism was evolving toward a clearly identifiable and definitive breakdown. Kondratieff’s most prominent contemporary critic was Trotsky, who argued that in diagnosing ‘the general condition of the capitalist organisation’, one had to reject cyclical presuppositions in favour of looking at ‘the specific way in which it breathes, and the rate at which its pulse beats’ (Trotsky 1921, 202). While Trotsky recognised the importance of long-term trends, he preferred to analyse them as ‘curves of development’ (200), whose various turning-points came at irregular intervals and were attributable to ‘external’ political events (Day 1976, 71). Most immediately, writing during a period of apparently great volatility, Trotsky could hardly relish the prospect of lost revolutionary opportunity that would most likely result from a cyclical recovery. Not until the post-World-War-Two capitalist expansion would this dynamic be reversed.

2.2 With the apparent restoration of capitalist stability after World War Two, the spectre of another long-term downturn once again gave cyclical analysis a subversive edge. It was under these conditions that Ernest Mandel, harking back to Parvus, moved to re-integrate long-wave theory with Marxism. Like Trotsky (but also in common with Schumpeter), Mandel rejects the ‘endogenous’ approach of trying to encompass all historical phenomena
within Kondratieff’s cyclical configurations; in addition, he rejects the concept of cycles in favour of ‘waves’, in order to emphasise the non-automatic character of the shift from ‘depressive’ to ‘expansive’ phases (Mandel 1992, 328). Unlike Trotsky, however, whose ‘exogenous’ benchmarks were principally social movements, wars, and revolutions (Day 1976, 72), Mandel places far greater emphasis on the phenomena of innovation. He identifies a ‘second technological revolution’ (associated with electric motors) as gestating during the 1873–93 depression and as engendering an ‘accelerated accumulation of capital’ between 1893 and 1914 (Mandel 1975, 188). He then focuses on the ‘third technological revolution’ of the post-1945 period (1975, ch. 6), among whose central characteristics he notes ‘a permanent pressure to accelerate technological innovation’ (1975, 192 and ch. 8).

It is within this framework that the propensity toward innovation, long heralded as the supreme creative attribute of capitalism, turns into an ‘end in itself’, increasingly divorced from any reference to human need or ecological constraints. Innovations then are weighed principally in terms of their profit-potential; the sole more specific criterion is that of control, i.e., enhancement of the power of management as the agent of capital (Noble 1984, 44 et sqq.). Other concerns are secondary, and are subject to manipulation.

3. The concept of innovation, much like the concept of ‘progress’, has become largely identified, in everyday discourse, with its capitalist embodiment. The historic challenge for socialists has been to wrest the creative dimension of innovation free of its capitalist constraints, and to apply it to the extraordinarily difficult tasks of ending poverty, building community, and restoring biodiversity. It is important to keep in mind the twofold aspect of technology emphasised by Marx. The ‘invention’ is merely a device, an instrument; historic innovations, in Marx’s treatment, imply an entire system of relations (cf. Wallis 2000, 54). Issues of technology are thus at the same time social issues. Not all inventions are socially useful; many have had severe negative effects, whether intended, as in the case of military technology, or unintended, as in the case of the petrochemical industry (cf. Comonomer 1971, ch. 9). Moreover, many inventions that might be socially useful (in the sense carefully defined by Cooley (1987, 154 et sqq.)) have not yet been generated, because of the absence of appropriate encouragement, whether in the form of political guidance, infrastructural support, or cultural attitudes. Certain goals whose pursuit has come to be identified with technological instruments (e.g., computers for education) might be better attained through social reorganisation, which itself, in its break with established assumptions, would constitute under present conditions perhaps the most important type of innovation. However, even if primacy is given to social reorganisation (as with literacy programs on the Cuban model (Fagen 1969)), implementation always involves decisions about how to use whatever material instruments might be available. Capitalism routinely entails a significant lag between the date of an invention and that of corresponding ‘innovation’ (Mensch 1976, 85f). There is no reason why, under socialism, long-familiar devices cannot be appropriated in new ways (e.g., drawing on different energy-sources; being used and above all maintained collectively).

The twentieth-century record of socialist innovation is a mixed one. In the longest and most influential experience, that of the Soviet Union, innovation was notably constrained by 1) the pressure to industrialise fast, eschewing experimentation; 2) the continuing global prestige of capitalist technologies and products; 3) excessive bureaucratisation and centralisation; and 4) insufficient communication — or commonality of interests — between production managers and those responsible for innovation (who were institutionally separate) (Berliner 1976, ch. 4). Still, the officially ‘public’ (or more exactly, statal) character of technological knowledge could speed the diffusion of certain specific improvements (e.g., the continuous casting of steel (Berliner, 99)). What was lacking was not so much the capacity to conceive innovations, but rather the kind of
democratic process that would be required in order to link innovation – beyond short-term market signals – to society-wide needs (Kotz 2002).

The latter goal is becoming increasingly identified with ecologically-oriented planning (cf. Burkett 2003). This will require, in part, a turn away from capital- and energy-intensive strategies, in favour of ‘thought- and knowledge-intensive’ approaches, grounded in an understanding of natural processes (Haila & Levins 1992, 163). The destructive power of transnational restructuring under neoliberal capitalism makes searching for alternative social innovations more urgent than ever. The possibility of innovating along non-capitalist lines is suggested not only by pre-capitalist experience but also by the continued presence, even under capitalism, of non-capitalist drives, whether manifested by individual workers/artisans/artists, by co-operative enterprises or communities, by voluntary or state-sponsored public services, or by oppositional initiatives on the part of organised peasants or workers, including those in relatively hi-tech industry. A significant example of the latter was the 1975 initiative of the Lucas Aerospace workers (in Northern England) to revive a failed enterprise by devising new lines of production, in consultation with surrounding communities (Cooley 1987, ch. 7). Beyond such grassroots or sectoral initiatives, there are cases of working-class parties bringing innovative participatory practices into public-sector enterprises (as in Chile, 1970-73 (Espinosa & Zimbalist 1978)) and into local administration (Brazilian cities in the 1990s (Baiocchi 2003)). The creativity associated with such a movement is suggested in certain other moments of twentieth century socialism, including Chinese experiments in industrial organisation and in rural healthcare delivery (Richman 1969; Horn 1971), Cuban experiments in organic agriculture (Levins 2005), and Spanish anarchist practices of organising crossover labour-time between agriculture and other sectors (Leval 1975, 108). Historical awareness of such past achievements, if combined with careful theoretical work on new approaches to planning (e.g., Devine 2002; Albert 2003), could provide the grounding for a thoroughgoing socialist approach to innovation. Under the conditions of ‘high-tech capitalism’ (Haug 2003), research is required into the extent to which the rise of ‘information work’ and the partial overcoming of Taylorist divisions of labour associated with it could offer points of departure for the development of innovations that lead beyond the mode of regulation of neoliberalism (cf. Jessop 2002; Hirsch 2002).


**Victor Wallis**

collapse/breakdown theory, competition, conjuncture, crisis theories, cycles in the planned economy, destructive forces, development, development of productive forces, ecology, electrification, equilibrium theories, extra profit, high-tech industry, industrial revolution, information worker, labour organisation, long waves of the conjuncture, machinery, productive forces, productive forces/relations of production, productivity, profit, profit rate, progress, rationalisation, refuse of production, scientific-technical revolution, species being, technical progress, technological development.

Notes on Contributors

Yasar Aydin holds a masters degree from the University of Lancaster on contemporary social theory. He is currently a PhD candidate and teaches courses on sociology at the university of Hamburg, Germany. His thesis focuses on a comparative analysis of the construction of stranger in the German and British social scientific literature.

Yasar.Aydin@gmx.de


bf@soas.ac.uk

Samuel R. Friedman is a Senior Research Fellow and the Director of the Interdisciplinary Theoretical Synthesis Core in the Center for Drug Use and HIV Research at National Development and Research Institutes, Inc., New York City. He is also Senior Research Associate at the Department of Epidemiology, Johns Hopkins University. He is an author of Teamster Rank and File (Columbia University Press, 1982) and a forthcoming book of poetry (Seeking to Make the World Anew: Poems of the Living Dialectic, in press, Lanham, Maryland: Hamilton Books).

sam4wp@netscape.net

Daniel Gaido is a researcher at the National Research Council of Argentina (CONICET). He is the author of The Formative Period of American Capitalism: A Materialist Interpretation (Routledge, 2006) and co-author, together with Richard B. Day, of Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record (Brill, 2008). He is currently working on another joint work with Richard Day called Classical Analyses of Imperialism (Brill, forthcoming).

danielgaid@gmail.com

Christoph Hermann is a senior researcher at the Working Life Research Centre in Vienna and a lecturer at the University of Vienna. He is currently co-ordinating a European
A research project on the privatisation of public services and the impact on quality, employment and productivity.

hermann@forba.at


jamesholstun@hotmail.com

**John Roberts** is Professor of Art & Aesthetics at the University of Wolverhampton. His books include *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (Manchester University Press, 1998), *The Philistine Controversy* (with Dave Beech) (Verso, 2002), and *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in the Artwork After the Readymade* (Verso, 2007). He is also a contributor to *Radical Philosophy, Oxford Art Journal, Third Text, Cabinet Magazine*, and *Chto Delat? (What is to Be Done?)*.

jorob128@aol.com

**Andrew Robinson** is Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow in the School of Politics, University of Nottingham. He is a member of the Centre for Social and Global Justice and the transnational Transformative Studies Institute. He has written widely on anti-capitalism, social movements, resistance and radical political theory.

ldxar1@tesco.net

**Panagiotis Sotiris** teaches philosophy at Panteion University in Athens, Greece. He is the author of *Communism and Philosophy. The Theoretical Adventure of Louis Althusser* (in Greek, 2004). He has published articles on Marxist philosophy, post-Marxist theorists and modern imperialism.

psotiris@otenet.gr


zendive@aol.com

**Jeffrey Webber** is a PhD candidate in political science at the University of Toronto. His dissertation examines left-indigenous popular struggle in Bolivia between 2000 and 2005. His articles have appeared in *Latin American Perspectives, Third World Quarterly, Monthly Review*, and *Socialist Studies/Etudes Socialistes*, among other journals.

jefferyrogerwebber@hotmail.com
Notice of Next Issue

Historical Materialism
Research in Critical Marxist Theory
(volume 16 issue 4)

Articles

MARTIJN KONINGS and LEO PANITCH • US Financial Power in Crisis
JOSEPH FRACCHIA • The Capitalist Labour-Process and the Body in Pain: The Corporeal Depths of Marx's Concept of Immiseration
JEFFREY R. WEBBER • Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia. Part III: Neoliberal Continuities, the Autonomist Right, and the Political Economy of Indigenous Struggle
STEVE WRIGHT • Mapping Pathways within Italian Autonomist Marxism: A Preliminary Survey
DANIEL CHO • Adorno on Education, or, Can Critical Self-Reflection Prevent the Next Auschwitz?

Interventions

BEN FINE and ALFREDO SAAD-FILHO • Production vs. Realisation in Marx's Theory of Value: A Reply to Kincaid
JIM KINCAID • Production versus Capital in Motion: A Reply to Fine and Saad-Filho

Review Articles

ENZO TRAVERSO on ARNO MAYER's The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions
PAUL MATTICK JNR. on DAVID HARVEY's Limits to Capital
TYSON E. LEWIS on PETER MCLAREN'S Capitalists and Conquerors and McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur's Teaching Against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism
OWEN HATHERLEY on JUDD STITZIEL'S Fashioning Socialism – Clothing, Politics and Consumer Culture in East Germany
Back Issues

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 1
Ellen Meiksins Wood on the non-history of capitalism • Colin Barker on Ellen Wood • Esther Leslie on Benjamin’s Arcades Project • John Weeks on underdevelopment • Tony Smith on theories of technology • Michael Lebowitz on the silences of Capital • John Holloway on alienation • Peter Burnham on globalisation and the state • Fred Moseley on the US rate of profit • reviews by Matthew Beaumont on Bloch • Benno Teschke on Guy Bois • Peter Linebaugh on Robin Blackburn

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 2
China Miéville on architecture • Gregory Elliott on Perry Anderson • Andrew Chitty on recognition • Michael Neary & Graham Taylor on alchemy • Paul Burkett on neo-Malthusian Marxism • Slavoj Zizek on risk society • reviews by Geoff Kay on Freeman & Carchedi • Ben Watson on Adorno and music • Mike Haynes on the Russian Revolution • Elmar Altvater on David Harvey • Martin Jenkins on Althusser and psychoanalysis • Esther Leslie on Benjamin

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 3
Symposium on Leninism and political organisation: Simon Clarke • Howard Chodos & Colin Hay • John Molyneux • Alan Shandro • Jonathan Joseph • Peter Hudis • John Ehrenberg • Paul Burkett on Ted Benton • Werner Bonefeld on novelty • reviews by Michael Lebowitz on Felton Shortall • Gareth Dale on East Germany • Adrian Budd on Kim Moody • Giles Peaker on John Roberts • Chris Bertram on analytical Marxism • Ken Hammond on Vietnam

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 4
Symposium on Brenner and the world crisis, Part 1: Alex Callinicos • Guglielmo Carchedi • Simon Clarke • Gerard Duménil & Dominique Lévy • Chris Harman • David Laibman • Michael Lebowitz • Fred Moseley • Murray Smith • Ellen Meiksins Wood • Plus Hal Draper on Lenin • Tony Smith on John Rosenthal • reviews by Rick Kuhn on Australian trade unionism • Charles Post on Terence Byres • Edwin Roberts on pragmatism and American Marxism • Alan Wald on Michael Löwy • Matt Worley on British Communism

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 5
Symposium on Brenner and the world crisis, Part 2: Werner Bonefeld • Alan Freeman • Michel Husson • Anwar Shaikh • Tony Smith • Richard Walker • John Weeks • Plus Geoff Kay on abstract labour and capital • Craig Brandist on ethics, politics and dialogism • reviews by John Gumbay on Erik Olin Wright • Alan Johnson on the Third Camp • Sean Sayers on Marx on Russia • Adrian Haddock on Andrew Collier • Gregor Gall on organised labour • Greg Dawes on postcolonial theory
HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 10:3
Giovanni Arrighi on lineages of empire • Ellen Meiksins Wood on landlords and peasants, masters and slaves: class relations in Greek and Roman antiquity • Peter Thomas on philosophical strategies: Althusser and Spinoza • archive: Richard B. Day on Pavel V. Maksakovsky's Marxist theory of the cycle and Pavel V. Maksakovsky on the general theory of the cycle • intervention by Neil Davidson: Stalinism, 'nation theory' and Scottish history: a reply to John Foster • reviews by Ian Birchall, Ian Buchanan and Simon Bromley

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 10:4
Symposium on Marxism and fantasy: China Miéville • Mark Bould on the dreadful credibility of absurd things • Stuart Elden on Lefebvre, Rabelais and intellectual history • Ishay Landa on Tolkein's political unconscious • Mike Wayne on utopianism and film • Anna Kornbluh on for the love of money • Alex Law and Jan Law on magical urbanism • Ben Watson on Adorno, Tolkein, Burroughs • commentary by Ana Dinerstein on the battle of Buenos Aires: crisis, insurrection, and the reinvention of politics in Argentina • archive: Jurriana Bendien • Ernest Mandel: anticipation and hope as categories of historical materialism • interventions: Carl Freedman with a note on Marxism and fantasy • Fredric Jameson on radical fantasy • Steve Shaviro on capitalist monsters. reviews by Neil Maycroft, Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Mike Haynes, and Tony Smith

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 11:1
Alfredo Saad-Filho on the political economy of Lula's election • Maria Turchetto on Hardt and Negri • George Liodakis on the role of biotechnology in the agro-food system • Paul Paolucci on the scientific and the dialectical method • Sean Sayers on creative activity and alienation in Hegel and Marx • Martin Hart-Landsberg and Paul Burkett on development, crisis and class struggle in East Asia • Dan Bousfield on export-led development and imperialism • Jim Kincaid on underconsumption versus the rate of profit • Christopher J. Arthur on the Hegel-Marx connection • Tony Smith on the homology thesis • Christopher J. Arthur once more on the homology thesis • reviews by Scott MacWilliam, Ian Birchall and Pete Glatter

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 11:2
Tony Smith on globalisation and capitalist property relations: a critical assessment of David Held's cosmopolitical theory • Paul Cammack on the governance of global capitalism: a new materialist perspective • William Brown on the World Bank, Africa and politics: a comment on Paul Cammack's analysis • Simon Pirani on class clashes with party: politics in Moscow between the civil war and the New Economic Policy • Glenn Rikowski on alien life: Marx and the future of the human • Interventions: James Gordon Finlayson on the theory of ideology and the ideology of theory: Habermas contra Adorno • Deborah Cook with a response to Finlayson • Alex Callinicos on egalitarianism and anticapitalism: a reply to Harry Brichouse and Erik Olin Wright • reviews by Enzo Traverso, Chik Collins, Craig Brandist, Christopher Arthur, and Bob Jessup

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 11:3
Simon Bromley with reflections on Empire, imperialism and United States hegemony • Jairus Banaji on the fictions of free labour: contract, coercion, and so-called unfree labour • Alan Milchman on Marxism and the Holocaust • Alfredo Saad-Filho and Marta Harnecker with commentaries on understanding the past to make the future • an interview with Michael Hardt • Interventions by Angela Dimitrakaki on art and politics continued: avant-garde, resistance and the multitude in Documenta 11 • by Andrew Levine & Elliott Sober with a reply to
Paul Nolan’s ‘What’s Darwinian About Historical Materialism?’ • Paul Nolan on Levine and Sober: a rejoinder • reviews by Kees van der Pijl, Colin Mooers, Ray Kiely, Ian Birchall, Alan Shandro, Pranav Jani, and Neil Larsen

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 11:4

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 12:1
Wal Suchting on Althusser’s late thinking about materialism • Alan Carling on The Darwinian Weberian: W.G. Runciman and the microfoundations of historical materialism • Peter E. Jones on discourse and the materialist conception of history: critical comments on critical discourse analysis • interventions by John McIlroy with critical reflections on recent British Communist Party history • by John Foster on Marxists, Weberians and nationality: a response to Neil Davidson • review articles by Paul Wetherly, Paul Blackledge, Paul Burkett, Jan Dumolyn, Steve Wright • a conference report by Enda Brophy on the Operaismo a Convegno conference.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 12:2
Brian Kelly on materialism and the persistence of race in the Jim Crow South • Domenico Losurdo on towards a critique of the category of totalitarianism • Massimo De Angelis on separating the doing and the deed: capitalism and the continuous character of enclosures • James Furner on Marx’s critique of Samuel Bailey • interventions by Paresh Chattopadhyay replying to Mike Haynes • Mike Haynes responding to Chattopadhyay • David McNally responding to Chik Collins • Chik Collins responding to McNally • review articles by Vasant Kaiwar, Pete Green, Samuel Friedman and Matthew Caygill.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 12:3
Dimitri Dimoulis and John Milios on Commodity Fetishism vs. Capital Fetishism: Marxist Interpretations vis-à-vis Marx’s Analyses in Capital • Symposium on Moishe Postone’s ‘Time, Labor and Social Domination’ • Guido Starosta’s Editorial Introduction • Moishe Postone on Critique and Historical Transformation • Robert Albritton on Theorising Capital’s Deep Structure and the Transformation of Capitalism • Christopher J. Arthur on Subject and Counter-Subject • Werner Bonefeld on Postone’s Courageous but Unsuccessful Attempt to Banish the Class Antagonism from the Critique of Political Economy • Joseph Fracchia on Transhistorical Abstractions and the Intersection of Historical Theory and Social Critique • Peter Hudis on The

**HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 12:4**

Nick Dyer-Witheford on 1844/2004/2044: the return of species-being • Marcel Van Der Linden on council communism • Symposium: Marxism and African Realities • Liam Campling’s editorial introduction • Pablo L.E. Idahosa and Bob Shenton the africanist’s ‘new’ clothes • Henry Bernstein on considering Africa’s agrarian questions • Patrick Bond on bankrupt Africa: imperialism, subimperialism and the politics of finance • Ray Bush on undermining Africa • Alex Nunn and Sophia Price on managing development: EU and African relations through the evolution of the Lomé and Cotonou Agreements • Alejandro Colas on the re-invention of populism: Islamist response to capitalist development in the contemporary Maghreb • Christopher Wise on geo-thematics, and orality-literacy studies in the Sahel • Carlos Oya on the empirical investigation of rural class formation: methodological issues in a study of large and mid-scale farmers in Senegal • Franco Barchiesi on the ambiguities of ‘liberation’ in left analyses of the South-African democratic transition • Brian Raftopoulos and Ian Phimister on Zimbabwe now: the political economy of crisis and coercion • Interventions • David Moore on Marxism and Marxist intellectuals in schizophrenic Zimbabwe: how many rights for Zimbabwe’s Left? A comment • Ashwin Desai on magic, realism and the state in post-apartheid South Africa • Review Articles • Paresh Chattopadhyay on ‘Karl Marx – Exzerpte und Notizen: Sommer 1844 bis Anfang 1847’, in Gesamtausgabe (MEGA) vierte Abteilung. Band 3 • Nigel Harris on *Trade in Early India: Themes in Indian History*, edited by Ranbir Chakravarti, and Michael McCormack’s *The Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, AD 300–900* • Surinder S. Jodhka on Tom Brass’s *Towards a Political Economy of Unfree Labour and Peasants, Populism and Postmodernism* • Henry Vandenburgh on Habermas, Critical Theory, and Health, edited by Graham Scrambler.

**HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 13:1**

Commentary • Lecio Morais and Alfredo Saad-Filho on Lula and the Continuity of Neoliberalism in Brazil: Strategic Choice, Economic Imperative or Political Schizophrenia? • Articles • Joseph Fracchia on Beyond the Human-Nature Debate: Human Corporeal Organisation as the ‘First Fact’ of Historical Materialism • Craig Brandist on Marxism and the Philosophy of Language in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s • Sean Homer on Cinema and Fetishism: The Disavowal of a Concept • Paul Burkett on Entropy in Ecological Economics: A

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 13:2
The Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize Lecture (Part I) • Benno Teschke on Bourgeois Revolution, State Formation and the Absence of the International • Debating the Hegel-Marx Connection: A Symposium on Christopher J. Arthur's The New Dialectic and Marx's "Capital" • Jim Kincaid's editorial introduction • Alex Callinicos on Against the New Dialectics • Patrick Murray on The New Giant's Staircase • Jim Kincaid on A Critique of Value-Form Marxism • Jacques Bidet on The Dialectician's Interpretation of Capital • Ian Hunt on The Economic Cell-Form • Robert Albritton on How Dialectics Runs Aground: The Antinomies of Arthur's Dialectic of Capital • Christopher J. Arthur's Reply to Critics • Intervention • Sean Creaven on Marxism and Realism: A Reply to Branwen Gruffyd Jones • Review articles • Bob Jessop on Antoine Artous's Marx, L'Etat et la politique • Alan Milchman on Domenico Losurdo’s Heidegger and the Ideology of War: Community, Death, and the West • Daniel Lazare on 51 Documents: Zionist Collaboration With the Nazis, edited by Lenni Brenner • James Devine on Michael Perelman's Transcending the Economy: On the Potential of Passionate Labor and the Wastes of the Market • German Books for Review • The Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism • Frigga Haug (translated and introduced by Peter Thomas) on Dialectics

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 13:3
The Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize Lecture (Part II) • Neil Davidson on How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions? • Articles • Jean-Jacques Lecercle on Deleuze, Guattari and Marxism • Rick Kuhn on Henryk Grossman and the Recovery of Marxism • Thomas Marois on From Economic Crisis to a 'State' of Crisis: The Emergence of Neoliberalism in Costa Rica • Bob Cannon on Retrieving the Normative Content of Marxism: From a Subject-Centred to an Intersubjective Critique of Capitalism • Interventions • Karl Beitel on The US, Iraq, and the Future of Empire • Mike Wayne on Fetishism and Ideology: A Reply to Dimoulis and Milios • Review Articles • Paul Blackledge on Brian Manning, 21 May 1927–24 April 2004: Historian of the People and the English Language • Brian Manning on Winstanley and the Diggers, 1649–1999, edited by Andrew Bradstock • Andrew Hemingway on The Philistine Controversy, edited by Dave Beech and John Roberts • Michael Keaney on Bastiaan van Apeldoorn's Transnational Capitalism and the Struggle over European Integration • Paul Dillon on Evald Iyenkov's Philosophy Revisited, edited by Vesa Oittinen • Eric Piper on Raya Dunayevskaya's Power of Negativity: Selected Writings on the Dialectic in Hegel and Marx • Conference Report • Peter Hudis on Rosa Luxemburg in China: The 'Rosa Luxemburg' Conference 21–2 November 2004 – South China Agricultural University, Guangzhou, China • The Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism • Bastiaan Wielenga, Hermann Klenner and Susanne Lettow on Justice
HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 13:4


HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 14:1

Article • Andrew Burke on Nation, Landscape, and Nostalgia in Patrick Killers Robinson in Space • Symposium: On Costas Lapavitas's 'Social Foundations of Markets, Money and Credit' • Jim Kincaid on Finance, Trust and the Power of Capital • Gary Dymski on Money and Credit in Heterodox Theory: Reflections on Lapavitas • Dick Bryan and Michael Rafferty on Money in Capitalism or Capitalist Money? • Makoto Itoh on Political Economy of Money, Credit and Finance in Contemporary Capitalism – Remarks on Lapavitas and Dymski • Kazutoshi Miyazawa on the Anarchical Nature of the Market and the Emergence of Money • Costas Lapavitas on Power and Trust as Constituents of Money and Credit • Interventions: Replies to Ana Dinerstein on the Argentine Crisis • Guido Starosta Editorial Introduction • Alberto Bonnet on Que se vanen todos! Discussing the Argentine crisis and insurrection • Juan Iñigo Carrera on Argentina: The Reproduction of Capital Accumulation Through Political Crisis • Juan Grigera on Argentina: On Crisis and a Measure for Class Struggle • Review Articles • Paresh Chattopadhyay & Martin Thomas on Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff's Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR • Alan Freeman on Guglielmo Carchedi's For Another Europe: a Class Analysis of European Economic Integration • Loren Goldner on Christophe Bourssellier's Histoire générale de l'ultra-gauche • Christopher May on Mark Poster's What's the Matter with the Internet?

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 14:2

Article • Robert Bond on Speculating Histories: Walter Benjamin, Iain Sinclair • The Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize Lecture • Michael A. Lebowitz on the Politics of Assumption, the Assumption of Politics • Symposium: The Dark side of Marx's 'Capital': On Michael Lebowitz's
HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 14:3


HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 14:4

Symposium: On David Harvey’s The New Imperialism • Sam Ashman’s Editorial Introduction • Ellen Meiksins Wood on Logics of Power: A Conversation with David Harvey • Noel Castree on David Harvey’s Symptomatic Silence • Bob Sutcliffe on Imperialism Old and New: A Comment on David Harvey’s The New Imperialism and Ellen Meiksins Wood’s Empire of Capital • Robert Brenner on What Is and What Is Not Imperialism? • Sam Ashman and Alex Callinicos on Capital Accumulation and the State System: Assessing David Harvey’s The New Imperialism • Ben Fine on Debating the ‘New’ Imperialism • David Harvey’s Comment on Commentaries • Intervention • Mike Lebowitz on The Politics of Beyond Capital • Literature Review • Stuart Elden on Some Are Born Posthumously: The French Afterlife of Henri Lefebvre • Review Articles • Peter Green & Martin Thomas on Nigel Harris’s The Return of Cosmopolitan Capital • Mark Bould on Carl Freedman’s The Incomplete Projects: Marxism, Modernity and the Politics of Culture • Neil Lazarus on David Macey’s Frantz Fanon: A Life • Loren Golnder on Franklin Rosemont’s Joe Hill: the IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Working Class Counter Culture • Vincent Présomcy on Revolutionary History: From Syndicalism to Trotskyism – Writings of Alfred and
Marguerite Rosmer • Elena Isayev on Guy Bradley’s Ancient Umbria • The Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism • Karen Ruoff Kramer on Jeans

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 15:1
Articles • Alberto Toscano on From Pin Factories to Gold Farmers: Editorial Introduction to a Research Stream on Cognitive Capitalism, Immaterial Labour, and the General Intellect • Carlo Vercellone on From Formal Subsumption to General Intellect: Elements for a Marxist Reading of the Thesis of Cognitive Capitalism • Symposium: Ernest Mandel and the Historical Theory of Global Capitalism • Marcel van der Linden’s and Jan Willem Stutje’s Editorial Introduction • Jairus Banaji on Islam, the Mediterranean and the Rise of Capitalism • Patrick Karl O’Brien on Global Economic History as the Accumulation of Capital through a Process of Combined and Uneven Development. An Appreciation and Critique of Ernest Mandel • Michael R. Kräcke on The History and Logic of Modern Capitalism. The Legacy of Ernest Mandel • Marcel van der Linden on The ‘Law’ of Uneven and Combined Development: Some Underdeveloped Thoughts • Jan-Willem Stutje on Concerning Der Spätkapitalismus: Mandel’s Quest for a Synthesis of Late Capitalism • Review Articles • Spencer Dimmock on Jane Whittle’s Land and Labour in Norfolk, 1440–1580 • Joao Bernardo on Alessandro Orsini’s L’Eretico della sinistra. Bruno Rizzi elitista democratico • Anthony Chase on the Leiden Journal of International Law’s ‘International Symposium on Marxism and International Law’ • Alan Thornett on Ralph Darlington’s and Dave Lyddon’s Glorious Summer: Class Struggle in Britain in 1972 • The Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism • Peter Thomas on Absolute Historicism

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 15:2
Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize Lecture • Kevin Murphy on Can We Write the History of the Russian Revolution? A Belated Response to Eric Hobsbawm • Articles • David Camfield on The Multitude and the Kangaroo: A Critique of Hardt and Negri’s Theory of Immaterial Labour • Peter Thomas’ Editorial Introduction • Roberto Finelli on Abstraction versus contradiction: Observations on Chris Arthur’s The New Dialectic and Marx’s ‘Capital’ • Samuel Knafo on Political Marxism and Value Theory: Bridging the Gap between Theory and History • Jan Dumolyon on The Political and Symbolic Economy of State Feudalism. The Case of Late Medieval Flanders • Archive • William S. Lewis’ Editorial Introduction • Louis Althusser’s Letter to Comrades on the PCF Central Committee • Review Articles • Jan Rehmann on Domenico Losurdo’s Nietzsche, il ribelle aristocratico. Biografia intellettuale e bilancio critico • Ian Birchall on Michel Surya’s La Révolution rêvée: Pour une histoire des intellectuels et des œuvres révolutionnaires 1944–1956 • Markar Melkonian on Richard Rorty’s Achieving Our Country: Lefist Thought in Twentieth-Century America, Philosophy and Social Hope, and Against Boses, Against Oligarchies • Pat Devine on Michael Albert’s Parecon: Life After Capitalism • Paulo L. dos Santos on Alfredo Saad-Filho’s The Value of Marx and Ben Fine’s and Alfredo Saad-Filho’s Marx’s ‘Capital’ • The Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism • Bob Jessop on Statism

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 15:3
Articles • Paolo Virno on General Intellect • Axel Kicillof and Guido Starosta on Materiality and Social Form: A Political Critique of Rubin’s Value-Form Theory • Symposium: Ellen Meiksins Wood and Empire of Capital • Paul Blackledge’s Editorial Introduction • David Harvey on In What Ways Is the ‘New Imperialism’ Really New? • William I. Robinson on The Pitfalls of Realist Analysis of Global Capitalism: A Critique of Ellen Meiksins Wood’s Empire of Capital • Prasenjit Bose on ‘New’ Imperialism: On Globalisation and Nation-States • François Chesnais on The Economic Foundations and Needs of Contemporary Imperialism • Ellen Meiksins

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 15:4
Articles • Helmut Reichelt on Marx's Critique of Economic Categories: Reflections on the Problem of Validity in the Dialectical Method of Presentation in Capital • Roland Boer on The Perpetual Allure of the Bible for Marxism • Gavin Fridell on Fair-Trade Coffee and Commodity Fetishism: The Limits of Market-Driven Social Justice • Viren Swami on Evolutionary Psychology: 'New Science of the Mind' or 'Darwinian Fundamentalism'? • Jim Kincaid on Production vs. Realisation: A Critique of Fine and Saad-Filho on Value Theory • Review Articles • Steve A. Smith on Kevin Murphy's Revolution and Counterrevolution: Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory • Samuel Knafo on Gérard Duménil's and Dominique Lévy's Capital Resurgent: Roots of the Neoliberal Revolution • Michael Heinrich on Karl Marx's Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, Dritter Band in Gesamtausgabe (MEGA) • The Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism • Jan Rehmans on Earth

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 16:1
Articles • Giuseppe Tassone's and Peter Thomas's Editorial Introduction to Vittorio Morfinos Causa sui or Wechselerwirkung: Engels between Spinoza and Hegel • Oliver Nachtwey & Tobias Ten Brink on Lost in Transition: the German World-Market Debate in the 1970s • Rakesh Bhandari on The Disguises of Wage-Labour: Juridical Illusions, Unfree Conditions and Novel Extensions • Intervention • Ana C. Dinerstein on Here Is the Rose, Dance Here! A Riposte to the Debate on the Argentinean Crisis • Archive • Paul Burkett & John Bellamy Foster on The Podolinsky Myth: An Obituary. Introduction to 'Human Labour and Unity of Force', by Sergei Podolinsky • Sergei Podolinsky's Human Labour and Unity of Force • Review Articles • Chris Harman on Christopher Dys An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages and John Landers' The Field and the Forge: Population, Production and Power in the Pre-Industrial West • Matthew G. Hannah on Peter Brückners Ulrike Meinhof und die deutsche Verhältnisse • Wolfgang Wicht on Bernd Blaschkes Der 'homo oeconomicus' und sein Kredit bei Musil, Joyce, Svevo, Unamuno und Céline • Zoë Marriage on Georges Nzongolas-Tnalajas The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History, Reinventing Order in the Congo: How People Respond to State Failure in Kinshasa, edited by Theodore Trefon and The African Stakes of the Congo War edited by John F. Clark • The Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism • Peter Thomas on Immanence

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 16:2
Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize Lecture • Chris Wickham on Productive Forces and the Economic Logic of the Feudal Mode of Production • Articles • Jeffrey R. Webber on Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia. Part I: Domestic Class Structure, Latin-American 'Trends, and Capitalist Imperialism • John Roberts on The 'Returns to Religion'; Messianism, Christianity and the Revolutionary Tradition. Part I: 'Wakefulness to the Future' • David Kristjanson on Gural Postmodern Contributions to Marxian Economics: Theoretical Innovations and their Implications for Class Politics • Interventions • Greig Charnock on Competitiveness and
Critique: The Value of a New-Materialist Research Project • Alex Callinicos on Marxists, Muslims and Religion: Anglo-French Attitudes • Review Articles • Sharad Chari on Patrick Bond’s Elite Transition, Against Global Apartheid, Talk Left, Walk Right, and Unsustainable South Africa and Ashwin Desai’s Arise Ye Coolies, We Are the Poors and, with Vishnu Padayachee, Krish Reddy and Goolam Vahed, Blacks in Whites • Alexander Anievas on Martin Shaw’s Theory of the Global State: Globality as an Unfinished Revolution, and William I. Robinson’s A Theory of Global Capitalism: Production, Class, and the State in a Transnational World • Peter Green on Rick Kuhn’s Henryk Grossman and the Recovery of Marxism • Loren Glass on Jean Baudrillard’s The Spirit of Terrorism, Paul Virilio’s Ground Zero, Slavoj Žižek’s Welcome to the Desert of the Real, Jeffory A. Clymer’s in a New Age of War, and Susan Willis’s Portents of the Real: A Primer for Post-9/11 America • Owen Hatherley on Ilya Ilf’s and Evgeny Petrov’s Ilf and Petrov’s American Road Trip • The Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism • Lise Vogel on Domestic-Labour Debate